Strange Stars

Phoebe Wagner
Iowa State University

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Strange Stars

by

Phoebe Wagner

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Program of Study Committee:
David Zimmerman, Co-Major Professor
Debra Marquart, Co-Major Professor
Brianna Burke
Alissa Stoehr

The student author, whose presentation of the scholarship herein was approved by the program of study committee, is solely responsible for the content of this thesis. The Graduate College will ensure this thesis is globally accessible and will not permit alterations after a degree is conferred.

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2018

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DEDICATION

For my family, old and new.
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PREFACE

I did not intend to write a novel as my thesis project. I had a short story collection and a novella ready to go. Then November, 2016 happened. Angry and alarmed, I knew I needed to write something, even though words seemed useless in the moment. That’s when Gwen and Erhent showed up in my head. I had written about them years ago, but now they wouldn’t give me any peace. I started Strange Stars for fun, as a way to vent my anger about politics, climate change, patriarchy, racism, capitalism, and so on. Soon I couldn’t stop writing (ask my husband).

I wrote the first draft in a harried two months, ending at a manageable 72,000 words. The second draft grew over 130,000 words. From a publication standpoint (let alone for my sanity), the second draft needed serious pruning. My process revolves around writing fast and dirty, pushing and pushing to reach an ending and letting my imagination spill onto the page. I love drafting. Revision has its pleasures, too, but drafting holds a certain kind of magic for me. Watching a story unfold, not knowing what will happen next until my fingers type it, receiving flashes of scenes while going about my daily life—it’s the purest form of escape. After much molding and shaping, the first two parts of the story became the entire novel. Through that process, it developed into a different book—more of a traditional young adult (YA) novel in the vein of Robin McKinley’s Sunshine or Holly Black’s Tithe.

What separates Strange Stars from other YA contemporary fantasy series, such as Maggie Stiefvater’s The Raven Cycle, is the engagement with socio-environmental unrest. While authors often engage with social issues in YA, currently most notably done by Angie Thomas in The Hate U Give, environmentally focused stories are not popular
yet. As adult literature accepts and engages with climate change issues—as seen in work by Jeff Vandermeer, Rebecca Roanhorse, Kim Stanley Robinson, Edan Lepucki, Emily St. John Mandel, and so on—I expect young adult literature to explore environmental issues more thoroughly. Indeed, Strange Stars combines environmental commentary with folkloric monsters, always popular in YA.

While the 2016 election became the impetus for this novel, the past three years of study provided the necessary readings and background to create the plot and world of Strange Stars. Key pieces of media inspired me throughout the novel process: Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor by Rob Nixon, Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence by Timothy Morton, Bitter Fruit: The Story of the American Coup in Guatemala by Stephen Schlesinger and Stephen Kinzer, “Apocalypse” by Junot Díaz, “Indigenous Cosmopolitics in the Andes: Conceptual Reflections beyond ‘Politics’” by Marisol de la Cadena, Chasing Ice directed by Jeff Orlowski, and HyperNormalisation directed by Adam Curtis. This list may look disparate, but each piece emphasizes the importance of story.

In the introduction to Slow Violence: The Environmentalism of the Poor, Rob Nixon describes what he calls “writer-activists” as artists who translate the ideas and issues of environmentalism into relatable stories that give people an entry point for empathy. Due to my moralistic upbringing, my writing always possessed an underlying goal: morality, a duty to change my culture for the better. I can’t shake the feeling that writing requires a purpose, even as I burrow deeper into speculative literature. A literary writer might argue that speculative fiction is the worst form if I wish to write stories about something, but line my sci-fi and fantasy favorites on a bookshelf and the greater
themes become clear: anti-fascism and environmentalism (J. R. R. Tolkien); gender
equality and gender fluidity (Ursula K. Le Guin); race and religion (Octavia Butler);
genetic modification and identity (Jeff Vandermeer); information technology and
consumerism (Ann Leckie); and speciesism and food security (Margaret Atwood). Pick a
relevant topic, and the speculative community has already dissected it and reinvented it.
These writers influenced my choice to write a young adult contemporary fantasy.

While *Strange Stars* is not my first novel, it is my first attempt at writing so
clearly about a specific issue. I do not know if I succeed in writing an environmental text
or simply a fun read. During the drafting and revising process, I struggled to balance
story and message. I did not want to write an idea-driven book like Ursula K. Le Guin’s
*The Dispossessed*, but I also wanted to provide more commentary than a well-written
genre book like *The Name of the Wind* by Patrick Rothfuss. Currently, I’m too close to
the novel to decide if I found a balance or not. My work leans toward a fun, page-turning
romp more than idea-centered. Although, I always kept my audience clear in my mind
and tried to balance ideas and fun with the needs of that audience—fourteen-year-old me.

Every manual on writing advice discusses audience, and famous writers make a
point of mentioning their imagined readers. *Strange Stars* differed from my other work
because I had such a clear drive to write the young adult novel I needed to read when I
was fourteen. At that age, I desperately wanted a young adult book that wasn’t centered
on romance, that didn’t have an incredibly hot female main character, that wasn’t about a
chosen wizard-warrior type. I also wanted a book that mattered and gave the teenaged me
a way to engage with society. To that end, the scenes that work most effectively are the
protests. Showing adults and young people working together to make change hopefully will encourage a young reader to become engaged.

Ultimately, I hope readers have fun while diving into Gwen and Erhent’s story. Each revision of *Strange Stars* has made these characters more real to me. While I know my teenage self would relate to their struggle for acceptance and their trials when making magic together, my definitive desire is for this novel to provide escapism and inspiration for a deeper connection to the environment.
Prologue

A streetlight shattered the window with the force of a spear.

For a moment, Gwen couldn’t shout, couldn’t breathe, just stared at the twisted metal balanced on her window sill. Part of her brain screamed to move, but go where—where else could be safer than her bedroom?

Just a storm, according to the weather report, the same storm that had been dumping on New Jersey for three weeks. Except tonight the crashing and booming shook the house, sounding less like thunder and more like falling trees.

Her mothers shouted, “Gwen! Get out! Run!”

Something else struck the house hard enough the whole structure shifted, spilling her bookcase.

“Mom! Mama!”

She scrambled toward her bedroom door, and when she opened it, even in the darkness, she could see water flowing against gravity, forcing up the stairs. The smell overwhelmed her more than the sucking gurgle—an oily, chemical and sulphurous thing.

“Gwen!”

Mom wrenched her into their bedroom, passed her to Mama.

“Out the window! Go, go!”

She climbed through the broken glass, pain searing her hands. Rain washed the blood in red rivulets down her fingers. Someone sobbed, and as if it were a nightmare, she realized with a strange detachment that it was her. She cried for her mothers as she crouched on the slippery porch roof.
Water roiled around the house, and the slurping roar blotted all noise until even her thoughts gave up against the drowning rage.

As her mothers followed her out the window, a car struck the porch and collapsed the roof.

Gwen fell.

The flood swallowed her. Rubble, branches, soft shapes brushed past her as she flailed, hoping to catch Mom’s hand or Mama’s shirt, but the current twisted and flipped her and tried to pull her two different directions. The water tricked her sense of gravity because, in the darkness, it all looked the same—no surface in sight.

The current slammed her into the ground and pinned her, washing over her. A twisting, biting pain made her gasp and suck in water. She coughed bubbles. The murk hid whatever had a flesh-tearing grip on her ankle, but if the current that had tossed her like a twig couldn’t drag her away, then human strength was worthless.

Her chest heaved, and she choked, her lungs like two clenched fists. Water burned her eyes.

With her foot pinned and the water buoying her, a sensation of standing on the street, watching this thing happen made her chest loosen, her jaw go slack. Darker shapes floated overhead like clouds, almost close enough to touch.

A faint glow parted the murk. A green and yellow light, the blur of a body.

The faint glow surrounded the thing like a bioluminescent fish. Not a thing, a woman, the glow coming from something streaked on her dark skin, as if she were going to a party.

Except half the woman’s body was wrong—brown and furry and was that a tail?
Gwen kicked and twisted at whatever anchored her foot, but the woman cupped Gwen’s face in her hands and kissed her, forcing air down her throat until her chest hurt.

Air filled her, tasting of fish and silt. She coughed, a large bubble bursting.

The current surged, shoving her into the arms of the woman.

She kissed Gwen again, gusting air into her lungs, then dove.

A lightning jag of pain made her scream, losing her gift of air, but the woman returned, giving her more. She wrapped her arms around Gwen’s chest, and the tail, barely an outline, shoved them upward.

The current buffeted them, even the woman struggling, while debris and bodies and bits of houses floated past, outlined in the woman’s glow. The woman paused, letting the current sweep them. She rolled onto her back like an otter, holding Gwen against her as she gave a final breath. This time, the air held words.

*Look to the stars.*

The next time Gwen opened her eyes, she was draped over a tree branch. A deep pain throbbed in her ankle. Around her, other people clung to branches, calling for help, asking who’d saved them.

Below, the flood swallowed everything in a starless dark.
Part I, The Pine Barrens, New Jersey

Interlude

Noah disrobed in the shadow of the Pine Barrens. The ancient forest Being churned below ground. Perhaps he even caused its wakefulness—one old enemy sensing another. The sandy loam recoiled beneath Noah’s bare feet. Overhead, branches swayed, pulling aside so as not to shade him, not dangle within his reach.

His skin ached to touch the forest.

Behind him, a dozen ATVs shone spotlights into the woods, penetrating the darkness. His followers wore AquaCore’s security uniform with the teal patch, demonstrating their unquestionable right to cut down the wood. He grinned at the idea of owning the trees.

Noah unbuttoned his shirt. Even if these children were lesser than him, evolution had made them appear more human, a helpful trait in a place so overrun. It sickened him to see their faces, but subversion came even easier than when he had walked the land. This town had sold their water-stained streets without a threat, a touch. Instead, they were flattered to host AquaCore’s statewide headquarters.

He licked his teeth as he folded his jacket and collared shirt over a branch, the twigs flinching. The Soul-Eaters stirred behind him, their whispers crackling like static charge.

Yes, he’d honor them with his presence. No cameras would find him deep in the pines. Tonight, he felt thin, hungry. The thinness had followed him since he escaped the glacier, an appetite he couldn’t gorge away.
He folded the hem of his pantlegs twice. Humanity had grown comfortable at the top of their so-called food chain. Time to remind them of what once was. He faced his followers. “Feed on whatever you desire.”

He entered the woods, flanked by engines. The first tree that attempted to trip him, he turned to dust with the barest touch.
CHAPTER 1.

Gwen warned Zeke about the corpses hanging in the trees. Part of her wanted to watch him flip out, but it’d ruin the mood. This was a date after all.

If you could call scavenging through her flood-destroyed house a date. It was sweet, in a weird apocalyptic way, and practical: she didn’t have a vehicle and it was too dangerous to go alone these days.

Zeke coasted his car between the trees lining the washed-out driveway. Most trunks had been snapped off at the top. The others held the bodies, lifted from two graveyards on either side of the river and hung in the tree tops. Gwen didn’t look up. She could sense them, though, like the edge of a nightmare.

The headlights ghosted the house—just a husk, now. The roof had half-fallen since she’d visited three weeks ago, and a pang tightened her chest, as if she were responsible, could have held it up with her own hands. The windows were empty of glass, just holes in the wall. The front porch had been ripped off in the initial wave when the dam collapsed, so her home looked foreign, a face she couldn’t quite recognize.

Zeke turned off the car but left the headlights poking into the shadows. He whistled. “You think it’s still safe?”

She swung out, the soggy ground sucking at her shoes. “You don’t have to go in. Squatters must not be home or they’d be yelling at us.” Three weeks ago, she’d stumbled on the remains of a drug den and two mostly-dead heroin users, the forgotten people of the opioid crisis, replaced by the climate crisis. She’d run.
Wind hissed through the pines, and the deadwood creaked. Gwen resisted the urge to look up. A crow cawed.

The last time she’d scavenged, she’d hidden what she couldn’t carry—a few of Mom’s map books that had escaped the worst of the mold, a photo album really not worth saving but she wanted it, a hunting knife that he been her grandfather’s (the only thing her mother kept from her family that disowned her). She should’ve taken the knife that night, but she’d been afraid of it. Maybe it was too much, like carrying a gun. The knife had taken life: gutted doe, stabbed the pounding hearts of bucks. It hadn’t felt right. Now, she wanted the it. Too many teens weren’t coming back to school or were losing it and performing a final violent act that the school tried to hide. The town was falling apart, and she couldn’t seem to get away.

Zeke slammed his car door and flicked on a flashlight. He bobbed the beam skyward. “Which trees—holy fuck.”

Gwen flinched but didn’t look. “Can’t miss them.”

A camera beeped and flashed. “My editor is going to lose it over these. Six weeks and nobody has cleaned it up?” Zeke had explained his plan to get rich by documenting the flood and selling it to news channels in Atlantic City. So far, he’d made money by driving people around and ordered a DSLR camera. The state of New Jersey might be under martial law, but Prime still delivered.

“WABC will give me a whole post for this. They love the bad stuff.”

Gwen nodded, her back to him. Part of her wanted to growl about leaving the dead alone, but if Zeke’s plan worked, having a boyfriend with an income might make the next few months easier. Zeke was one of the nice ones. Quiet, not vomiting his anger and sorrow
on others. Like her, he’d called the emergency housing set up in the high school gym home for the past six weeks. Nobody came for him, just like nobody came for her. A handful of kids still waited—for distant relatives to figure out how to care for them, for family friends to make room, for best friends with parents still alive to settle and beg for a month-long sleepover.

At least Zeke had a car. Gwen assumed one day he just wouldn’t be in his cot, that he’d drive off. After the flood, a working car was gold. Hers had only run for a few days, then it refused to start, just a ticking sound when she turned the key. She’d checked the battery, but it had charge. Eventually, she’d traded it to the punks setting up a commune at a flooded trailer park.

Her mothers would berate her for thinking about Zeke that way. They’d say, people aren’t money to be spent. She’d died from embarrassment when they’d dropped that platitude in front of her friends. The nights she felt guilty, she promised herself she’d pay him back after wresting control of her mothers’ bank account from the school.

She squelched over the marshy ground. “I’m going inside.”

“Wait up.” He limped in her tracks. His leg still hadn’t healed from being pinned in a tree for hours. It’d saved his life during the flood, keeping him out of high water after the initial wave, but it never healed right. Gwen wanted to ask how he ended up in the tree, but that seemed like a surefire way to lose access to Zeke’s car. Nobody wanted to date a crazy orphaned girlfriend chattering about an otterwoman.

She squinted into the black hole of the front door. Zeke reached over her shoulder, shining his light into the living room.
This numbness had to be what opening a casket felt like. In three weeks, mold had bloomed across the walls and the furniture washed into the far corner. The couch with its sunflower pattern was a black, soggy thing.

Zeke made a noise in his throat. “You sure you want to go in?”

“I hid the stuff upstairs.”

Except the stairs had collapsed with part of the roof, broken to fuzzy splinters. The house was falling on itself, burying itself.

He snapped pictures while she inspected the stairs. They’d cracked apart as if someone had tried to use them. The stench assured her the squatters wouldn’t be waiting—nobody could stay now, with this smell. She already imagined her lungs blackening with spores.

Together, they maneuvered the couch as a stepping stool. Zeke went first, swinging onto the landing in a smooth motion before helping Gwen. For a moment, they were nearly nose-to-nose. He smelled good, she realized. This close to him, the fungal decay’s vomit-inducing scent almost faded. He must’ve used some of his driving cash to buy soap or deodorant—not the crappy stuff the school passed out.

She wanted to pull away, get out of this zombified version of her home that would worm into her nightmares. She forced herself not to flinch. “Thanks, Zeke. For coming along. It means a lot.” She took his hand, both their palms sweaty. With him, she could pretend even just for a few miles in the car with the windows down and the radio blaring—or sinking into the sensation of his fingers, his lips.

He half-smiled, his gaze sliding to his camera in a cute, shy way. “Of course. Us gym rats gotta stick together.”
They carefully felt a path through the hallway as if it were a lake they didn’t believe was quite frozen. Pieces of her life transformed by rot collected against the left wall. The drawer from a nightstand, some paperbacks, a stuffed bear, glass and wood that once made something.

That night flashed through her mind’s eye—her mothers’ screaming, stumbling through the dark from her room. Her heart pounded, and she felt sick. It’s just the mold, she told herself.

The tilt of the house slowly sinking toward the pines showed in the slide of her bed, her dresser, her tipped over bookcases. She dug through the pile of chunky paperbacks and hardcover novels she’d artfully piled on top of her previous findings. If she were a squatter, the last thing she’d want were soggy books—no practical value, even as fire starters. Her intuition had paid off since the pile was undisturbed.

Zeke limped to the blown-out window frame. The camera beeped as the lens whirred into focus. The flood had been kind enough to remove the streetlight that had speared into her room but took most of the wall with it.

Another shutter click. “It’s almost beautiful.”

She stuffed her backpack with three books—Mama’s broken-spined astronomy book she taught out of each semester and Mom’s volumes one and six from *The History of Cartography*, each of which were almost two thousand pages and strained her already tearing pack—some canned food (the jars’ seals looked intact enough to risk it and the glass could be traded, maybe), and the photo album. She threaded the cracked leather sheath of the hunting knife to her belt, though she tugged her sweatshirt over most of it. The sheath felt reassuring, settled against her hip, and when she touched the carved antler handle, the smooth, wormness
felt good, right. Mama had brought the knife on every camping trip and usually kept it in the
car. Gwen had been surprised to find it in their bedroom the last time she scavenged.

She tightened the backpack straps so the heavy volumes settled more comfortably. She
told herself she’d sell the out of print map volumes to some professor but knew she
couldn’t—not when they held her mother’s notes and scribbles. Lifelong academics, Mom
and Mama believed in marking up books, and the margins held pieces of them Gwen could
never sell.

“I’m ready to go,” she said.

Zeke still leaned against the broken wall, staring over the Pines that encroached on
the house. He only wore a T-shirt despite the autumn chill, and moonlight glowed across his
freckled arms.

He held out his hand. “Come here for a sec.”

She joined him, shrugging off the pack, and he slid an arm around her waist, his
thumb curled in her belt. Below, weeds stretched shoulder high, separated from the pines by
the creek bed, more like a gulch now. Next year, saplings would fill the half-acre. The
Barrens would reclaim it if some developer didn’t swoop in.

Zeke sighed into her neck. “The flood might have fucked everything else, but the
trees still look stunning.”

She half-expected him to drop some silly not-as-beautiful-as-you line, but isn’t that
why she’d agreed to this? Because he was dorky-sweet and quiet like that? But if she paused
to take it in, relaxed in his arms for a moment, something bad would happen. She felt it in her
gut.
He hugged her from behind, resting his chin on her shoulder. His hands slid under her shirt, warm against her stomach, one finger tracing the line of her bra.

She bit back a sigh, the exhausted kind. If only she wasn’t so tired. All day, she went through the motions, her head in a haze. Any of the kids who’d lost a lot to the flood had the same vacant look. The ones living in the gym, even more so. Zeke had managed to shake it off, maybe because he had a chance with his car and camera—a way to make hope.

She tugged his wrist. “C’mon, let’s go to the car.”

He nuzzled her neck. “All right.”

They left her bedroom and crept along the soggy hallway. For a moment, it felt weirdly normal—sneaking out of her house to screw in the backseat. She paused in the empty doorway while Zeke limped to the car, silhouetted by the high beams. She closed her eyes, imagining a sunny afternoon, everything in its place: the sunflower couch below the bay window, coffee table stacked with antique art books and camping magazines, the bookcases wreathed in plants, a basket of laundry waiting to be folded. She whispered goodbye, then knocked once on the wooden doorframe, as Mom had a habit of doing when they left on a trip.

As she followed Zeke across the overgrown lawn, the sense of eyes watching grew too strong. Not dead eyes but living, a gaze with a soul behind it. Her mothers said she had good instincts, and she’d grown to trust her gut more over the past six weeks.

She obeyed the warning coiling below her stomach and looked up.

A man crouched on a branch over the car. His weirdly bright eyes, glowing from the headlights, focused on her, and she felt like a trapped fawn. He wore some sort of dark
uniform, though the cloth was torn, as if he’d run through the pines. A teal patch dangled off his shoulder.

“Zeke!” Her voice broke into a scream.

The man dropped from the tree—except he didn’t jump. The branch dissolved beneath his bare feet. He landed on top of the car, cratering the roof, and cracks webbed the windshield.

He prowled forward, crunching over the broken glass, blood welling from his soles.

“I was hoping for a show, but I guess not.”

Zeke backed up until he blocked Gwen. “Just chill, man. You want money? The camera?”

The man bared his teeth like an animal and swung off the car. “Run.”

Command spiked the word, and Gwen’s flight instinct jolted her legs.

She held her ground. “What do you want?”

He feinted forward, and Gwen lost control. She ran.
CHAPTER 2.

An ambulance took Zeke two nights later. During Gwen and Zeke’s sprint through the pines, he’d fallen. His shin had splintered, bones piercing skin, and it’d taken them the rest of that night to limp back to the high school gym. Instead of relief at the single working light buzzing and blinking over the doors, anger had choked Gwen. She was still trying to swallow it.

At least the man hadn’t followed them. The last they’d heard of him was a wail, high-pitched and faint as the trees creaking in the wind. She’d told the rent-a-cop at the door, and he’d pretended to write it down.

The loss of the car had snapped Zeke, and he hadn’t looked at her, let alone spoken to her for the past two days. He’d just stretched on his cot, staring at the high ceiling. After twenty-four hours, his leg became infected, then fever set in.

Gwen hunched on her cot, staring at his empty one, the covers piled on the floor. How did broken bones still get infected? According to CNN, the rest of the USA had already moved on to California wildfires and fantasy football picks. New Jersey had been archived. None of it mattered now.

Gwen slung her backpack over her shoulders. Emergency lights in the high school gym’s rafters lit the cots. By the folded bleachers, teachers manned a watch station, more like prison guards than educators. They’d organized shifts once the police said they were needed elsewhere—protests outside of AquaCore, looting and loitering downtown. Tonight, Ms. Smith, fresh out of college, flirted with Chris the hipster English teacher and token African-American hire of their white Piney school district. The cracked alarm clock on the table
glared the time: 12:02 AM. Hopefully, they wouldn’t notice her as she hurried toward the back of the gym.

“Gwen, where are you off to?”

“Shit.” She turned around, hitching her thumbs in the backpack straps.

Chris jogged over, scanning the other cots as he passed. “It’s after midnight.”

“I see that.”

He folded his arms. “Is this why you’ve missed two weeks of my class, because you’ve been sneaking out?”

“I got other things on my mind—like my boyfriend half-dead because of a broken bone.”

Chris rubbed the back of his head. “Yeah, I’m sorry about Zeke.” Even at midnight, he still wore his black skinny jeans. Last year, when things had been normal, when Chris was the cute new hire, she’d Facebook stalked him and found out he was twenty-four. He looked older, now, as if the flood had aged him, too.

“How are you doing?” he asked.

She squinted at him. “What?”

“Listen,” he said, “English was your favorite subject. You were researching the best colleges for English and Environmental Science degrees. Now, I haven’t seen you for days and you’ve missed two assignments.”

Gwen grit her teeth. Like she really cared about class right now. “Because college is totally in my future.”

Chris steepled his fingers and pointed at her. “Rutgers is giving preference to flood victims. Keep your grades up and there are scholarships for other state schools.”
The word *grades* rang like a gunshot, and rage exploded through her. Her hands clenched. “Grades, Chris? My parents died in a flood. I’m living in the high school gym until all the FEMA fuckheads can figure out what to do with the orphans! You think I care about grades?”

He raised his hands and said something, but her surging anger drowned him out. This was why she had to get away—maybe just for a night, maybe for longer. All her real belongings, stuff not donated by rich people, pressed against her spine. She didn’t have to come back.

She cut through the cafeteria toward the loading bay door as Chris called he was sorry. A broken lock made the door look secure but jiggle the handle, and the whole thing creaked up. She shimmied under the edge, dropped to the pavement, and slammed it shut. The parking lot lights had broken weeks ago, so she stood in near dark, the mostly full moon a bright disc. Cracks and heaved pavement destroyed the asphalt until it hung in ragged sheets over the edge of a gully. Though it was early November, only one freeze had shaken the trees, so the sumac still held their leaves, blurry as brushstrokes in the nightlight. She trotted to the gully’s edge and used broken rebar poking from the pavement to swing down. Mud slurped at her feet, and her bad ankle twinged as she wrenched it free.

At the bottom, a child’s bike leaned beneath an overhang created by an oak’s tangled roots, carefully placed so the gully appeared scavenged-clean. She hooked the crossbar over her shoulder, her backpack cushioning the weight. Deadwood she’d stuck in the loam marked the easiest footholds, and she hauled herself to the other side, only slipping once. The one mistake caused a bike pedal to dig into her ribs, but another bruise didn’t make a difference.
The grove still smelled like river bottom, which was enough to make her pulse race, for her ears to roar with the sound of the oncoming flood. She focused on the stars and took a few deep breaths before wheeling the bike through the undergrowth to Water Street. God, she hated the irony. Maybe deep down inside, the town’s founders had known the river would reclaim it all, that humans were dumb enough to think they could control the water—or the planet for that matter. Her parents had gone to the marches, written letters to politicians pleading for change so all the children wouldn’t inherit poisoned land and water. Funny, but the politicians’ kids weren’t worried about dams breaking or nitrate runoff. At least, not yet. The rural farmland, the coasts, the city limits—the edges of the world were fissuring.

Gwen peddled standing, her knees absorbing every pothole. Since these houses had been abandoned, only the high school on the hill partially surviving the flood, the streetlamps hadn’t been replaced and she navigated the broken pavement by moonlight. Squatters’ fires flickered in the houses’ empty eyes, and she pumped faster, her breath catching. A few candles burned on sagging porches, and oversized shadows wavered. Someone strummed a guitar. Gwen turned her head to catch a few notes. Teachers and older students spread stories about the squatters—rape, beatings, murders. In the daylight, Gwen didn’t believe them. Before the flood, these people had been upstanding neighbors. The flood couldn’t strip all of that away. At night, though, fear spiked her pulse.

Gwen swerved onto Pepper Street to avoid the center of town. The single street shopping district had shifted to a slight rise after bad flooding in 1972, so it had received the least damage and recovered the quickest, even experiencing a bit of a boom as AquaCore gas guys filled up apartments and demanded new bars. Police kept the homeless, squatters, and
kids moving along, claiming that threats of mobs and looting forced them to concentrate on
downtown rather than say, the high school or the outskirts.

   Usually Pepper Street was empty—far enough away from downtown—, but three
white pick-up trucks idled outside the shell of a house lit by a generator. Gwen hopped the
bike onto the broken sidewalk, leaning into the shadows.

   As she passed, a woman climbed down from one truck cab and entered the next.

   A man leaned from the window of the third truck. “Damn girl, how do I get a piece of
you?”

   Gwen muttered fuck off and swerved onto River Road. She didn’t stop pistoning the
pedals for a mile, praying she didn’t hear an engine. At least those trucks were loud.

   The sluggish river gleamed in the moonlight, and a coolness radiated from it, chilling
her damp hoodie. Her breathing slipped into panicky gasps at the river’s smell: part silt and
part sulfur from the nearby frack pads spewing light pollution and god knew what else. She’d
never feared the water as a kid but loved the river’s wet smells and shushing sounds. The
flood had taken that love, turning it to acid in her stomach.

   She attempted to quiet her anxiety by sinking into the pure silence of River Road. The
houses had been swept off, so squatters were rare, especially since living by the river meant
bad luck. These houses used to be the million dollar homes, complete with ATV, RV, skiff,
and a never-used canoe. All washed away six weeks ago.

   She took a breather by the train tracks. The bridge had been one of the first things the
town fixed—had to keep that natural gas shipping to the Gulf. People protested by standing
on the tracks, but the police had arrested them. She’d wanted to go because her mothers
would have been there if they were alive, but she’d chickened out.
The train whistle blared, and the headlight raced over the bridge. Gwen leaned her bike against a dead tree and edged closer to the tracks.

The caboose chugged past, and she stepped nearer, the wind sour with fuel and hot metal. It whipped her hair over her face, and she smoothed it to watch the graffiti go by. Sometimes, she imagined it would be nice to scream, hidden by the train’s clacking. Other times, she considered how much it would hurt to just catch hold of a car, let it carry her until she got tired, and fall off somewhere new.

Her chest ached as the cars whizzed by, carrying spray-painted messages from cities she only hoped to visit. In the dark, the graffiti was just strange splashes with no context in a flooded town. It’d be easy to become another splash of color on the train.

Except she couldn’t shake off her mothers’ ghosts. They’d given their lives, and part of her had died with them. She wasn’t Gwen Gardner, sixteen-years-old with straight As dreaming of attending Columbia University for English or maybe Environmental Science. The flood had diminished her future to getting through the next twenty-four hours, then the next. If she were more resourceful, if she were braver, she could be like her mothers. Mama had been homeless for a month, couch-surfing, after her religious parents disowned her. Mom had once beat up two Neo-Nazis in a bar fight during college.

Only to have their lives wrecked by more old white men in suits who couldn’t be bothered to fix a dam in poor Hamilton County.

The final train cars carrying huge metal gas containers with the teal AquaCore logo whisked past, and Gwen inched closer, the gusting air tugging at her, the power shaking through her legs like a thrumming anger. If only she could turn anger into an identity like some of the others. A punk squat had grown from a destroyed trailer park, part anarchist
workshop, part soup kitchen. Two other homeless girls had dropped out of high school and joined up. She’d seen them handing food packages to squatters along Water Street. If she were just a little bit more like her mothers, she’d make something of her life instead of floating along like a piece of flood trash.

The last train car whipped by, the air snapping dead like a broken rubber band.

A man stood on the other side of the tracks.

Gwen blinked. Her heartbeat tripled, almost painful. He stood only two yards from her.

She took a step back. He didn’t move. Another step back toward her bike.

The moon silhouetted him, so she couldn’t see his face or his clothes, just his shape—tall and broad-chested.

Another figure stepped from the tree line. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

Instinct screamed to run—screw the bike. She listened and sprinted along the road, hooked into the trees, then down the steep incline toward the river.

She kept running until she neared Slabtown Bridge, pain spearing her ribs until she almost vomited. She crouched behind an old refrigerator rolled up against a tree trunk and gasped into her sweatshirt, trying to quiet her panic by counting her breaths. Nothing crackled the underbrush behind her. Maybe they were just two squatters trying to stay warm by walking, but she needed to lie low and decide if she were going to go back to the gym or finally suck it up and do something else.

Quietly as possible, she picked a path to the bridge. Slabtown had earned the name for the smooth river stones large enough for sunbathing. Her mothers had met there, and
they’d brought Gwen all summer long since she’d been born. Most of the locals hung out right beneath the bridge, but her mothers had a better spot beyond a row of DIY pit toilets. Few swimmers ventured along that path, but around a bend in the river, a creek wound from the pines and a six-foot chunk of sandstone settled where the creek and river water mingled.

After ten minutes, Gwen crouched a few yards from the sandstone slab. She closed her eyes and listened. At first, the swirling creek overwhelmed her senses, ramping her pulse so it throbbed in her ears. She waited, taking deep breaths, until she could hear beyond the water. Rabbit rustles, a lone cicada confused by the warm weather, the wind groaning through deadwood, but no human noises—no spitting fires or drunken shouts.

She counted to one hundred, still listening, then walked to the sandstone slab. She toed off her shoes and socks before stepping onto the cool grit. A bit of warmth seeped into her soles as she padded to the edge where the stone jutted into the creek. She set aside her backpack and stretched on her stomach, reaching over the edge, almost bent double. A breath of cold air came off the water, but she plunged her arm into the creek. She’d regret the wet sleeve, but she had something to warm her.

Underwater, she felt for slick glass propped beneath the sandstone and wiggled the bottle free. The label had been washed away before she found it, but from the clearness and bite, she assumed vodka or maybe gin. Something cheap and gut-burning. She picked off the tape, unscrewed the cap, and took two gulps. It made her gasp, but a cold fire winked in her chest. She tilted her head to the moon and closed her eyes as warmth swirled through her.

As usual, she flicked a swig into the water, either to her mothers or the bloody river or the hallucination of the human-animal that had lifted her from the flood—it changed depending on her anger.
Tonight, she couldn’t help but ask. She pressed the cold bottle to her forehead.

“Mom, Mama, I know—I know you aren’t out there. But I need someone. I’m sorry I’m not like you two. I wish I was, but now that Zeke’s gone—I just need a friend. Anyone.”

She took another gulp, then stretched by the sandstone’s edge, the water loud to her fuzzing senses. The stars glinted in an ancient mosaic of creation.
CHAPTER 3.

The star coordinates led to a dead house. Not Erhent’s partner in making magic, not the woman described in the horoscope cast by the old Starcatcher: a leader, fierce but soft spoken, artistic, well-loved by those around her, a maker of packs. Merely a decaying house smelling of a bedraggled girl, totally human, without even the after-scent of wilder. He hadn’t prepared for a human girl.

Jack’s ears swiveled backward. “I only smell humankind.”

Erhent paced around the house. “Of course you do. They’ve left their flood trash everywhere.”

The yard had been hollowed from the pines, which leaned toward the edges. A washed-out stream cut between the house and the wood. He imagined a human girl picking a path across the water and entering the forest. The part of himself kept caged beneath his ribs growled the Starcatcher was wrong. This girl was a mistake, but no, something felt right about this place.

He stepped into the doorway, biting off his glove. He touched the frame, and the wood crumbled in his palm. The house’s spirit still wicked off the skeleton—welcoming, peaceful. Two mothers and a content child, all in the shadow of the weird woods.

Jack flicked his tail at the house. “The young one, the girl, she was here a few nights ago.”

He sighed. “I sense her. Like a spiderweb caught on my finger.”

Jack touched his shoulder. “We can still leave. She’s too young, and she’s lost everything. Let her grow.”
Erhent pointed at the dark trees. “She’s alone in the middle of Dark Star territory. I know you smelled the Soul-Eaters, same as I did.”

Jack’s ears twitched, but he didn’t correct Erhent. “It’s all their territory since the dam broke. If we go any further, if they sense us—”

“We could die, I know.” He gripped Jack’s biceps, breathing in the desert dryness of him. “I need this, Jack. To be a Starcatcher. If she’s lost everything, then I suspect she will need the magic of the stars, too.”

His ears swiveled and drooped. “You will have barely five weeks to learn magic. She will have to learn a new culture, a new world, learn to trust you, and magic. I don’t know if it can be done.”

Erhent reached up and tugged gently at Jack’s right ear. “Oh, Mercury will change his mind when he sees her. He must honor us as a Starcatcher.”

Jack growled but slumped, pressing his face into Erhent’s hair. “Maybe the otterkind can tell us more about your partner.”

Even though the Kurultai had lost this part of the Pine Barrens to the Dark Stars, made obvious by the AquaCore signs pinned to every fence, a few native wilders refused to leave their lands. A romp of otterkind had even showed themselves during a flood, rescuing humankind.

Hopefully, the otterkind would continue helping, even once she saw Erhent. The stream behind the house had become more of a muddy gulch after the flood. Water gurgled along the bottom, leaving roots grasping from the crumbling walls. Jack cupped his hands around his mouth and barked into the deep darkness across the creek.
Erhent rolled his shoulders, an itch rubbing at his spine. Since they’d entered the Pine Barrens, and unfriendly whisper had carried after him. He held out his hand as if feeling for rain.

The trees groaned and branches rubbed against each other, squealing. A branch dropped with a *whump*.

Erhent stepped into the empty yard. “I don’t think I can go into the woods.”

Jack motioned to the husk of a car with a broken windshield. “No, not with other soulkind here.”

“All the more reason to find my partner—tonight.”

Jack’s tail pressed against Erhent’s leg. “Once we—” He turned, lowering into a crouch and bearing his teeth.

A shadow parted the creek. “Relax, dogboy. A Dark Star would’ve just sniped you by now.”

Erhent clasped his hands behind him. Jack straightened, angling himself in front of Erhent. As always.

The otterkind folded her arms on the edge of the bank, resting her chin on her hands. The sweet, sickly smell of infection rolled off her skin. Sores coated her jaw and lips. “What an odd pair. Even odder for a Starcatcher. I’m surprised the Kurultai allowed it.”

Erhent lowered his head. Some Soul-Eaters became Starcatchers, for Dark Stars or Kurultai, but usually the stars paired them with an equally powerful partner like wulvers or dragonkinds or fey. Never humans. Just another reason this girl seemed like a mistake.

The otterkind chuckled deep in her throat. “A Soul-Eater and a humankind Starcatcher? That’s, well, wrong.”
The fur-hair rose over Jack’s skull and between his ears like hackles. “If you want to compare wrongs, how about exposing yourself to humankind?”

She scratched at her jaw. “That’s your girl I saved.” She nodded downstream. “She’s waiting for something. More Soul-Eaters are out. One already tried to get her a few nights ago, but the Pine Barrens did the Kurultai a favor and saved her.”

Erhent jerked up his head. “Is she in danger?”

The otterkind bared her small, sharp teeth. “We are all in danger, here.”

He gripped Jack’s arm, but Jack flicked his ears, signaling wait.

“What do you know of her?” Jack asked.

“I only live in this stream. I wasn’t her keeper.”

“Yet you saved her life.”

The otterkind raked her fingers through her muddy hair, releasing another sickly smell. “I saved a lot of lives that night.” She dug her palms into the grass, levering herself higher and glaring. “Maybe I shouldn’t have. Maybe she would have saved herself. But you are breaking the rules, too. I saw she had the potential to be a Starcatcher, but not for many, many years.” She dragged her gaze over Erhent, and he forced himself to hold still, wringing his hands behind his back. “Yet, here you are.” She licked her lips and nodded at Erhent.

“You can’t be one of the alphas, too small. They call you a runt, isn’t it?”

Jack lowered into a crouch, eye-to-eye with the otterkind on the edge of the gultch.

“We are here on orders from the Kurultai—”

She scrapped her thumbnail over a sore, bursting it. “Too bad they abandoned this place, huh?”
Erhent brushed Jack’s raised fur, asking him to stop. Whatever poison the flood had dumped into the water and the land had sickened this wilder who, he imagined, did not want to abandon the place her kind had lived for generations. He’d be angry, too.

Jack took a whistling breath through his nose. “He and this girl are a Starcatcher. You owe them your allegiance. Tell us where—”

She chirped a laugh. “A Soul-Eater runt and his humankind girl? I do not owe them.”

“Please,” Erhent said. “I just want to find her, keep her safe.”

Her dark eyes flicked to Erhent, then settled on Jack. “Tell me, Jackalkind, is it true what they say about the runts? If you’re alpha enough, they’ll do whatever you say?”

Jack lunged into the gulch even as the otterkind dropped from the bank, splashing into the stream.

Erhent slid to the edge. “Jack!”

He caught her by the waist and pinned her in the mud even as her tail cracked against his thigh.

“Tell me where she is!”

The otterkind snapped at his throat, but he pressed his forearm to her chest.

She bared her teeth. “Follow the stream to the river.”

He rolled off her, and she vanished through the black water.

Jack panted as Erhent helped him up the steep bank. Mud and algae smeared the T-shirt and frayed pants Erhent had asked him to wear to meet his partner.

Jack shook himself, water whipping off his tail, but the shaking turned into a shiver.

Erhent wanted to look him in the eye and say thank you, but his head dipped, his hair hiding his face. “May I warm you, at least?”
Jack leaned into his side for a moment. “I’m fine.”

He caught his arm, slick with mud. “It’s two days back. The flight will take the scent off. No one will know.”

Jack flicked his tail, and Erhent peeled off his gloves. He reached beneath Jack’s T-shirt, palming his shoulder blades. He eased warmth and energy into Jack’s skin.

Jack breathed deep. “Thank you.”

He straightened Jack’s shirt. “At least she won’t know what I am. That will make it easier.”

Jack’s ears flattened. “At first.”
CHAPTER 4.

The cheap liquor hot in Gwen’s gut had bloomed into anger. Maybe she’d come here to be angry, and the alcohol just washed away her inhibitions. Standing in the moonlight and shouting over the water was really dumb, but she did it anyway.

“Hey!” She heaved a chunk of sandstone, and the splash echoed across the bank.

“You don’t get to do this! Save someone and leave them!” She hurled a softball-sized rock so hard her shoulder ached. “You changed everything.” She sat on the edge of the rock, letting the water freeze her feet. “Saving me was—was cruel.” Cold racked her body, but she slid into the shallows, anyway.

“Did you save me to be cruel?”

Her bare feet numbed as she felt a path over the slick river stones. The water caressing her skin made her throat tighten.

“You told me to look at the stars.”

The water swirled around her waist, and she stopped, hugging herself. She tipped her head to the night sky. Stars spread over the darkness like goosebumps, more appearing the longer she looked.

“I did. There’s nothing—nothing!”

She stuck her arms into the water, soaking her sweatshirt, and hauled up a stone. She raised the rock over her head, but after a second, her muscles quivering, she clutched it. Cold seeped into her chest.

She forced her fingers to relax. The rock splashed. Other teens had faded into hopelessness, waiting for something to come back from the water. Not her. She wouldn’t
waste her mothers’ deaths, but maybe it was time to leave the high school. Zeke’s infection showed it wasn’t any safer than the punk squat. Her mothers would approve of that lifestyle, probably.

She cupped her hands and howled, “Fuck you!”

“If you’re directing that at the otterkind, I’d agree.”

Gwen whipped around, almost lost her balance, and splashed at the water to stay upright.

A man crouched at the edge of her rock. “She wasn’t very pleasant.”

Oh hell. Now she was going to pay for not sprinting to Chris and the high school after running into those guys by the train. Mistakes like this led to girls becoming horror stories. Her mothers had taught her to be smarter.

He raised his hands. “Please, I just want to talk.” He had a slight Latino accent. Her height and slender. Black clothing caused him to blend in with the darkness. “We mean you no harm.”

Gwen’s gaze flicked between him and her backpack—all her dry clothes, her wallet, her last things from home. “Get the fuck away.”

“Ah, but then we would be harming you,” he said. “You are cold on a cold night, and we are not the only ones out.” His eyes locked onto her, weirdly bright—enough to brighten his brown face. “According to the otterkind. You met her, I believe? Half-woman, half-otter in your eyes?”

The river lapped against her gut, and her legs trembled. Wiggling her toes sent pain zig-zagging up her calves. “J-just go away. I’ll scream.” He’d said we even though she didn’t
see a second person. But he’d also mentioned the otterwoman, at least, she thought that’s what he meant.

“Please, I know the otterkind saved you. She saved you for me.” He grimaced.

“That’s not what—I apologize, I’ve been waiting to meet you for months.”

“What, is that code for kill me and throw me in the river?”

He stood, clasping his hands behind him. “I swear I would never hurt you.” His voice strained, and he didn’t say it like a stranger, but like someone who knew her. Or someone like her English teacher Chris.

His tone made her step toward the rock. She glanced over at the far bank, but her feet had numbed so that each step made her want to groan. She grit her teeth. “Get back.”

He raised his hands and stepped off the rock. She hauled herself out, gasping as the sandstone bit into her numb legs. She crawled to her backpack and snatched it and her shoes.

He shrugged off his coat and offered it. “May I?”

She ripped open her backpack and pulling out a hoodie. “You may stay right there.”

She jerked off her sweatshirt and one of her two T-shirts before slipping on the hoodie. She forced herself to stare at the man while she changed, so if he even flinched, she could roll into the water and swim for it—not that she would get far in wet clothes. Still, the trailer-park-turned-punk-squat was close by. She might only have mild frostbite before she reached it.

He slowly crouched again so they were eye-to-eye. “I’m Erhent.” His hand twitched as if he didn’t know if he should extend for a shake or wave or do nothing.

She stuffed her wet clothes into her pack. What kind of name was that?

“The otterkind—otterwoman—told us you were waiting here.”
She jerked on her shoes, but her hands shook too badly to tie the laces. “You keep saying we.”

The man motioned into the trees lining the bank. “Jack, why don’t you come out?”

Gwen scrambled upright, shouldering her bag. “Look, I don’t want to know. Just let me by and I won’t say anything to anyone.”

The man picked at his gloved hands, which didn’t seem like winter gloves but something finer. “You misunderstand. We are here for you.”

She pulled the hunting knife from the front pouch, unsheathing it. Shit, shit, what about the guy who had cat-called her? Maybe these were his friends, or just some pimp who saw her at the school. It had happened to other girls. “I said, move.”

He clasped his hands behind him again. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to frighten you. I’m here to help.”

She turned the blade so it glinted in the moonlight. “Then let me onto the path.”

He pivoted, glancing at the trees as if asking for support. “Wait, the stars have brought us together, and you are in danger here—”

She breathed hard through her nose. Her muscles spasmed with the cold. “Let me onto the path.”

He stepped into the undergrowth, and Gwen hurried off the rock, backing toward the bridge. Hopefully, the second guy wouldn’t appear behind her and snatch her. What little strength the cold hadn’t sapped would totally be gone if that happened.

He removed his gloves, tucking them in his coat. “I know this will make little sense, but we are destined to meet. If not now, then later. Now will serve us both better, I believe.”
Another step back. She could turn and sprint for it, except running made her an easy target. If she ran now, at least she’d have a few seconds of surprise. The punk squat was only a quarter mile off. She might be able to outpace him for that long.

She took a deep breath, then sprinted.

“Wait!”

Feet pounded behind her.

A second voice shouted, “No, Erhent, let her go!”

Adrenaline pushed her body, and she blocked the pain in her feet. Instinct warned he was catching up.

“Erhent! Don’t touch her!”

She turned, knife swinging, but he caught the blow, seizing her wrist in both hands. At his bare touch, a great joy flooded her, as if seeing an old friend thought dead. Warmth spread through her fingers, bringing a good feeling, like waking up on the first day of summer. Or a first kiss.

Yet, when she met his gaze, fear gripped her. He looked human but not. His face was predatory: high cheekbones, a sharp chin, so thin he looked starving. His eyes—he could kill her, right now. She couldn’t say why or how, just a deep belief.

She jerked from his grasp and ran again. When she glanced back, a second shadow had appeared, gripping the man’s shoulder.

She didn’t look again until she’d crossed the bridge. Nobody followed.
CHAPTER 5.

Two large No Trespassing signs declared the land property of AquaCore. Gwen hadn’t crossed Slabtown Bridge since the flood, so she didn’t plan for a ten-foot tall fence blocking the broken road. A teal logo depicted a fracking well. Apparently, the landlord hadn’t been around, because red spray paint read: Slab Town Welcomes All. Another layer of hot pink paint x-ed out Slab Town, scrawling the name of an activist instead: Mary L’Engle. She’d busted a human trafficking ring in Atlantic City twenty years ago—Gwen had written a paper about her, a semi-local hero.

A hole had been cut into the chain link, so Gwen squirmed through.

Even though it must be nearing two in the morning, young people in a spectrum of just-ran-away-from-daddy’s-mansion to full crust punk drank, smoked, talked, made out, and goofed off. Generators powered some of the water-sodden modulars, and through the broken windows rap lyrics, punk riffs, video games, news cycles blared, making the whole place feel more normal than the gym—not a black hole of gloom.

She asked a group of girls passing a cigarette if they knew where to find her friend Lizzy (though the word “friend” was stretching it), but they said she’d gone train-hopping.

“Do you need something?” the oldest-looking girl asked. Gwen thought she might have recognized her from the high school but couldn’t place her name.

Gwen hugged herself, shivering. “Is there a place I could warm up?”

The girl, who said to call her Calypso, led her to a roughhewn pavilion, the wood still white instead of weather-stained. It appeared almost medieval, lit with pine torches and an oil barrel for a fire pit in the center. A warped plastic table offered a junk food buffet—
Twinkies, chocolate, Cliff bars, off-brand sugar cereals—in addition to some surplus army
meals, apples, oatmeal packets, trail mix, ramen, and canned vegetables.

Calypso nodded at the table. “Donations, so help yourself. Coffee’s by the fire.”

About a dozen people chatted and chain smoked, while a handful of others played
cards. A few slept bent over the splintery tables and makeshift chairs. Despite the dark, more
squatters kept coming in and out. The crowd soaked up some of Gwen’s tension. No wonder
others had dropped out of high school for this place. It actually felt safe here—well, safe
enough.

She poured coffee from a tall pot into a chipped Star Wars mug, though she had to
pause twice, waiting for her hands to stop shaking. Her brain replayed the encounter over and
over. Only one thing made her question the man’s status as a stalker—he’d mentioned the
otterwoman. For fear of being labeled crazy, she’d never revealed her to anyone. Maybe he’d
been rescued, too.

She snatched an off-brand chocolate bar and settled in the pavilion’s center, so other
squatters surrounded her. She would have preferred to hunker in a corner, but the idea of
leaving her back to the woods made her heartbeat quicken.

For half an hour, she watched a game of chess unfold at the table across from her,
listened to three guys with shaved heads argue about whether the dam had been allowed to
fail to make the land worthless so AquaCore could buy up acreage for fracking, and stole
glances at two girls nestled together beneath a wool blanket. Longing made her stare, picking
apart their patchwork clothes. She wondered if Zeke felt better. Maybe she could try to visit
him, though since he’d stopped talking to her, that didn’t seem like a good idea. Before the
flood, she had a few close friends at school, Caleb and Lisa, but while their families had
survived, they’d moved in with Pennsylvanian relatives. She’d texted them until her smartphone was stolen. Half the high school students had moved, and the few still stuck in the gym were unfamiliar faces, the kids who skipped and were just pushed through the system. At least she’d taken shop with Zeke the previous year.

She crossed her arms on the table and hid her face. Maybe things would be different if she stayed here. Zeke could come once his leg healed.

“May I join you?”

She straightened, swooping back her hair. A guy waited on the other side of the table. He wore a black collared shirt tucked into black jeans, and over all, a long black coat and black gloves—not winter gloves.

She gripped the table, her muscles tightening, ready to run. “Why are you following me?” Fear crashed through her, but it raced along something else—a feeling that made her want to grin.

“Please,” he whispered, glancing around the pavilion. “I only want to talk.”

Thoughts tickertaped through her head—he’d known about the otterwoman, somehow. What could it mean, that her savior wasn’t a hallucination? But she couldn’t trust some guy following her around the woods in the middle of the night.

He sat down. His face was thin and angular—not in a beautiful way, but hungry. His nose cut too sharp, his eyebrows too thin, his chin too pointed. For some reason, it made her think of a shark or a cheetah, something fast and predatory. His gaze made her pulse double. Maybe it was the dim light or her exhaustion, but she noticed his eyes again, their weird brightness enough to cast a glow.

His proximity made her stomach coil.
“I saw your house,” he said. “Is this where you live, now?”

She pulled her knife from her pack, digging the tip into the table so it looked like she merely scratched at the wood. “Why are you following me?”

He locked her in his overly bright gaze. “It’s not my intention to frighten you.”

She gripped the antler-handled knife with both hands. “Then stop following me.”

He sighed, staring at his hands. “Fair enough. Though aren’t you curious how I knew about your rescuer?”

She mulled over how to answer without giving too much away. This guy made her feel—something. Fear, yes, but he felt like more. His face, his eyes, even his gloved hands felt familiar, as if from a dream. Name-dropping the otterwoman made him seem less like a creeper.

“I saw something,” Gwen said, “in the flood. You’ve seen it, too.”

“What did you see?”

“Something that doesn’t exist.”

He half-smiled. “But it does exist. You live in a very old forest. Surly you felt something before?”

“Before what—now? You?”

“Maybe.” He chewed his thumbnail through his glove. “Tell me your name, and I’ll explain.”

“I’m not giving some stalker freak my name.”

He leaned forward, lowering his voice. “You can’t feel that way or else you would have told these humans to toss me out.”
She stared at the table, tracing some of the letters scratched into the wood. His touch still warmed her wrist, like a thumb on her pulse, a light tugging in the veins close to the skin. A little pleasurable, a little painful. “If there is any chance that you are like—are like *her*—I have to know.” She took in the predatory angles of his face. Her breath hitched.

He bit the tip of his right glove, pulling it off. “Let’s try this again. I’m Erhent.” He traced his finger over the wooden table, spelling a word. Except his finger burned a line straight through the wood, each letter a window to the dirt floor.

*Erhent*

An animal part of her brain screamed to run as fast as possible, but she only grinned. “Holy shit.”

He smoothed his hand over the letters. “Is that enough to earn your name?”

She shrugged. “Gwen.”

“All right, Gwen. Do you ever feel like the world is ending?” He paused. She wasn’t sure if he wanted an answer. “If you aren’t super rich, sure.”

“As if all of humanity has suddenly realized they are waist deep in quicksand.” The way he said “they” made her zip her hoodie to her throat. As if that pronoun didn’t apply to him. “You must not live in New Jersey.”

He shook his head, his black hair framing his face. “I flew in from Wyoming.”

“Really? Cool.” She wanted to pinch herself. God, she sounded like a kid. “Is it as pretty as it looks in the pictures?”

“More so. Different than here.”
She swirled the coffee, then took a sip, grimacing—it had turned lukewarm. “Well, if you’d spent any time here, you’d know about the dam breaking. Water will kill you quicker than sand.”

He leaned back with a long *ah*. “So that’s what happened.”

She crooked a finger through the letters he’d burned. The flood was an unspoken thing at school, as if it were unlucky as grinding a toe into a sidewalk crack. “Yeah. We got hit by a bad hurricane six weeks ago, so everything flooded. They said the dam was going to hold. It didn’t.”

“You lost someone.”

The way he said it, so clearly a statement as if she wore it on a sign around her neck, made her meet his bright eyes. “My parents. My mothers.”

“I’m sorry.”

She stood and refilled her coffee mug, giving herself time to swallow the thickness in her throat. “It’s not like I’m the only one.” When she turned, he’d shifted in his seat, watching her. A moment of familiarity made her brace against a wooden beam.

“Do you stay with other family?” he asked.

The question made her tense, glance between him and her backpack. Nobody casually asked where a teenage girl lived. She hurried around the table, snatched her bag. “Why do you want to know?”

He blanched and hid his hands in his lap. “I didn’t mean to pry. Only my—my kind, we try to help others when things like this happen.”
A canine howl silenced the pavilion as those awake and sober looked toward the pines. From elsewhere in the camp, others returned the howls or yipped a response. Some hooted like drunken owls, dissolving into laughs.

A couple of the younger squatters stepped from the pavilion. One guy dragged a folding chair as if expecting something to leap from the undergrowth. Even in the safety of the gym, she’d heard the rumors that the coyotes had grown bolder, entering inhabited homes. At least, that’s what the police claimed when pets went missing.

He swung off the bench seat with a predatory grace. “Gwen, we need to go.”

She retreated, keeping the table between them. “No way.”

“That was a signal. My friend and I aren’t welcome here, and now, I’m afraid, neither are you.”

She kept her voice low. “You are crazy if you think I’m following you into the woods in the middle of the night.”

He circled the table, stepping close enough she could smell him. He carried the scent of the pines, sweet and cool. “Gwen, you don’t know me, but the stars have dictated that we will make magic together, that we are partners, what my kind call a Starcatcher—”

Another howl, this one deeper and more lyrical, which made him face the trees. “We need to leave.” He reached for her.

She scrambled backward. He raised his hands.

“You aren’t safe here,” he said.

“Yeah, probably from you,” she whispered, “and I’m an idiot for still standing here.”

She glanced at the other squatters and punks in the pavilion, still focused on their own conversations or checking out the woods.
The words he’d burned through the table still waited, challenging her world every second. If magic did exist, if he were something else—she had to know.

“Gwen, please.” He offered his hand, palm up, but she jerked away, banging into the table.

Two punks playing chess a both turned and looked them up and down.

“Everything all right, sweetheart?” asked the older one, a Scottish accent softening his words. The two girls nestled in the blanket were watching her, too, one leaning forward as if ready to step in.

Now was her chance. One word and she could turn this situation over to an adult, someone who could actually do something. But if it were true—

“Yeah. We’re good.” She smiled, then nodded for Erhent to walk with her.

She powerwalked, scanning for another cluster of people or somewhere well-lit. Her body shook, though she couldn’t tell if it were from cold or fear.

He stepped silently beside her like a hunter.

“What are you?” she asked.

“I’m a wilder.”

She stopped beneath a stolen street light hooked up to a solar panel. A sickly yellow light created a cone on the ground. They stood nearly eye-to-eye. “So like a fairy or something? Magic?”

“Of a kind.”

“Like Harry Potter.”

He squinted as if thinking, then wavered his hand. “Some. You and I are meant to be partners. We can only make magic working together.”
She crossed her arms. “And you expect me to believe that?”

He pointed at the pavilion. “I can spell it out in the wooden table if you like.”

“You really think I’m so stupid I would just believe you, some guy who stalked me through the woods. Just walk away with you?”

He picked at his gloves as if he wanted to touch her. “Can you say with honesty that you don’t feel something standing here, with me?”

She shoved her hands in her pockets. Her heart thudded, and she felt a little sick with adrenaline, but looking at him, really looking at him, beyond the weird stalker-y bit, something made her feel, well, lighthearted. A feeling lost with her mothers.

He edged closer, his voice dropping. “Because I feel something—like the pull of the river.”

She retreated. “I can’t run away on a feeling.”

He ducked his head, nodding. “I understand, Gwen.”

“So prove it. One more time.”

Another howl crackled through the night, and his gaze snapped toward the woods. “Once more. Quickly.”

He hurried to a woodpile by a flooded-out trailer and snatched a piece of firewood. He stuffed his gloves in his pockets.

A faint light came from his bare hands as he crushed the wood like a can. It made no noise, and only a few flecks of sawdust floated to the ground. He kept pressing away the wood until his palms met, as if he were praying. The light silhouetted his fingers for a moment, then faded.
He opened his hands. Only a thin square of wood, like a playing card, remained of the log. He offered it to her.

She plucked it, careful not to touch his fingers. An image had been burned into the grain—her house, a husk. She pressed her knuckles to her mouth.

“I had to guess on the other side,” he said. “I hope it’s accurate enough.”

She turned over the wooden card. Somehow, he’d recreated her home, even adding the porch, fixing the roof, lining in the trees the flood had snapped off, tracing the driveway.

“Oh my god.”

“I was given star coordinates that led to your house. We met the otterwoman in the stream nearby, and she told us where to find you.”

She flipped the card back and forth, running her thumb over the grooves. That’s how quick it had all happened. One day, a house with a porch and a roof and a driveway. The next, a shell that smelled like death.

He offered his ungloved hand. “If you believe me, we must leave. My friend is in danger.”

She pocketed the wooden card, then, careful not to touch him, jogged ahead. “So let’s go.”
CHAPTER 6.

The howling followed Gwen and Erhent along the road. He kept to the pavement, occasionally eyeing the trees, but never veering. She felt a thin thread of trust, but not enough to follow him into the woods—alone, with a total stalker type who definitely had a weird edge.

Between the howling, he kept promising to explain everything, saying how excited he was to show her star magic (whatever that meant).

Twice, he paused, turning his head as if listening, but she only heard the river shushing or the pines creaking. At least she could catch her breath, the stitch in her side making her wince. Only an hour of sleep, no food, and fighting the cold had exhausted her. Plus the mental energy of her brain reforming the world: A dam could break and kill your parents; a guy could dissolve wood with his bare hands.

After the second time he stopped, she asked what was wrong.

He kept his voice low as they crept toward the bridge. “This part of the Pine Barrens has been taken over by unfriendly things.”

“Wait, do you mean AquaCore, the fracking company?”

He nodded. “They’re a front, a way for the Dark Stars to make money and exhaust the land.”

“Dark Stars?”

He stepped onto the moonlit bridge and held up a hand. He tilted his face toward the sky as if scenting the air, then motioned her forward. “There’s so much to tell you, Gwen. Most of it good, I promise.”
Halfway across the bridge, Erhent froze. “Car.” His knees bent, as if he considered running or vaulting the railing.

An old sky-blue Jeep turned onto the bridge, cruising slow, less than twenty-five miles per hour. Crap, she knew that vehicle, always parked in the school lot—Chris, her English teacher. He’d cared more than she thought.

She turned her back to the road and leaned against the railing, tipping her head so her hair screened her face.

Erhent propped his elbows on the cement, almost brushing her. “Looking for you?”

She edged away from him. “Yeah, the local do-gooder.”

The Jeep stopped behind them. “Gwen?” A car door slammed.

She sighed and turned around—Erhent didn’t. “Hey, Chris.”

He hurried over, still in his skinny jeans with a denim jacket thrown over his T-shirt. His sagged, his eyes red. “Thank god. Where have you been? Did you go to Slab Town?”

She tried to stand straight, square her shoulders. “I’m staying with a friend, that’s all.”

He let out a long breath, his gaze sliding to Erhent. “Him? Is he your friend?”

She rolled her eyes. “God, Chris, just stop being a teacher for one second! Can’t you see none of this matters?” She pointed toward Slab Town. “Half your class is squatting on frack land, and the other half is dead or living in the high school gym.”

He spread his hands, palms up. “Gwen, I know that’s how it feels. I know you’re angry. Please, just come with me. I won’t take you to the school. We’ll go get some food, and we’ll talk about it. I know it feels hopeless. I feel it, too.”

She pressed against the railing. “I’m not going with you, Chris.”
His jaw twitched, and he nodded at Erhent’s back. “Because of him?” Chris tugged on Erhent’s coat. “Hey, I haven’t seen you around before.”

Erhent turned, pulling off his gloves. “Gwen is free to go with you if she desires.”

Chris flinched as if he felt the same fear Gwen experienced when she stared at Erhent’s face too long. “What did he promise you, Gwen? It’s all lies. I know it sounds good—quick money, good food, clothes, whatever. He will only hurt you.”

Erhent stepped into Chris with inhuman speed. “I would never hurt her.”

Chris gripped his coat and shoved him into the railing. “I’m fucking sick of guys like you thinking nobody will care if another girl goes missing, if her body shows up on the beach!”

Gwen jerked Chris’s jacket. “Stop it!”

He shrugged her off. “You guys come around flashing money or drugs or just taking them. I won’t let you!”

Erhent didn’t fight, just locked his gaze on Chris. He spoke slowly. “Gwen. Would you like me to make him leave?”

She backed away, holding herself. The thing was, Chris was right. Cots had gone empty in the gym because kids like her listened to men and women who promised them money, food, safety. Those ideas held a type of magic, too.

Chris shook him. “Shut it! Get in the car, Gwen. Now!”

Moms, she needed a sign. Maybe the river was giving something back. Every desire said to trust him while every piece of common sense said she was a stupid kid for believing in a fairytale man-in-black.
Nothing happened. The moon cast a glittering line as the river hissed over its bloody bed. Her moms were dead.

She stared Erhent in his pretty-deadly face and nodded.

He rested his hand over Chris’s grip on his coat. “Leave.” He bared his teeth, his face aging to a forgotten nightmare that made Gwen brace against the railing.

Chris shied back, bumped into his Jeep. He hesitated, glancing between Erhent and Gwen. “Your mothers wouldn’t want this. Listen to me—”

Erhent roared, his slim body shaking. “Leave, now!”

Her shoulders hunched, but she also felt the smallest touch of relief. Erhent was dangerous. She’d known that since he crouched on her rock. Except he didn’t direct that dangerousness at her, not like the guys in the AquaCore trucks. Erhent used that edge for her, not on her. Wasn’t that part of his offer, to protect her?

Chris scrambled into his idling Jeep and backed off the bridge, U-turning in the grass. He was right about her moms, too. They would’ve flipped if she brought someone like Erhent to the house—young but too old for her, good-looking in an uncanny way, dressed in black.

Erhent passed a hand over his face. “I apologize. I wasn’t expecting—that. I-I didn’t want you to see that.” He jerked on his gloves, flexing his fingers.

Gwen held herself as the taillights faded into the trees. “He’s right, you know. What could you possibly want with a homeless piece of flood trash like me? Other than to use me.”

He didn’t flinch or look away, like other adults did when they remembered what she was. His right arm twitched as if he might touch her. “Because you and I, Gwen, are going to
show them we are so much better than the names they gave us. We are going to make magic
together. I promise.”

“You make a lot of promises for some dude I just met.”

He glanced after Chris’s Jeep, then smiled, the last shred of sinister fading. “Ah, my
friend’s back.”

A shadow loped onto the bridge, except the form looked off. The feeling that she
played prey to Erhent’s predator hadn’t totally worn away, so in that aspect, the other guy
appeared more human since he didn’t inspire the same fear.

Even if he seemed more impossible. Even if he were human and dog combined.
Pointed, lupine ears sprouted from tawny hair that looked more like fur, the colors
contrasting with his dark skin. The fur made a lump beneath his dirty white T-shirt as if it
grew along his chest and spine. And that tail, the sleek gray and tan tail that flicked back and
forth, poking from frayed jeans that looked wrong on him.

Golden eyes peered beneath wiry brows, locking onto her.

She took a step back even as Erhent hugged the dogman. What had Erhent called
himself—a wilder? Anything with the prefix wild- would fit better than human.

“We mean you no harm,” said the dogman as he stepped away from Erhent. He had
an accent soft as lamb’s ear, but she, ashamedly, couldn’t narrow it down more than African.

Erhent pointed to the dogman. “This scruffy one is Jack. Well, you can call him
Jack.”

Jack waved his tail. “Barking doesn’t translate to English with precision.”

“Barking. Like, like—”

Erhent leaned into Jack. “We’re not human. If that’s what you mean.”
She laughed but didn’t dare look directly at them. “Sure. Not human. What, is that supposed to scare me?”

“No,” Erhent said. “You are a human unfamiliar with us, that’s all. A wilder would know what a Starcatcher was, would recognize the honor, would know what I am, what Jack is.” Erhent nodded to Jack. “Should we start with the tail and ears?”

“Don’t bother,” Gwen said. “You aren’t going to convince me they’re real.”

Jack huffed and shook his head, his ears flopping like an annoyed dog. “I told you as much. I honestly don’t know why I bother costuming when we go into town. Humans won’t even believe what they see with their own two eyes.”

A sarcastic, pain-edged comment about fairytales flitted through Gwen’s thoughts, but these men could kill her, or worse. The past few hours had stripped some of the fear away, but even if things went bad, she’d seen magic. The otterwoman had been real. Just knowing that made the fear worth it.

“I see you two are playing the one-with-nature card but how about you use your eyes. This town’s dying and will be dead as soon as FEMA can figure out where to ship all the orphans and AquaCore can scare old people into selling. If magic exists, why didn’t freakin’ Gandalf stop the dam from collapsing?”

Erhent tilted his head, hawklike. “Just because you do not see our world does not mean it isn’t a reality seen by others. Is it easier for you to discount us, believe we’d go to such lengths to fool you?”

She dug her palms into the railing. The pitted cement felt more real than the conversation. “People are weird. The flood washed up all kinds of crazies.”
Jack’s ears swiveled backward. “We don’t have time for this. I laid some false tracks, but that won’t confuse them for long.” He edged toward Gwen, his hands raised as if approaching a beaten dog. Even though she hated herself for it, she stepped back.

“Don’t be afraid,” Erhent said. “Gwen—”

Jack hushed him as he knelt a few feet from her and clasped his hands behind him.

“Would you like to feel my ears?”

Gwen found herself nodding. She wanted to believe, but she couldn’t, even as her hand stretched, even as she edged toward a dogman whose ears flicked and twitched to the river noises. An animal musk radiated from him, good smells of sunny days and warm dens.

She closed her eyes and ran her finger over the tip of his ear.

It felt soft as fleece, a softness she hadn’t touched since she had a home. The inner hairs tickled her skin, and the ear twitched, as if she’d irritated it. She rubbed the thin tip between her fingers, felt a scar and a nick in the edge.

“Oh god.” She jerked her hand back. “You’re real.”

He stood slowly, gracefully. “And so are you.” He smiled, revealing fangs, but not in a creepy way.

Erhent picked at his gloves. “Now, we can discuss the offer.”

“I’ll start a fire,” Jack said.

He swung over the railing, and Gwen gasped as he disappeared. She peered down. He hung from the undergirding, extended to his full height with his feet dangling above a dead tree wedged against a piling. He dropped onto the branch, which groaned, then scurried along the trunk, following it to the shallows. He hopped from rock to rock underneath the bridge.

“Holy crap,” Gwen breathed.
Erhent grinned, his features softening. For a moment, he looked normal except for a—wildness that cloaked him. A primal fear made the hairs raise over her arms. Though anymore, a loud noise or sudden movement inspired that feeling. Other than his face and the wiry toughness, he wasn’t physically imposing—not the type of guy who would make her nervous to pass on the sidewalk. Unlike broad chested Jack, his narrow shoulders seemed to fold in. Though Jack had him beat when it came to size, Erhent still cast a shadow over her.

Firelight crooked around the edge of the bridge as she half-slid, half-fell down the sheer bank just as she had a few hours ago. Mass erosion caused by the flood left a plateau where driftwood collected. The men—males?—had dragged two broken trunks on either side of the fire for seats, and steepled driftwood burned bright. The flickering flames played tricks with the bridge graffiti, making the *fuck the worlds* and nonsensical bubble letters dance.

Erhent jumped down beside her, silent except for the rustle of his coat. Jack’s doglike ears swiveled toward them, so real that an uncanny feeling made her nauseous.

He leaned on his haunches as fire licked the steepled sticks. “We have much to tell you, and quickly if we are to leave before the night ends.”

“Leave? What do you mean leave?” She pivoted, keeping them both in sight. “I want to know what the hell is going on first. How did you make Chris away go like that?” She pointed at Jack. “And, just, how?”

Erhent tugged off a glove.

Gwen scrambled back. No way was he touching her.

Hurt flashed over Erhent’s angular face. “Gwen, I swear on the stars we are not going to hurt you.”

Jack snatched the hem of Erhent’s coat. “Wait, be patient.”
Erhent ripped away and, giving Gwen a wide berth, strode toward a half-dead tree leaning from a crack in the cement where it had somehow managed to take root. He placed his bare hand on the trunk and locked eyes with Gwen.

A soft glow shone through his hand where it touched the bark.

The tree trembled. Leaves scattered but were sucked toward the light, catching on Erhent’s coat, and being—absorbed. A hot, ozone smell radiated from the tree.

The trunk cracked and groaned, falling into itself and twisting down, down to Erhent’s hand until he had to crouch to keep contact.

The light faded. Only a twisted, agonized stump remained. Erhent nudged it with his boot, and it fell to splinters.

He took a handkerchief from his pocket and dusted off his hand. “That’s what I do. The rest are parlor tricks.”

Gwen gripped her backpack’s straps because she needed to hold onto something. The tree had just—crumpled. Impossible. No, not impossible. Merely the way he performed the destruction was impossible. Lightning could mangle a tree or burst it to splinters. A human could do it with a chainsaw.

Jack flattened his ears and whipped his tail as if chiding Erhent. “Don’t be frightened, Gwen.”

She tore her gaze from Erhent. “Stop saying that!”

Erhent stepped closer, and she shifted to run if he raised his hand. “Jack looks as he does, but my kind are different.” His eyes glowed with the same pale light from his hand, and a hot smell, like charred wood, wafted from him.

“Wilders are the stuff of your stories,” Jack said. “The monsters and the blessings.”
Erhent took another step. “And so much more than that. We are magic and science and poetry combined. Our kind are astronomers and alchemists, zoologists and cryptozoologists, magicians and biologists. Made of skin and stardust. Like you.”

She sank onto a driftwood seat. Her hands shook. This couldn’t be happening. Then again, if someone had told her a flood would destroy her town because some rich company didn’t want to repair a dam, she wouldn’t have believed that, either.

Jack let out a long breath, whistling it between his teeth. “We don’t have time for much of the basics, but I’m jackalkind.” He pointed at Erhent. “He’s soulkind.” Jack drew up his knees, his tail curling neatly around his ankles. “We live longer than humankind. In less than one wilder generation, humankind have expanded into untouched wilds, changed ecosystems, pushed animalkinds to extinction, forced wilders into smaller territories that could not sustain them, thus compelling us to become complicit in the destruction of the land, as well.”

“We’ve killed ourselves, too,” Gwen said. “I don’t think I would be alive if it weren’t for a—a wilder. When the dam broke, something saved me. It wasn’t human.”

Jack flicked his tail. “The Kurultai used to have a camp here. Many wilders have dedicated their lives to trying to reverse the destruction. To save all kinds.”

“Wait, what’s the Kuru—Kurultai?”

Erhent waved her off. “Too much history for now. Just know that we are part of the Kurultai, the good wilders.”

Jack stirred the embers, causing the flames to stretch high. He held his hands to the warmth. “The Kurultai have requested as many Starcatchers as possible to be paired and trained before the final total eclipse of Solar Saros Cycle 136 next year.” His gaze slide to
Erhent. “Otherwise, I doubt you two would be accepted as a Starcatcher due to the unusual nature of your meeting. You will have only a few weeks to begin making magic and prove the stars wrong.”

“Prove the stars wrong?” she asked. “So we aren’t supposed to be whatever it was you called us?”

Erhent ducked his head and hunched his shoulders.

Jack’s tail brushed Erhent’s leg. “Many wilders, and humankind and animalkind for that matter, have the ability to be Starcatchers, but it takes two. I have the ability to be part of a Starcatcher, but I haven’t met my partner, and I might not. Erhent did not believe he had the ability to walk in the stars, but when he found out a few months ago, he became obsessed with finding his partner—”

Erhent glared at him, his teeth showing. “Obsessed is a little harsh, wouldn’t you agree? The stars were vague as to when I would meet Gwen.”

Jack’s ears swiveled backward. “Except that it wasn’t supposed to happen yet.”

They stared at each other, a silent conversation carried out in muscle twitches and posture.

“So, what’s a Starcatcher exactly?” Gwen asked.

Jack’s ears flattened, and a growl roughened his words. “Yes, Erhent, what is a Starcatcher?”

Erhent picked at his gloves. “Space burns with monstrous energy. We all came from it, even the gods in some fashion. We still live by that energy. The stars gave us a harmony, a pattern, and in that harmony, there’s music and story. It is no coincidence that we looked at the night sky, to the stars that gave us the elements for life, and saw pictures and told tales
inspired by those pictures. There’s power in the blackness. There’s magic to be made. Those who can shape or direct that energy, we call them Starcatchers.”

“A pair accessing the stars together,” Jack said.

Erhent grinned at the sky, then at her with such boyish joy, she couldn’t help but return the smile. “That’s us, Gwen. Together, we can do that.”

She wanted to call bullshit, but the happiness on his face transformed him, added a hopefulness. She hadn’t been able to place his age, though he sometimes looked as old as forty and other times as young as twenty. The word Starcatcher turned him young.

A deeper stillness settled over the forest, like when the birds silenced if Gwen spoke too loudly. A groan built through the forest like a gust of wind, except nothing stirred the air.

“That’s not good,” she said, her voice dropping.

Erhent grinned at Jack as if he’d just scored a point while Jack gathered into a crouch. He padded along the bank, his ears pricked toward the trees. “You are lucky to have grown up in the Pines, Gwen.”

A strangled cry rang over the water, then snapped off.

The hair-fur along Jack’s neck rose like hackles, and his tail puffed. “And that you knew enough to respect them.”

Gwen stood, clutching the straps of her backpack. “What’s going on?”

Jack growled in a cadence that sounded like words before he scrambled up the eroded bank, disappearing over the lip into the forest. A howl parted the silence. Not a crazy human bawl, and not a yipping coyote howl, but pitched lower, a whine rimming the edges.

A sense of longing gripped Gwen, and her chest hitched. “Where’s Jack going?”
“To give us a few more minutes.” Erhent stepped closer, and she forced herself to stay still. “Gwen, I’m sorry to ask this of you, but you must make a choice. I can’t stay any longer, and it won’t be safe to return for a while.”

She faced the river. Memories of her house, sun-dappled, smelling of rosemary and cinnamon, loud with her mother’s laughter, memories of wading in the creek, cooling off in the shade, peering through the bay window in hushed excitement with her mothers as a bear lumbered past—leaving or lingering wouldn’t change what happened.

She took a deep breath, tasting the river’s murkiness, the chemical sourness. “It’s all gone. I’m not safe here, though I don’t think I’ll be safer with you, either. But a part of me would die if I let you leave.” Saying it somehow made it real, and her body felt light like in the aftermath of dreams where, for that one hazy moment, she believed her mothers still lived. God, she wanted it all to be true so bad. Thing was, she did feel something, an undercurrent of familiarity, how, sometimes you just hit it off with a person, regardless of age or gender or personality.

Erhent pointed toward skyward. “You will love this.”

Two shadows swung past the moon, blotting out stars as they dipped toward the river. One figure separated, blending into the blackness of the woods while the second followed the water, gliding lower. A heavy thump-thump beat across the river.

It grew larger and larger, some sort of four-legged, winged thing. Air whooshed over Gwen, whipping her hair, and she ducked. When she straightened, it padded forward, wings the span of a bus settling along its panting ribs.
Moonlight glistened off a mess of fur and scales, pale white as crystal. Fangs protruded from a lupine face while two tails began fluffy but lengthened and narrowed to something dragonlike. It stood tall as a Clydesdale.

Gwen’s vision blurred, and she swayed. She rubbed her eyes. Her brain said no, she was dreaming. This wasn’t real. A great need to touch the ground with her hands, to make sure she still existed on the shores she knew, forced her to kneel. She pressed her palms to the cold rocks then picked a water-smoothed stone and rubbed her thumb along the sandy underside. A tree dying, a man with animal ears and tail—that existed in some form or fashion. This being, no.

It stepped toward her and nudged the top of her head with a scale and fur muzzle. The shock of the icy nose, the hot breath that smelled like baking bread, made Gwen shiver, but it cleared her mind. The world she knew was gone, the shadow of a loved one still looked for in a favorite chair. But she’d already lost her world with the flood, even before then with the dead fish washing ashore, the bad tap water, the dying trees her mothers couldn’t explain away.

She brushed her fingers over the neck ruff. The fur felt coarse on top but turned downy below the guard hairs. She took a shaky breath.

Erhent crouched next to her. “Are you all right?”

She opened her mouth, but a sob welled instead. She laughed and wiped her face on her sleeve. “You-you got me. You got me at dragon—things.”

The dragon-thing stooped, almost catlike. “I saw two vehicles coming this way stinking of Soul-Eater.” She flicked her ears at Erhent, but he shook his head.

Gwen blinked, almost eye-to-eye with the crouching beast. “You talk?”
Erhent swung up, then offered a hand to Gwen. “Gwen, meet Daði. They were kind enough to consent to join us. Jack will meet us in the air with Daðey, their offspring.”

Gwen reached for Erhent but hesitated for a second. Riding—no, flying—would mean trusting him completely, even after she knew what he could do.

She took his hand, and he hauled her up.

Headlights flashed across the bridge above them. Breaks squealed. A low shriek like metal twisted lashed over the water, making Gwen cover her ears.

“Go, go!” Erhent said as he fumbled with leather straps. “I’ll hold her!”

Daði lunged into a trot, and Gwen leaned forward, gripping the saddle.

Erhent crushed her against him with an arm around her waist. Some sort of straps hooked to the wing joints. He slung the straps behind him and adjusted them, so they formed a double railing on either side, wrapping behind him. He cinched them tight, his hips pressing into her, then reached around her, twisting one wrist into straps riveted to the saddle. He guided her hands to the straps, and she copied him.

A spotlight raced along the water, then swung toward them, glinting off Daði’s crystal scales.

Daði’s wings snapped open. “Rising!”

The two larger leather straps meant to box her went taut as Erhent leaned back, his arm around her waist dragging her against him, her backpack digging into her spine.

Daði reared, blasting them forward and across the river. Another whooshing downbeat took them skyward, water spraying. Gwen stopped breathing. The rising pushed her into Erhent, and the straps strained on either side. Adrenaline and the pressure of takeoff
made her want to piss herself while every part of her screamed this was not what humans were supposed to do.

The spotlight skittered over the water, then the trees before it caught them, blinding Gwen.

Daði banked sharp enough Gwen slung into the leather straps, leaning over the water. The wings half-closed, and they fell, swerving under the bridge, losing the spotlight.

Daði’s wings opened, pumping them upward, just as a smaller shadow glided over the bridge.

It paused in mid-air, then almost hopped—crunch—and the spotlight blinked off. The shadow dove off the bridge, wings opening, and soared behind them.

Erhent whooped. “That’s the Lunatic!”

Gwen wanted to look back at the bridge, but she only felt capable of staring at her hands, her eyes locked on the straps turning her skin white. Her knees dug into Daði’s sides.

Another downbeat. The leathery wings stretched so high they nearly tented her. Daði rocketed toward the moon, clearing the trees. Each thunderous beat of the wings took Gwen higher into the blackness, and she couldn’t breathe. Her body felt as if it were collapsing inward.

Two more beats, and Daði leveled, the wings extended wide enough on either side that Gwen wondered how they’d settled so neatly. Gliding made it feel less likely she’d just fall off, so she hunched forward, trying to breathe. Either from the height or her body just giving up with all the impossibilities of the night, but she couldn’t stop gasping and choking as her lungs begged for more air.
Heat flushed her face. Her humanness made her want to disappear from embarrassment. She wasn’t cut out for this.

Even gliding, the air whipped past them, tangling her hair and turning all other noises into a staticky roar. She only guessed Erhent was trying to talk to her because of his hand rubbing her arm. She shrank from him.

Daði tipped back their head, the draft carrying their words. “You won’t fall, youngone, I promise.”

She twisted the handholds. This leather strap system was the epitome of safe.

Gwen wasn’t sure how long she huddled over, gasping, with Erhent’s voice coming when the wind blew right. Once her hands had gone numb, she partially straightened and raised her head.

Above the smog and light pollution, in the thinner atmosphere, the stars at the edge of the horizon glistened like chips of quartz in river stone. The moon was a disk of ice in a dark lake. She took a deep breath, the cold air sending a shiver through her, then looked up.

The stars, so clear—the kind of crystal sky the dying wished to see one more time, the kind her grandparents had reminisced about. And so many! Shards of creation scattered over the dark. Clusters turned hazy while others burned sharp and bright. If the night sky had looked this clear throughout history, no wonder people had studied, even fought and died, for the stars’ stories. She searched for the constellations Mama had taught her—sighting the Big Dipper, then the Bear. Used the tip of the Dipper to locate Draco twisting between Hercules and the Little Dipper. Up here, the stars surrounded her. It was probably just the cold wind, but she felt them, like dew. Maybe Mama had known, somehow—during all those nights
stargazing on the roof or driving out of town to watch a meteor shower—that the stars would mean more to Gwen someday.

She kept her head tilted until her neck cramped. “It’s more than beautiful.” She managed to speak without choking up, though her chest was tight. “I never thought I’d see the sky like this.” She guessed the wind stole her words, but she didn’t care if Erhent heard.

She wanted to unwrap her frozen hands and tuck them under her thighs, but she couldn’t convince her brain to unlock her fingers. Even worse, her hips still ground against Erhent. With a grunt, she scooted forward, though the absence of the solid wall of his body made her dizzy. Her leg muscles squeezed Daði.

Erhent leaned over one of the packs hanging from Daði’s side. He pulled out some sort of blanket: leather on the outside but lined with wool. He tugged on her pack twice before she realized he was offering to stow it. The lack of weight made breathing easier.

He slung the blanket around them and clasps on the inside created an overlapping seam that blocked the wind. A hood even made talking semi-possible.

The blanket added a comfortable weight, and even though it could do nothing to stop her falling, she felt more secure, as if she could duck her head beneath the folds and not be miles high. The cloth carried a musky scent, like Jack.

As Daði gliding above the clouds, Gwen eased as far away from Erhent as the blanket allowed. He radiated heat, more than an average human, which Gwen was thankful for, and his charred wood and pine scent soon replaced the muskiness.

He leaned over her shoulder and said, “It’s about a twenty-four hour flight if the winds are good. Sleep if you can.” He hesitated. “You can rest against me if it helps.”
Yeah, right, his hips pressing against her with each wingbeat already creeped her out enough. She wasn’t going to fall asleep against a complete stranger, even if he were her magical star partner. She sat straight so as not to touch him, but she could still sense him, how he relaxed into the straps like a backrest, the confident looseness of his legs and arms—unlike her. The woody smell of him deepened, fresh chopped wood and loam.

She yelled at him. “You never said where we were going.”

“Wyoming.”

She started, twisting in the saddle. “You’re kidding.”

“The wilders are aiding the Park Protectors at Yellowstone.”

“I caught a few Unicorn Riot reports on them.”

“That’s where we will train.”

She yelled over her shoulder, asking what had happened at the bridge.

His sigh pressed against her shoulders. “Dark Stars found us. Thankfully, Jack bought us enough time.”

She leaned forward and looked around the hood. A miniature of Daði glided to the right, a figure hunched over the wings. “Is Jack all right?”

“Of course.”

“Erhent.” She turned far enough to meet his bright eyes and mimed her question: what the hell were they riding on?

He laughed and flipped off the hood. The wind beat against her, whipping her hair probably right into Erhent’s face.

He scratched the spot where the wing joints turned into fur. “Daði is a diredragon kind enough to let us ride them—even me.”
Daði lifted their head, one dragon-slit pupil catching Gwen’s gaze. “A friend of Jack’s is a friend of mine.”

He patted their side. “I know.”

Gwen leaned forward. “Thank you for the ride!”

Daði tilted their head to the stars and barked something like a laugh. “The youngone has more politeness in her bones than you, Erhent.”

#

Gwen intended to stay awake for the sunrise and figure out what the hell had just happened, but beneath the wool blanket and Erhent’s easy breathing, her head tipped forward. She dozed, the kind where any rough air or a twitch from Erhent made her start. Adrenaline still buzzed her brain, chanting that she knew better. Sleeping at whatever height they flew seemed like a bad idea.

These drifting thoughts stiffened her and knotted her shoulders, causing her to jerk half from sleep—like now. Daði had caught a current and glided. The clouds passed slowly, purple and silver in the dawn.

Erhent’s arms wrapped around her, loosely, holding her hips in place while his hands hooked into the leather straps. She turned her head so he could hear. “I’m sorry, this must not be comfortable for you.” It sure wasn’t comfortable for her. Her pulse throbbed in her feet, and each downbeat caused Gwen’s thighs to burn as they rubbed the saddle.

He shrugged. “I’m fine.” Something tinging his voice made her meet his eyes. He looked pained but tried to smile. “You can trust me. I won’t hurt you. We’ll need trust.”
She focused on the cloud shadows surrounding them. Maybe he didn’t realize smiling that much made him suspicious. “I met you, like, twelve hours ago.”

“In my eyes, you could be a sorceress intent on killing me and my friends once you reach our camp. Or you could be a Hunter that hates my kind and intends to cut off my head when we land. Or you could be Gwen, the girl who the stars say will be my partner. That’s what I choose to believe.”

An angry line cut through her thoughts: *I don’t have that luxury of choice.* Maybe she did in this new world, though Erhent’s comments sounded just as violent and uncertain as her life after the flood. Perhaps in this new place, she could choose to be someone else, someone unafraid.

The next time exhaustion and gravity pushed her against him, she stayed.
Part II, Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming

Interlude

Noah strolled between the holding cells. The sheriff, a step behind, chattered about how the entire department supported AquaCore and the executive order to continue drilling in Yellowstone.

Humans packed inside the cells jeered and called him evil.

“AquaCore is killing the earth!”
“Keep it in the ground, fuckhead!”
“You’re poisoning our mother!”

Some humans tried to settle the more rabid, chanting.

“Hey hey, ho ho, AquaCore has got to go!”

Other humans picked up the beat—stamping, drumming their thighs, slapping the bars—until the cement thrummed. His hunger rose like a wave. How easy to touch one of these animals and disappear it. Would the others even notice? They saw so little.

Deputies rushed in, brandishing rifles.

Noah smiled. These humans cried out of fear, cornered, hissing, witnessing their demise. The land buzzed with this feeling, and it had flushed his body when he crossed into what these humans mapped as Greater Yellowstone.

Some nights, this winter reminded him of the ice, the decades he slowly warmed until an animal had touched his sun-brushed skin and he’d fed, bursting into wakefulness.

Standing here, wrapped in the heat and stink of his prey—it turned him ageless. That’s what these animals valued: beauty, youth. They gave it to him.
The deputies screamed at the protestors, but Noah merely spread his hands. The humans might not know what he was, but their instinct, their old sense remembered. No number of generations erased the recognition of one’s predator, designed to be feared by them.

The chanting melted into silence. The gods had known their creations when they crafted him to hunt humanity. Even thousands of years later, they still succumbed to his height, his sex, his white skin—once meant to mark him as other, now cherished. It had only become more engrained in these animals until most of the Dark Star’s task was completed for them.

When silence settled, Noah clasped his hands. “The United States of America. Where the right to protest is part of the foundation of this great oligarchy. Who am I to stand in the way of freedom?” He slapped the sheriff on the back in the domineering way these animals admired. “AquaCore will not press charges. Release them.” He swallowed at the word release. His hunger ached.

At first, only silence stretched as he sauntered toward the door, then some human let out a long boooo. Jeering started anew. No animal appreciated being robbed of their heroism.

He met his guards in the lobby—one of the pitiful creatures that passed as a Soul-Eater in this age, and a Dark Star wilder who looked so human he’d already decided to feed on her when the time was right. His hand twitched, and he stilled it in his pocket. Not now, though how easy to feed here. On the reporters waiting outside, on the police, on the protestors. His body rose on the balls of his feet, begging.

He took a deep breath, then whispered to the Soul-Eater. “Tell the sheriff to release them in the wild. You and the others take your fill. Make it look like a bear attack.”
The Soul-Eater nodded, already thumbing a smartphone.

Noah adjusted his teal tie, glistening against his black-on-black suit like a spot of blood in the snow. He brushed his ice-colored hair then stepped outside to greet the reporters and pronounce AquaCore’s magnanimous decision to release the newly arrested Park Protectors.
CHAPTER 7.

Blood trickled down Gwen’s thighs as she entered the Druid Peak camp. The rational part of her brain warned against feeling excited or hopeful, but she couldn’t help grinning. The idea of living, even if only for a few months, in one of the most beautiful spots in the US was beyond what the girl sleeping in a cot two nights ago could have ever imagined.

Daði and Daðey had dropped them off at a meadow outside camp, not even settling their wings before they flew off again, free of their saddles. Erhent slung Daði’s saddle over his shoulder and waved as the diredragons glided toward the mountains. A nervousness made him jerky, and sweat glistened in his hair even as he stripped off his coat and gloves for Gwen, who couldn’t stop shivering. She didn’t particularly want to put on his gloves—it felt too personal, like using someone else’s deodorant—but her fingers ached from the cold.

Gwen had asked where the diredragons were going, and Erhent explained they’d consented to be ridden as a favor to Jack but didn’t belong to the Druid Peak camp like they did.

The short trek through the snow made her bleed, and she hoped her jean’s dark denim would hide it. Jack cut a path through the deep snow and into the pines. Soon, they crossed a more established track they could freely follow, though her sneakers had no grip on the packed, slick snow. A mosaic of paw prints spread around her—ranging from tiny squirrel-esque prints to something large and lizardlike. Many looked canine or feline, and a dozen were human-shaped. They led toward structures situated among the thinning trees.

Gwen took a deep breath, smelling campfires and animal musk.
Erhent faced her. He flexed his bare fingers. “I should let you know, we don’t see many humans in our camps. Not that it should be that way, just we don’t see many. Also, well, you will probably be the youngest here.” He tucked his bare hands in his hip pockets, then took them out, as if he didn’t know what to make of them without his gloves. “But don’t let anyone judge you for either of those things.” He reached as if to grip her shoulder but lowered his hand.

Jack curled his tail around Erhent’s leg. “No use waiting.” He stripped off his T-shirt and stowed it in a saddlebag. He puffed himself up, the same tawny-black hair covered his dark chest and abs but the fur couldn’t distract from his lean strength. His ears pricked, his tail double-sized and flicking. The hair-fur that flowed down his neck and spine rose like hackles as he stalked into the camp, followed by Gwen with Erhent bringing up the rear.

Gwen walked carefully to limit the pain and bleeding, though she kept her head high, back straight, arms swinging freely at her side. Body language mattered to these creatures, and she wasn’t going to act afraid. She’d just rode a freakin’ diredragon across half the United States—even if it wrecked her body.

A bonfire burned smokeless in the camp’s center where wilders gathered, eating and drinking. Gwen repeated over and over not to stare, but as if her brain short-circuited, staring was all she could do. Centaurs, fox people, human bodies with branches growing out of them, a figure made of fog, beings with horns, tails, wings, scales. Mash-ups of human and animal—like Jack but more animal or less animal. Satyrs and dragons, walking trees and insect swarms shaped like people, a dog made of grass clippings. A grizzly bear and a wolf walking together, a squirrel and a raven conversing while perched on an elk’s antlers.
Some wilders felt familiar, like the centaur hauling a sled of firewood, but more 
mythic with rugged-thick fur and stout body, two curving tusks parting his lips—like 
something from the Ice Age.

Near the bonfire, a trio of half-wolf, half-human wilders skinned and gutted a bison. 
The gore stench made her gag, and she switched to lightly breathing through her mouth. She 
picked a bison hair off her tongue.

The wolf-people were totally naked—the lower half upright like a human but the legs 
replaced with canine appendages. The largest one growl-barked to Jack and tossed him a 
hunk of raw something, purplish and slippery. Jack barked and tore into the still-steaming 
meat, disappearing it in a few bites. As she and Erhent stepped past, the wolf-man cut them 
off. Gwen dug in her heels as Erhent bumped her.

The top of her head barely reached the wolf-man’s chest. Blood matted his fur-hair. 
He smelled like roadkill, and Gwen recoiled into Erhent, who tried to push her away.

The wolf-man spoke, his English a rumbling growl, though clear enough Gwen could 
understand something bad was going to happen.

“I thought Lunatic Jack was supposed to keep you away from humankind, Soul-Eater. 
Perhaps we will have to rescue her.” He snatched her arm and shoved her toward the other 
two. Her shoes slid in the blood-slush. Heat radiated from the hanging carcass. Facing the 
flayed open meat, she felt the nakedness surround her—a sense of smallness hunched her 
shoulders. With a claw, one of these wolf-men could split her open. And Erhent was only 
watching.

Erhent retreated, his hands clasped behind him and his eyes wide. A growling hum 
came from the other two naked wolf-men, as if they were laughing.
Jack snarled in front of the leader, though his ears were pinned flat and his tail tucked between his legs. Still, his lips parted enough to show his fangs.

A deep growl punctuated his words. “Leave her alone, Sirk.” Without breaking his stare, he extended his hand to Gwen. She gripped it, and he dragged her past the group.

As if he had pulled her from underwater, she felt as if she could breathe again. Her legs went wobbly, and she couldn’t stop shaking. “W-what was that?” She kept her gaze locked on her blood-stained sneakers, afraid eye-contact would bring some other monster.

“Wulvers.” Jack stopped and gripped her shoulders. “Gwen, look at me.”

She forced her head up. The wildness of him with his fur-hair and pointed ears made her shrink back, but he held her still.

“Gwen, you can’t let them frighten you. No harm will come to you from the likes of them.”

She nodded, but a tightness in her chest warned her she’d reached a breaking point, that it had all become too much.

Maybe Jack sensed it because he drew her close. For a moment, she stiffened and pulled against him, but his arms felt like a wall between all the rest of the strangeness while his warm-den-and-sand smell banished the lingering blood and guts stench.

She hugged him hard, hiding her face in his furry chest. Don’t cry don’t cry don’t cry— and after a few deep breaths, the tightness in her lungs loosened.

Jack released her and bent over so they were eye to eye. “Are you afraid?”

She sniffed and wiped her nose on her sleeve. “No.”
He bared his teeth, and she copied him, even though it had to look ridiculous. Jack tilted his head and let out a yipping laugh, though something about the tone and openness told her it wasn’t supposed to be mean.

“Hehent, she looks like you when she snarls.” He squeezed her shoulder.

A cry cut through the snow-muffled camp. “Soul-Eater!”

Hehent sighed, and his shoulders slumped. He let the saddle fall to the snow. “Fuck.”

A white man in a fur-lined cloak marched toward them, wilders parting, and some even following as if to watch a show. He leaned on a cane with a silver head, some sort of lizard making the pummel.

Hehent glowered at Jack who shrugged and tugged at one frost-crusted ear.

The man shouldered past Jack and stared at Gwen. “I thought I smelled a girl, but I said to myself, even the Soul-Eater isn’t that foolish.” He turned on Hehent. Though a few inches shorter, the man seemed to tower over him.

Beneath his gaze, Hehent backed away, faltering in the deeper snow. “The stars chose her, Mercury.”

Mercury faced her and crossed his arms. “So you believe.” His gaze tore into her, evaluating her, skinning her, assigning her worth. She knew how to withstand those looks. Beneath Hehent’s coat, she gave him the finger. With her other hand, she gripped the hilt of her hunting knife, still strapped to her waist, wishing on her mothers’ memories. They’d stared down men like this guy, like Mom’s story about her battle of wills with a racist dean who wanted to stop a Black Lives Matter march on campus.

Gwen eased her hand off the knife and straightened her shoulders.
Mercury looked somewhere between thirty and sixty. Each time Gwen thought she’d pinned his age, some other aspect suggested a different number—the crow’s feet around his eyes canceled by his bright lips and smooth cheeks. He had a thin but wiry frame, emphasized by two leather straps crisscrossing his chest. Other than his cloak, he didn’t seem protected from the cold in a thin maroon sweater.

He leaned closer, focusing on her eyes. His irises flickered like storm clouds, like the planet of his name.

“You see it,” Erhent said. “Don’t you?”

Gwen bit back her question and held his gaze. Finally, he asked her name.

“Gwen Gardner.”

“Take her to the Starcatcher.” He stepped into Erhent again. “If the Starcatcher says there is no compatibility, you return her to whatever backwoods dump you dug her out of.”

They glared at each other before Mercury stomped through the handful of wilders pretending not to watch—the centaur, two wulvers, a man with scales patching his skin and a tail like a komodo dragon’s.

Mercury yelled over his shoulder, “Put your gloves back on before somebody decides to chop off your hands, Soul-Eater!”

Jack growled at Mercury’s retreating shadow, the fur-hair along his neck raising like hackles.

Gwen released a long breath and unclasped her knife. Something broke inside her and spilled warm relief. This Mercury guy knew what she was—flood trash. Erhent built her into something magical, but Mercury’s words had punched through that, even if it hurt. “Resident asshole?”
Erhent stuffed his hands in his pockets. The light had gone from his eyes, and his jaw worked as if he were chewing on something. “That was the leader of this little enclave.”

Jack shook his head until his ears flapped. He touched Gwen’s shoulder, his tail slowly wagging. “You must be exhausted, but you should meet the Starcatcher. Jesse and Sarah are much more welcoming than Mercury.”

Jack led them deeper into the camp. The encounter with the wulvers and Mercury had definitely stripped away her excitement, but adrenaline, sickness, and wonder surged through her. She pressed an arm against her stomach and focused on her breathing. It all felt so right and wrong at the same time, a relief and a terror. If the world could be so much more, than she could find a second chance—maybe.

While Jack hadn’t acted like anything other than best friends with Erhent, other wilders treated him as if he were infected. They’d circle around him, even stepping into deep snow to stay well out of his path. Some spit at his feet. A few wilders—usually similar to Jack except their hair-fur was coyote colored—greeted Jack by placing hands on his shoulders and touching their foreheads to his. These wilders would at least say hello to Erhent, but they kept their attention on Jack. Except with the wulvers, Gwen remained an invisible tagalong.

The camp seemed arranged around three central fires. While a general gathering place, work also organized around the light and warmth—chopping wood, cleaning carcasses, cooking, sewing, sharpening weapons, wrestling, fighting. Her human experience had expected the wilders to have cabins or live in dorms like at a summer camp, but for the furrier wilders, sleep happened wherever they choose. Some structures set beneath the trees,
but the buildings appeared thrown together with deadwood, not chopped trees. Holes in the
ground were another popular option, judging from the two dozen rock-ringed entrances.

The camp possessed only four human structures: a traditional log cabin complete with
picturesque chimney and curl of smoke, a building that reminded her of a Viking long hall,
and two large, circular tents which she thought were called yurts. Jack led them toward the
circular structures.

Two women exited a yurt. One woman wore a puffy winter coat, but a pair of ram’s
horns curled from her skull. The other looked like Jack but even furrier and more wolfish.
She only wore a homemade tunic thing and a scarf.

The wolf woman waved, her tail wagging. “Hullo!” She approached Jack, repeating
the forehead touch, hands on shoulders greeting. And, like all the others, she didn’t touch
Erhent, just said his name and dipped her head.

When she came to Gwen, she crossed her arms and cocked her head to one side, her
wolfish ears pricking. “You can call me Jesse.”

Gwen stuck out her hand. “I’m Gwen.”

“No, no. Like this.” Jesse placed her hands on Gwen’s shoulders and bent to touch
her forehead. After a moment, she straightened. “Only humankind shake hands. You’re not
among them anymore.” She looked her up and down. “So you’re what got the old bastard so
riled up.” She circled her, which made goosebumps rise over Gwen’s arms. “Bit young for an
anchor.”

Gwen curled her toes in her sneakers, trying to work the feeling into them. “How old
is an anchor supposed to be?”

Erhent huffed. “Stop, Jesse. Mercury already bared his teeth.”
Jesse’s tail lashed. “I guess I shouldn’t be surprised.” She picked a hair off Gwen’s arm. “The wulvers, too?”

Erhent ducked his head. “Of course.”

The woman with the ram’s horns broke in, hugging Erhent. “Come here, you! I’m so happy you found your partner.” She switched to Gwen and before Gwen could wonder what to do, the woman hugged her tight. Apparently wilders didn’t only do the forehead thing.

“I’m Sarah. Glad to have you with us.”

“Thanks, I—”

“Let’s load up.” Jesse hopped onto one of the sled runners. “I don’t want to be on Druid Peak all night.”

Erhent motioned to the second sled. “Do you want to sit or stand?”

The mention of sitting made her ass hurt. “Stand, for sure.”

A few moments later, Jack waved goodbye as she and Erhent lurched in the sled, following Jesse and Sarah. Well, following Sarah on the sled. Jesse ran beside the dogs, easily keeping pace.

Gwen stood on the runners with Erhent behind her. Again, she found her hands gripping something until they cramped with Erhent’s hips pressed way too close. Each shudder made her legs ache.

The dogs (or wolves or maybe wilders?) lunged ahead, barking and panting and yipping. Unlike riding a diredragon, the sled had no safety lines and no blanket to block the wind. Soon, she couldn’t stop shivering and her lips felt like bloody ice shards. At least she still wore Erhent’s coat and gloves.
Erhent shouted it wasn’t a long ride. The sun had dipped behind Druid Peak, leaving only a golden glow gilding the snow while the moon rose. The air tasted better, less sooty and more evergreen. They raced through dark trees, and even in winter’s bareness, the land seemed full of life. Not like the state forest she’d grown up in where she could scuff up a beer can or a cigarette butt every few feet. Squirrels blurred up trunks, crows startled from canopies, a snow rabbit cut in front of the dogs. She couldn’t be sure, but she swore a bear lumbered deep in the woods.

A few minutes later, the dark trees parted to reveal a rocky incline, which the dogs ate up, dragging the sled to a snowy plateau where Jesse and Sarah waited.

Gwen wobbled off the sled, her legs frozen stiff and her hands turned to claws. She tucked them under her armpits.

“We won’t go far,” Sarah said. “There’s a good view just up the path.”

The path didn’t really function as a path. Only Jesse could follow the winding trail of paw prints on top of the snow—which didn’t make sense since Jesse was also the largest—but Sarah, Erhent, and Gwen had to break a track. Thankfully, Sarah and Erhent went first, leaving Gwen the manageable job of limping in their footsteps, though she felt popping and grinding in her ankle. Tomorrow’s soreness already made her wince. She grit her teeth as the raw spots on her legs bloodied again, the cloth warming, then icy against her skin. Sharp pain radiated through her thighs, and her feet felt swollen, ready to pop. She focused on the dark spots of Erhent’s boots and keeping them respectably close.

Erhent kept glancing over his shoulder as if he wanted to ask if she were all right, but thankfully, he didn’t. His hovering would totally undermine any attempt to impress Jesse and Sarah.
The path might not have felt far to the wilders, but Gwen wanted to collapse at the top, mostly from the pain consuming everything below her waist. She kept her head down as she swallowed back bile. It felt as if her body were rejecting everything—the climate, the impossible flight, the change of place—even if her spirit soared.

She thought she felt Erhent’s bright eyes, and he stared at her when she looked up. He pointed.

“Oh, god.”

A valley spread below, turned ghostly by the moon and stars. A silver river split the land, and plains stretched on either side, perfect in their whiteness. The snow reflected the moonlight and made the herds easy to spot—dark shadows clustered together. Stillness blanketed all, bringing an unexpected comfort.

Jesse tilted her head to the moon and released a rhythmic, wrenching howl, her voice rising to a sharp, ice-cracking cry.

In the complete silence that followed, another cry came, then another. Gwen pressed a hand to her mouth as the wolves’ howling filled the valley, skimming the snow. She closed her eyes, letting the cries paint pictures of stars so close to earth she could taste their coldness, of the moon looming so large her bones responded to its gravity.

Erhent leaned close enough she felt his warmth, smelled his pine scent. “Look.” He pointed toward the frozen river.

Shadows loped across the ice, then gathered on the bank. Another round of howling gusted through the valley. It carried Gwen into memory—her mothers daydreaming over coffee on the porch about a cross-country camping trip once they bought an electric car. A hotness welled behind her eyes, and it hurt to breathe. She sniffed, wiping away the cold-
induced snot. No, she couldn’t think about that, not now. Maybe later she’d have a moment to process the past forty-eight hours.

Jesse clapped her hands and rubbed them. “Shall we?”

“Yeah,” Sarah said, “we don’t want Daddy to get even angrier.”

Gwen started and glanced at Erhent, mouthing dad?

“Ah, yes,” Erhent said. “While Sarah is the apple that fell far from the tree, Mercury is her father.”

Sarah shook her head, her horns glinting, muttering in a different language. “He wasn’t always like this. I know it’s no excuse, but his arm is probably still regrowing.” She scratched at the base of her horn. “The Dark Stars hit the protest camp hard while you two were gone. He was at the front line. Lost an arm and a hand to a concussion grenade.”

Gwen wanted to ask what that meant. Mercury clearly had both hands and arms, but she bit back her question. Not the most pressing of her growing list. “So wait, the Park Protectors know about you all?”

“Of course not,” Jesse said. “That’s our job. The protestors stop AquaCore and we secretly stop the Dark Stars from stopping the protestors.”

“The Dark Stars?”

Sarah rolled her neck in a way that made her horns toss. “Shit, Erhent, you didn’t even explain the Dark Stars, did you?”

“We were short on time, and I didn’t want to frighten her. She knows nothing about us!”

Jesse’s ears flattened. “Let’s save the history lesson for next time. I’m hungry.”
Sarah grazed Jesse’s jaw with a horn. “You’re always hungry, but I agree.” She took Jesse’s right hand. “The best way to know for sure if you two are compatible is to force you into the stars.”

“What do you mean ‘into the stars?’” Gwen asked.

“Starmagic,” Jesse said. “Think of it like a candle. Erhent’s the wick and you are the wax holding him in place, supporting him, giving him fuel.”

“So Erhent has the fire.”

Sarah grinned. “Exactly. He’s the point burning in space. The duty of a Starcatcher is to harness the stars, whether by tracing a constellation with your tether or becoming a point of light.” She spoke with her hands, motioning to the sky and then at them. “Certain Starcatchers make magic with the tether—which you’ll see what that is in a sec.” She spread her hands as if something connected them. “Starmagic. It can be strong and precise, like bringing rain to a county in drought, or more general, like spelling peace over a chaotic city.”

Jesse’s black tail flicked. “ Doesn’t sound like magic, but it is. If you’ve ever looked at the sky and felt peaceful, you probably caught the edge of a Starcatcher’s constellation. Or if a devastating storm took a surprising turn back to sea, probably starmagic.”

Erhent scuffed his boots. “Didn’t you cast to bring the snow?”

“Yeah,” Sarah said, “it’s too early for deep snow like this. Even fifty years ago the snows didn’t come until December. Not until January these days, and usually not this deep, so snow like this in November is unheard of.”

Jesse smiled in a way that bared her teeth, more wolfish than human. “Stopped the drilling and cutting. For a while.”

“We haven’t made magic like that in, oh, ten years,” Sarah said.
“So what do I do, exactly?” Gwen asked.

“You’re like me,” Jesse said. “You anchor your partner—Erhent, in your case. He harnesses the stars while you anchor him to the ground so he can find his way back.”

“Anchors give strength,” Sarah said. “Keep us walkers in reality.”

“Usually we are rooted to the earth in a way.” Jesse pointed to the wolves pacing across the valley. “I’m connected to the wolves.”

Erhent clasped his hands, then seemed self-conscious about his bare skin and hid them in his pockets. “From what Sarah and Jesse have taught me, when a starwalker, me, is in the sky, the anchor sends strength, instructions, and helps the walker find a way back to solid ground.”

“Wait, you won’t be physically in the stars, right?”

“His body will be here,” Sarah said, “but it will be comatose. You take a lot of yourself with you.” She nodded at the stars.

Jesse locked eyes with Gwen. “There’s one rule with anchors. Never let go of your partner. If you aren’t touching him, the tether will vanish, leaving him in the stars. Now, take his hand.”

“Whoa, whoa. I could kill him if I accidently let go?”

Sarah bumped shoulders with Jesse. “She’s being dramatic. It would cause complications, but that’s why we’re here.”

Gwen pocketed Erhent’s gloves as they circled up, Gwen between Erhent and Jesse. She felt small, stretched between two creatures who hadn’t existed until a few days ago.

Now, they expected her to make magic—but if she didn’t know anything about this star stuff, how could she help Erhent? He knew more than her, but she was supposed to instruct him,
somehow. Her palms felt sweaty, but she only gripped his hand tighter. Losing a grip on his hand now would be a terrible way to begin her lessons as a— a Starctacher.

Sarah waved her and Erhent’s clasped hands. “It’ll be more exciting for you than Gwen. Sorry.”

Jesse squeezed her hand. “You won’t see your dreamscape tonight, Gwen, since you haven’t created it yet.”

Gwen opened her mouth to ask what a dreamscape was, but Jesse cut her off with a wag of her tail. “Just go with it.”

Sarah nodded at Erhent. “Ready?”

“Yes.”

Gwen wanted to ask Ready for what? But Sarah and Erhent’s bodies suddenly went limp, turning to dead weight.

“Shit!”

Erhent fell back, and Gwen tried to lower him to the snow but dropped beside him, her left arm stretched awkwardly because Jesse still had a vice grip on her other hand.

Jesse lowered Sarah’s body to the snow, then knelt beside her. “I guess I should have warned you. I haven’t trained a humankind before.”

“Is he all right?”

Erhent’s face had gone slack, though his eyes flickered beneath the lids. His breath came quick and sharp, clouds of condensation streaming from his mouth as if his insides burned hot.

“Just keep ahold of his hand and he will be fine.”

Gwen tightened her sweaty grip, lacing her fingers with his. “What now?”
Jesse half-closed her eyes. “We wait. Being an anchor isn’t as flashy as a starwalker. You’ll see soon enough, they get all the love in camp, but if it weren’t for us, they couldn’t go to the stars at all. Well, they wouldn’t last long in the stars, at least.”

Maybe the lack of sleep or the stress of the past few days was screwing with her head, but none of it made sense. She said so to Jesse. How was this making magic, sitting beside an apparently unconscious Erhent?

Jesse’s tail twitched. “You’ll see. It’s your turn, now. Tell me when you feel the magic.”

“Feel wh—”

An icy prickle crawled up her arm and she yelped, nearly dropping Erhent’s hand. The prickle turned into a pull, as if someone had reached beneath her skin and plucked at a vein. “What the hell!”

“Close your eyes.”

“What’s going on?”

Jesse growled. “I said, close your eyes.”

She did, the bright snow casting white spots behind her lids.

“Do you see a silver thread?”

She took a deep breath. Something silver lingered once the leftover light faded. “I think so.”

“Let go of my hand. Grab it and pull.”

Her eyes fluttered, but she snapped them shut as Jesse growled again. The silver thing sharpened.

Another tug sent a chill through her, and the silver thread bobbed.
“How do I grab it?”

“Just do it.”

“But it’s not there.”

“This is your job, Gwen. This is what anchors do.”

She drew her hand from Jesse’s grasp then pawed at the air where she imagined the thread should be. “There’s nothing here!” Her voice broke on the last word and what ifs took over—what if she failed, Erhent had been wrong, Mercury had been right? What if Erhent took her back to New Jersey?

“Relax,” Jesse said. “I know Erhent is still a stranger, but focus on him. If he’s your partner, you should feel something for him already. A closeness.”

Gwen swallowed hard. Did she? She refocused on the silver crack behind her eyelids. There had been a moment of closeness with Erhent while they were flying. It came back to her like a dream. Hell, it might be a dream, but it felt too real, solid. Sunrise had woken her, and she’d been nestled against his chest, his heartbeat a steady rhythm beneath her cheek.

Her fingers brushed something like a spider web, and she gasped.

“Wrap it around your wrist if you have to,” Jesse said.

She screwed her eyelids against the moonlight. As if squinting at something far away, the line sharpened, took on a smoothness like silk.

Supposedly, she was born to this. Erhent’s hand in hers was a warm spot in the darkness. She was his partner, meant to bring him back from the stars.

Believing it would be there, she gripped the tether, rotated her hand twice to secure it around her wrist, and pulled. The line went taut and cut into her skin.

“Go, go!” Jesse called. “Keep pulling, Gwen! Keep going!”
She jerked back her elbow, and it felt as if she were dragging something out of deep water. She took another fistful of the icy line and ripped it back again—all with her eyes shut.

“That’s it! Here he—”

Her hand burned and some force slammed her forward. She fell on top of Erhent, no—they crashed together like two powerful magnets released. Her eyes snapped open, her face inches from his. The fall, if she could call it that, had knocked the breath from her so she was gasping when he opened his eyes. His eyes glowed as if he’d captured some of the starlight inside of him. Blood streamed from his nose.

He laughed as they both struggled to sit. She coughed, panting, and he stifled the blood on his sleeve.

“We did it!” He tilted forward as if to hug her but froze, so she grabbed him.

“That was freaking amazing!”

Sarah and Jesse crouched side by side, unruffled, as if the whole incident were as normal as waking up.

“Yes, you’re good for each other,” Sarah said. “You’re exact opposites.”

Jesse wagged her tail. “Desert heat and a snowmelt stream.”

Gwen let out a long breath and glanced at Erhent. The rightness returned, a warm spot in her gut. Magic, stars, a fairytale man-in-black, it was all too much to understand, but maybe Erhent was right, maybe she did belong here, with him.

As if he could read her mind, he grinned, his teeth and lips red from the nosebleed, but it only made him look more ridiculously happy.
CHAPTER 8.

Mercury’s cabin had one east-facing window. Faint moonlight crept through the pane, but the rest of the cabin remained shadowy enough to lose a sense of time like in a cave. The hearth crackled and breathed heat so sweat trickled down Gwen’s neck. Or maybe the sweat was due to Mercury staring at them from his desk. The desk seemed carved from one large trunk, planed on top with leg space hollowed beneath, the roots forming twisted holes and ledges along the front. Two bookshelves, a rusted filing cabinet, and a medieval weapons rack—stacked with swords, javelins, spears, longbows—filled the remaining space.

Beside her, Erhent stood straight, his bare hands clasped behind him. Gwen copied his pose. After Jesse and Sarah reported that Gwen held Starcatcher magic, Mercury had dismissed them to talk with Erhent and Gwen alone.


Erhent stiffened.

Mercury shoved off the desk and stood, glaring at Gwen with storm-dark eyes. “Has he told you?” His gaze snapped to Erhent for a moment. “I see not.” He paced to the hearth. “Powerful but volatile. Erhent, you might have heard the stories. The orc raped the girl, as orcs are wont to do, and when she told the clan leader, the orc killed her. Very brutal.” He picked up a poker and stirred the embers, then added another log, though Gwen wished he’d
crack the door instead. The heat smothered her. “I won’t give you the details. I’m sure even a humankind can imagine an orc kill.” He dusted off his hands as he paced toward them.

Erhent broke his stare at the wall and glared at Mercury. “I did hear stories. Except I heard they were the best Starcatcher on the continent, but the Kurultai can’t have orcs acting human or humans acting wilder. So they killed them. Brutally.”

Mercury closed the distance between him and Erhent in a blink. “Careful.” He bared his teeth, thrusting his chin toward Erhent’s neck. “A Soul-Eater talking treason—even being a Starcatcher won’t protect you.”

Gwen imagined being brave enough to step between them. While unsaid, she’d sensed from Jesse’s presence and the way she looked at Sarah that an anchor didn’t hold that duty just when the other was in the stars. But what to say that wouldn’t get Erhent in more trouble? She didn’t even know what Soul-Eater meant, though the way it dripped off Mercury’s tongue, it had to be a slur.

Mercury sneered, but he marched to his desk. “My Starcatcher will commence your training tomorrow. I expect you will contribute to the Winter Solstice Celebrations. As a Starcatcher.”

Erhent sucked in a breath. “I know we agreed but that was before. You ask—”

He dug his knuckles into the desk and leaned forward, almost as if he wanted to pounce on Erhent. “The impossible? What will be attempted next year at the eclipse will be impossible. Curbing the planet’s rising temperatures—that will be impossible.” He lashed his hand in Gwen’s direction. “Curbing the human population, ending their consumption—more than impossible. You must be capable of the impossible.”
He sank into his desk chair with a hiss, easing out his right leg. “You have until the Solstice. If you are not a complete and functioning Starcatcher in five weeks, you will be disbanded.” He fixed his stormy sight on Gwen. “I will oversee the girl’s physical training so she will not be a detriment to this clan.”

“Jack can train Gwen,” Erhent said.

“Jack has a soft spot for weak things. I will not have a soft Starcatcher sent from this camp.” He dragged his gaze over Gwen. She held still, refusing to adjust her shirt or fidget.

“You will report here at dawn, anchor.”

Ehrent’s lips twitched as if to bare his teeth. “She’s hardly slept in two days.”

Mercury tilted his head. “Do you challenge me, Soul-Eater?”

Erhent shrunk into himself, leaning away from Gwen. “No.”

“Then leave, Soul-Eater.”

Erhent nearly bolted for the door, and Gwen followed.

“Did I dismiss you, girl?”

She hesitated, one foot over the threshold, then shut the door, catching a last glimpse of Erhent looking over his shoulder.

“Sorry.”

Mercury stepped in front of her, his arms crossed. While her fear made him larger, he stood slightly shorter than her. “So what am I to do with you, Gwen Gardner?”

She met his gaze. Time to make her case. “I can do it. I’ll train, I’ll run, I’ll accomplish whatever you want to prove myself. You think I’m too young, but my age means I can change.”

It all sounded more elegant in her head, but at least it was something of an argument.
Mercury circled her. Instinct told her to watch him, but she held still, her breath growing shallow and her chest tightening.

"Do you think you are special? Do you think the stars chose you?"

"Jack said lots of people—of others—have this thing."

He stopped behind her. "Do you want to be special?"

"I want to live, not just survive. That’s all." She couldn’t take it—she looked over her shoulder.

He flashed his teeth. A growl edged his words. "Can you feed yourself?"

"What do you—"

"Can you gather your own food?"

Gwen looked straight ahead. "No."

"Can you build a fire without matches?"

"No."

He circled her. Faster now. "Can you clothe yourself?"

"No."

"Can you make a den, can you find water, can you mark a direction?"

Her face grew hot. "Nobody taught me."

He shoved her, hard enough she hit the wall. "Can you defend yourself?" He slapped his cane into his palm.

She gripped the hunting knife’s hilt. "What?"

The cane snaked out, the tip pressing beneath her chin. "Can you defend yourself?"

She pulled the hunting knife, leveling it at his chest. "Stop it."
He bared pointed teeth and dug the cane’s tip into her throat hard enough it hurt to breathe. “When does the lamb order the shepherd?”

The need to run made her legs quiver. She glanced at the door, but Mercury slapped the cane against her cheek enough to sting. “At least a lamb can feed itself. What has your culture trained you for?” He leaned into her, his eyes storming. “You can’t even survive. You don’t deserve to live, Gwen Gardner.”

She shoved him and ducked away. With a quickness that belied his limp, he blocked the door. “Simply ask, and you can leave, but I will not allow you to remain in this camp.”

Her chest heaved, and her hands shook, the knife loose in her grip. This place—it could never be a new home. That’s what he wanted her to see. She couldn’t belong here. “What do you want?”

“You want to live with wilders?” He gripped her jaw, his fingernails scraping. “Show me the wildness hasn’t been bred out of you.”

“I don’t know how.”

Except she did. It flashed like the answer to a riddle. She glanced at her knife, then held it toward him. She slit her palm. The pain brought tears, and she screwed her eyes shut. Blood pattered on the floor. The blade had been sharper than she imagined. She raised her bloody palm, but didn’t know what to say—another failure. She cupped her hand so the blood pooled. “See for yourself.”

He gripped her wrist and jerked her toward him. She shrank away, but his fingers dug into her skin. He licked the welling line, his tongue dry like a snake’s. A smear of her blood glistened on his lips. “You know when to bleed, but you are still worthless as a newborn.” He dragged her toward the door, shoving her outside. “Tomorrow, you learn.”
She stumbled in the deep snow. The door thudded shut.

She sucked in the cold air, relief washing over her. Her wound stung, and she tried to stop the bleeding with a fistful of snow. Well, at least that was over. For now. What a fuckhead.

Erhent hadn’t waited for her, and his boot prints mingled with the other tracks packing the snow. The slamming door had a few nearby wilders staring—the centaur-esque one, something human and wolfish but also with horns, and four half-rabbits-half-humans.

She looked away and pretended like she knew what she was doing. Deeper in the camp, something snarled, then a painful yip. She hurried toward the trees, just able to follow Erhent’s tracks as he waded off the path and into the nearest copse.

The trees’ shadows calmed her. On full moon nights, her mothers would often take her for walks through the pines. As a little kid, the moonlight had made her feel like something other-than-human, something able to see in the dark. There was power in walking unafraid through the blackness.

Gwen limped along his trail, each step rubbing the raw spots on her thighs. She called for him, churning through the knee-deep snow.

When she caught him in the trees, he was leaning against a large oak, blood dripping from his knuckles. A patch of bark about fist-sized appeared to have been blasted off the trunk. He stared at the branches that stretched like cracks in the starry sky. “I’m sorry.” He kept his gaze fixed skyward. The moonlit snow illuminated him. She still wore his coat, and he looked smaller without it. “I promise I’m not prone to anger.” He shook his hand, blood spattering the snow.
Except she’d seen him angry too many times now to believe it. She slogged over, breathing hard but trying to hide it. “The wolf-guys, Mercury—why do they treat you like that?”

Erhent sank into a crouch, leaning against the trunk. His gaze remained on his bloody hand. He nodded at her palm, which dripped a line in the snow. “Did he hurt you?”

She pressed the cut flat against her jeans, staunching the blood. “No. It seemed like the right thing to do. I don’t know why.”

He let out a low laugh. “We are both bleeding from our hands. Maybe we are right for each other.”

Silence stretched, and Gwen was sorting out how to ask if he wanted her to leave when he met her gaze. Pain twisted his face, turning him older. “I don’t want to tell you because you are the only person who doesn’t see what I am, who isn’t constantly weighing that against how close you should stand or what you should say.”

She perched on a twisting root, six inches between them. “You don’t have to tell me.” A few hours ago, sitting this close would have freaked her out. It still made her twitchy, but some intuition knew Erhent needed the closeness.

He dug a handkerchief from his pocket and tore it in half with his teeth. “May I see your hand?” He didn’t look at her, fiddling with the cloth, as if he expected her to say no but had to ask, anyway.

She offered her palm, blood still oozing. Dried trickles crusted her fingers.

Erhent pressed snow to the wound, whatever power he held in his hands melting it, so the warm water washed off the worst of the blood. He wiped clean the rest before wrapping
and tying the cloth around her wound. His fingers were gentle, and for a moment, she wanted
to hide her face in his shoulder until the world settled.

“Thank you,” she said.

He sucked at his bleed knuckles, then bandaged them. “Jack says somebody else
would tell you if I don’t.” He rested his head against the trunk. His breath streamed from his
nose like smoke. “Mercury called me a Soul-Eater. It’s apt. My kind need the energy of
others to survive—whether that comes from humans, wilders, animals, or non-sentient
beings. I feed off trees, like when I met you.” He looked away, and Gwen leaned closer to
hear. “Most Soul-Eaters prefer humans or wilders. Their energy is like honey, and it is much
more powerful than a non-sentient source.” He stared at the blood spotting his bandage. “A
well-fed Soul-Eater is nearly impossible to stop at close range. It only takes one touch to
incapacitate prey.”

“You don’t have to say anymore.” Her list of questions kept growing, but she sensed
what pain it would cause to ask if he’d fed on humans.

He shook his head. “In answer to the question you are too kind to ask, yes. I lived like
my kind for seventy-three years. I am a murderer.” He covered his face. “I don’t do that
anymore. Not for decades, though I can understand if you don’t believe me.”

He shifted and knelt on one knee in front of her. The fear in her gut from the first time
she met him returned, and instinct pushed her against the tree. Of course he noticed, hurt
flicking across his face.

He hid his hands in his hip pockets, which looked awkward as he knelt. “You need to
know. Mercury will only keep hinting at it. The reason we are a strange match is because
humans are not the top predator. According to the old stories, when humans overran the
world for the first time, the gods created Soul-Eaters to cull humanity.” Sweat slicked his brow, as if part of him were straining to keep talking, to tell the truth. “That was the flood your mythologies recorded. Not water decimating humankind, but me, my kind. An ancient more terrible version of Soul-Eaters, but we were the flood.”

He bowed his head so his hair parted, revealing the nape of his neck. The action felt older, weighted with some meaning she didn’t understand, like slitting her palm. “I know, now, this will sound hollow, but I promise to protect you, Gwen, and never cause you harm.” A plea strained his words.

Bark ridges bit into her skin through the coat. God, she was still wearing his coat. She forced herself to relax. Cornered by an apparently immortal (he couldn’t be seventy), self-proclaimed murderer whose ancestors almost wiped out the human race—except that’s not what she saw. He looked worn out, kneeling there with his head bowed, like a kid who has given into the bullies and just curled up. He was giving her a chance to say no, it was too much.

She liked Erhent. She liked when he promised to protect her—the comfort of those words. Perhaps the stars had already pulled them tighter. Maybe it was selfish, but it felt so good to be wanted, that he wanted her to be there, with him. It was like when she hugged Jack. She’d forgotten how that felt. She had to explain those feelings to Erhent somehow. If she didn’t respond, he’d have that look around her, like when a member of the camp changed directions or swerved away from him.

She placed a hand on each of his shoulders. When he looked up, she leaned closer, resting her forehead against his. While she’d performed the motions with Jesse, she wasn’t prepared for the intimacy of the act with Erhent. Even with her eyes half-closed, she could
sense the fierce angles of his face—that predatory element. His pine scent drifted like incense and reminded her of home.

At first, Erhent’s shoulders tensed, but he reciprocated by placing his hands on her shoulders. She held still for a count of ten, trying not to think about if her breath smelled.

She raised her head but left her hands touching him. Even though her heart pounded, she kept the shiver out of her voice. “You’re my partner. Nothing will change that.”

His face and body had relaxed. Somehow, she’d made the right move. He smiled. A fake smile, but at least he tried. “Gwen, you are more than any of them will ever expect.” He stood and offered a hand, helping her up.

“So wait.” Gwen nudged him. “How old are you?” As she’d hoped, he chuckled, his laughter growing until he doubled-over, hands on his knees. She joined in.

He took a stuttering breath and shook his head. “I’m one hundred and twenty-one.”

Gwen whipped toward him. “Holy shit!”

He shrugged one shoulder. “Jack’s two hundred and three.”

“What? Are you guys like—immortal or something?”

He rapped the oak trunk. “More like trees. Time flows over us differently.”

She squinted at him. “Okay, so you’re not going to die soon or anything?”

“I don’t plan on it.”

She jumped into one of his footprints. “Good. Since that’s settled, my feet are ice blocks. Where’s bed?”
Gwen assumed she’d have her own space, but Jesse explained the second yurt belonged to the three of them. Being a Starcatcher started with trust, and wilders usually shared everything. The circular structure had a woodstove, a table, six chairs, and a stack of blankets—no beds. The walls were lattice material, and the cone-shaped ceiling peaked at a skylight. Handmade rugs in blues and grays, with random purples or greens, overlapped and covered the floor. Gwen’s pack waited on one of the chairs, and a stack of clothing set on the table. Sarah also left them with enough books to make the table creak.

Wood crackled in the stove, but a deep silence surrounded the yurt. Set back from the main camp, the walls blotted what little noise other inhabitants made. The quiet reminded Gwen of nights she’d scavenged the flood-ruined houses in her hometown. Her rotten house flashed behind her eyes and her vision blurred. She gripped the back of a chair until the yurt blinked into focus. All that was gone now. She didn’t need to think about it except when she was ready to deal.

Erhent glanced through the clothes. “Jack will be here later. He and some of the coyotekind are making sure the wulvers won’t bother you again.”

Gwen picked up a book. Gold letters lined the spine: *Astrology Learner*. She thumbed the soft pages, releasing the old-book musk. “I can take care of myself.” But the words sounded hollow, even to her. A hunting knife wasn’t much good against a wolf-man with claws and fangs.

Erhent performed a strange little half bow. “He meant no insult. As part of our guard, it’s his duty.”
She stepped under the skylight. The surrounding trees didn’t block the view, and for some reason, relief spread through her. She imagined Mama’s voice labeling the stars: *Rigel, Aldebaran, Capella, Procyon, Sirius, Castor.*

Gwen shrugged off Erhent’s coat and handed it to him. “What do you mean by guard?” Jesse and Sarah had mentioned it, but hardly anything that had happened tonight made sense.

“Oh, all Starcatchers have them.” He placed a book in the center of the table, then arranged four others around it in a compass design. He tapped the southern book. “Jack is our South Guard. We will find the others later. I should have asked Sarah and Jesse to explain. Only it’s been so long since we lived with someone who knows nothing of us.” He walked toward the door. “There’s so much to show you, Gwen. First, you need to eat, and I will find a pair of appropriate boots for your training tomorrow.” He left, a blast of cold air replacing him.

No lock on the door. She took one of the chairs and propped it under the handle. Just for a few minutes, she told herself. She hadn’t been alone in a room, *her room,* for months. Besides, working off her jeans would be a mess.

She pawed through the clothes. Most were patched into formlessness, and some appeared made from hides. She chose a pair of long underwear—the closest thing she could find to sweatpants. Even though plenty of naked wilders filled the camp, she was not ready to join the ranks.

Her jeans did not come off easily. Blisters had burst and dried, and oozing raw spots stuck the material to her skin. She soaked the cloth with handfuls of water from a bucket by the stove before peeling the jeans down another few inches. When she finally tugged them
off, the air stung her raw sores. She wet the handkerchief Erhent had tied around her hand and dabbed at spots. Pain made her breathe through her teeth. While not a deep hurt, it stung enough to bring tears. The exhaustion didn’t help. She managed clean off most of the dried blood and gunk before slowly tugging on the long underwear. No wonder Mercury sneered at her. Erhent had taken the ride as if it were nothing, the norm. She’d carry it on her skin for weeks. If a basic part of the wilder life, their transportation, made her bleed, how could she even begin to keep up?

From her backpack, she pulled her last piece of clean clothing, a T-shirt her mothers had shared—a Tegan and Sara band shirt. It’d been left on the clothesline and somehow the flood waters hadn’t stripped it, just wrapped it around the line. It had smelled like mold and fishrot when she found it, but scrubbing it in the creek and drying it in sunshine helped, even if the cloth no longer held the sweat and lavender scent of her mothers.

Something kicked the door then called her name—Erhent.

She yanked on the T-shirt. “One sec!”

She replaced the chair but paused to run her fingers through her hair, then felt dumb because it wasn’t a date, and opened the door.

He held something tucked under his coat and hurried to the stove, dropping into a cross-legged position. “Damn, that winding is biting, even for me.” He spread the food he’d been carrying on the floor.

Gwen tried to hide her limp as she followed him. Okay, no table for wilders, apparently. She hissed as she sat, the long underwear pulling against the raw spots on her thighs.
Erhent froze, a bowl in mid-air. “You should go to the infirmary. Jack can accompany you, if you like.”

“I’m fine.”

He bit his lip, watching her. “I wasn’t sure what you would like, so I brought a bit of everything.” He motioned to a series of clay bowls and platters made of bark. How he’d manage to carry all of it under his coat through the wind was beyond her.

He picked at his gloves. “Usually, wilders hunt for themselves, but there are too many here, so the nightly meal must be more thought out, rationed, as it were—so as not to overburden the ecosystems.”

The word sounded weird coming from Erhent, as if magic creatures shouldn’t have to think about ecosystems.

Two thick stews filled the bowls, one smelling of fish. The bark plates held greens, pickled vegetables, berries, and dried brown strips—meat? So much had happened in the past few hours she’d just forgotten about food. Her body had turned all the excitement into fuel. But not now. Her stomach clenched, so hungry she felt nauseous.

Erhent hadn’t brought any utensils—maybe wilders didn’t have any?—so she drained the first stew straight from the bowl: thick, savory broth with gamey but soft meat. She finished it in a few swallows and set it aside. She leaned back on her hands and let her head fall back. The taste of sage and wild onion lingered.

“God, that’s good.”

Erhent fidgeted. “I can get you another bowl if you like.”

She picked up the fishy smelling bowl. “Stay—it’s not like you didn’t bring me enough.” She ducked her head and let her hair hide her face. At the word *stay*, the real world
clicked into place. She was alone, in the middle of a huge wilderness, sitting almost hip-to-hip with a guy she’d met seventy-two hours ago. A guy who had acted like he was a prince or something but was one step above outcast. In a place where nobody cared if she wandered into the snow and didn’t come back. Well, that was pretty much the same at the high school, though Chris obviously cared. She wondered what Erhent’s touch had done, if Chris had totally forgotten about her once he’d driven off.

Erhent was saying something about the food, and she ran a hand through her hair, pushing it back. “Sorry, zoned out.” She took a gulp of the fish stew. It tasted mostly of salt, but a sweet tuber added variation. “So did Mercury really give us an impossible task?”

He sighed, staring into the stove. “I don’t know.” He half-smiled. “I haven’t done this before.”

“And if we don’t make it?”

He stretched out beside her, his knees drawn up and his hands crossed behind his head. “We move on.”

Before the silence could turn uncomfortable, she said, “You haven’t told me what happened with you and Sarah in the stars.”

“It was glorious, Gwen. I don’t remember much, not clearly at least.” He grinned at the canvas ceiling. “I’ve heard other starwalkers describe it, but I wasn’t ready. The light of the stars, it’s like a forest of starbeams. No, forest isn’t the description—a cave of stalagmites and stalactites combined with a forest—if you can picture it.”

She couldn’t, but just nodded. “I think I got it.”

He took a deep breath, pushing out his chest. “It felt so good to be there. So right.” He rolled onto his side, propping his head in his hand. “What about you?”
She took her time chewing off a hunk of dried meat (a surprisingly peppery wad) and swallowing. Compared to Erhent, her experience sounded boring. “I don’t know, I just—waited, I guess. Drawing you back was the most exciting part.”

“I could feel you up there,” he said. “Our partnering. I think that’s what the tether represents.”

Gwen popped a handful of tart, dried fruit into her mouth, letting the sourness coat her tongue. *Partnering* sounded way too sexy, especially alone with him sprawled beside her. “You mean the silver thread thing?”

“I can see it clearly in the stars.” He raised his right foot and wiggled it. “It’s wrapped around my ankle.”

“I could feel it in my wrist and arm, like someone was pulling out my veins.”

He sat up. “I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

“No. If anything, I hurt you.” She motioned to his blood-crusted nose. “Hopefully, that won’t happen every time.”

He sighed, letting his head loll back. “I wouldn’t care if it did. We’re a Starcatcher, Gwen. It’s worth all of it.”

She hoped he was right. Even after tonight, the word seemed abstract. She couldn’t wrap her head around what Erhent did or her role in this place. Candle and wick. Erhent held the fire. So what was her job—to melt?

Erhent stood. “Jack’s back.”

As he spoke, Jack slipped inside and leaned against the door. “It is so cold. I hate it.” Erhent snatched a wool blanket. “I know. How’d it go?”
Snow matted Jack’s fur-hair and lined his ears. Blood spilled over his bottom lip and chin. Dark spots stained a baggy sweater that hung past his narrow hips and something that looked like shorts, which he promptly squirmed out of.

Gwen whipped around and stared at the fire, a prickling heat crawling up her neck. What else had she expected? Plenty of furry wilders in camp were naked. It’s not like there was a bathroom to change in. Right, she’d have to ask about the toilet and shower situation.

“Jack,” Erhent growled.

“What? Oh, well, she’ll learn.”

Jack hurried to the stove, the blanket clasped around him and hiding everything, for the most part. He crouched, his back to the embers, shivering. “Good, you’re eating.”

She nodded, trying not to look at him without being rude. “Um, thanks for doing, whatever, with the wolf guys.”

“Wulvers,” he said. “Mercury’s dislike of you two will only make them bolder.” His tail flicked from beneath the blanket and brushed Gwen’s bare foot. She started. “Don’t let them scare you.”

She nodded. Sure, don’t let the huge wolf people scare her. As if she had a choice.

Erhent pulled a rag from his pocket, spit on it, and dabbed at Jack’s lip, even though Jack’s ears swiveled backward.

“I can do that,” Jack said.

Erhent’s other hand cupped Jack’s neck, his gloved fingers twined in the fur-hair that grew down his back. “Just hold still.”
For a moment, memory overlaid reality, and she saw her mothers, Mom sitting at the kitchen table while Mama swabbed a scrape on her chin. *I warned you those bike tires were low.*

Gwen rubbed her eyes. “I think I need to go to bed.”

Erhent tugged Jack’s right ear as he turned away. “Of course. Take as many blankets as you need. I’ll wake you in time for training with Mercury tomorrow.”

Hides, wool blankets, and knit covers stacked against the wall. Gwen nudge the pile with her foot, and a spider scurried over her toe. She danced back a step but managed not to scream. Okay, no beds and shake all the blankets.

She chose a stack, heavier than she imagined, and hauled it against the far wall, dropping them with a *whoomp*.

Erhent padded over. “Wait a moment. You will be cold against the wall.” He took a hide from her pile—bison, maybe?—and spread it near the stove. “The trick is to be warm but not hot.”

She nodded, too tired to say thanks. She didn’t even know how to go to sleep properly in this place. After Erhent helped arrange her blankets, it was satisfying to squirrel into them. The stove’s open door cast a warm glow, silhouetting Erhent and Jack. If she squinted, Jack’s ears blended with his hair, and Erhent’s predatory aspect came from his face, not the rest of him. They almost looked human.

Jack huffed and slid over, half-draped across Erhent’s lap. The tension eased in his legs and his tail slowly tapped the floor. Erhent combed his fingers through Jack’s hair, picking at the tangles. He caught Gwen watching.
He winked, and she smiled. Seeing them together gave her the peace to close her eyes.
CHAPTER 10.

During her first week at camp, Gwen learned more than how to read a star chart. She learned the correct way to chop wood and how to chop wood with a sprained wrist resulting from sloppy form. Wyoming’s winter taught her she never chopped enough wood.

She learned how to tell time by the sun after Mercury chewed her out twice for being late. Mercury taught her what little she knew—how to breathe, how to walk, how to run.

She learned when the wulvers came back from hunting so she could avoid them and learned that most wilders thought the wulvers were dicks. And most wilders didn’t like Erhent because everyone knew someone with a Soul-Eater horror story: kidnapped, forced into sex-slavery, forced to trap others, fed on for years or decades. Some said the activists that disappeared in the 2020s were fed on until the Soul-Eaters turned them to dust, even Mary L’Engle, which is why she vanished after she busted the sex trafficking ring in Atlantic City.

By listening around the central fires and during dinner, she learned the web of wilder politics—that not all kinds were called wilders and, regardless, not all wilders wanted the label. Learned that the Kurultai had reformed in 1774 when the steam engine became a thing, the date humankind declared war on the earth and the nonhuman inhabitants. The Dark Stars considered that year to mark the beginning of the end of humanity. Both Kurultai and Dark Stars struggled against humanity’s destruction of the earth, but came from opposite directions. The Kurultai wanted to save what was left while the Dark Stars worked to accelerate humanity’s destruction toward a mass extinction event, knowing that it would be the end of humankind but that many wilders would survive.
Then she learned about the Samsara, the more shadowy of the groups, who believed in harmony between all kinds, but also didn’t seem to gain much traction with no central leadership. Gwen also learned Erhent didn’t like the Samsara because they had tried to kill him. Twice.

Gwen learned that Erhent and Jack fought like lovers when she waited outside the yurt door one night, shivering, because she hadn’t worn enough clothes to go take a crap (she’d also learned the correct way to piss and shit in the woods—pee two hundred yards from any water source, the camp, or a trail; for a crap, dig a hole six to eight inches deep and use snow or leaves for toilet paper). She learned that when Jack raised his voice, a whine entered his words, though she’d expected a growl.

“Just why? If Gwen didn’t come with us, it would have happened later. It’s written in the stars. Why did you have to touch her and that male teacher?”

“She said she wanted him to leave!”

“Then make him leave another way!”

“How, hmm? Growl at him? I don’t have fangs, Jack, I don’t have claws!”

A whistling sigh came from inside the yurt. “I’m trying to keep you safe. If Mercury knew—you have to be more careful.”

She also learned that Jack had been someone famous, but when she asked him over dinner, he’d just grumbled and gone for another helping of raw bison. Erhent had explained Jack was famous for hunting Erhent’s kind, Soul-Eaters.

“For some reason,” Erhent said, lowering his voice and glancing around even though nobody ever sat with them, “he fell in love with me instead of killing me. I’m the end of his perfect record and his disgrace.” He spoke casually, almost like a whispered joke, as if hunter
and hunted becoming best friends happened every day, but as she lived in camp and saw coyotekind chopping wood beside harekind, or wulvers play-boxing with bisonkind, or Jesse and Sarah slipping off into the woods (pro tip, even in winter, wilders fucked outside, so don’t blunder around)—maybe it wasn’t all about who ruled the food chain.

She learned from Jesse not to mention Jack and Erhent as a couple.

“It’s a secret,” Jesse said when she took Gwen stargazing.

Gwen had tilted her head. “They aren’t very secretive.”

Jesse’s tail had whipped. “Because he’s a Soul-Eater, Erhent isn’t supposed to have sex with any sentient being by Kurultai law. If they are too obvious, Mercury will use it against Erhent.” She’d nudged Gwen. “You’re his anchor. Tell him to be more careful.”

Gwen knew the small touches and greetings between Jack and Erhent reminded her too much of her mothers to tell Erhent to be more careful.

She learned that on unseasonably warm days, wilders would walk around naked. Including Jack.

She learned she was the only human and the youngest in camp. When wilders made her humanness clear to her with slick comments, they also demonstrated their dislike of the Park Protectors. Just a bunch of children playing war in the snow. Sometimes, other wilders spoke up, said that humankind were different from wilders, that they couldn’t simply declare a fight for dominance and change the world—it took time, convincing, money, and diverting funds from the actual humankind in power. But why not just take the power? the others would snarl back. To which, the others said: It’s energy, oil, that’s how the humankind live! From there, it would devolve into wilders blustering that humans were soft, and they could stop the drilling by themselves, why did they need to help the humans?
Erhent taught her how to raise her chin and show her throat if any wilder glared at her too long.

She learned that moving hadn’t stopped nightmares flooding her sleep, only diversified them.

And at the end of the week, she learned about designing spells for the stars.

Jesse smoothed the star chart over the table and weighted the corners with gnawed chunks of bone.

Gwen loved the *swish* of paper, the torn and fuzzy edges, the creases as if the chart hadn’t always been rolled and carefully stored. Mom had kept her maps in a flat file drawer, the tracks squealing whenever opened.

The dirty-white paper featured a peppering of black spots over a blurry grid. Erasure marks showed the smears of old notes. Mom’s maps had often been pristine reprints, not showing the tags of adventures.

In the center of the map, Jesse placed a small black book, the right size to fit into a pocket. The cover’s corners were sharp, and the spine looked so smooth as if it had just come from the publisher’s box.

She nodded to the book. “Read aloud the first paragraph.”

The spine cracked as Gwen parted the covers. Unlike a novel, the writing started on the first page. A chemical acridness stung her nose. Perhaps she’d been in the woods long enough to lose her sensitivity to unnatural smells.

She swallowed and cleared her throat. Jesse’s ears pricked.

“‘Dear Readers: You hold this book because your blood sings with starlight, and you feel the cry of the constellations to serve your fellow wilder. Many Starcatchers have heeded
the Kurultai’s call and left lands, if they remained unspoiled, to join a clan. This text will prepare you for the skills and castings necessary for success at the final totality of Saros Cycle 136, though it will be useful to all Kurultai Starcatchers as we uniformly resist the plundering of our places. All wilders owe you the greatest thanks for answering the call and journeying to where you are most needed, the eclipse and beyond.”

Gwen took a breath. Not exactly what she expected from a book of magic. She thumbed the pages, glimpsing charts, diagrams, maps, tables, astrology definitions. “Okay, so this is basically a magic high school textbook?”

Jesse’s tail curled upward. “It’s bullshit. That’s what it is.” She rapped her knuckles on the paper chart. “My mentor was considered heretical for starting me with a star chart. And there’s a reason for that. There’s no singular right way to access the stars.” She removed a pad of tracing paper, the yellow price tag still attached, which looked out of place in the yurt. She tore off a piece and layered it on the chart. “Some Starcatchers only use general astrology.” She traced the constellation Leo with a charcoal stick, connecting the dots. “Others use a specific system, like Mongolian cosmology.” She marked a five point zig-zag. “You can invent your own. My mentor used cat’s cradle designs.” She drew lines back and forth between star points, filling a large swathe of the map. “The symbols, whatever you choose, focus the magic and prove your intent—like different ways to string a guitar or punctuation in a long sentence. The starwalker outlines the picture, the desire, then releases the magic. You channel it through the tether and help disperse it. Since the magic goes through the anchor, you have the ultimate decision of what is cast.”

“Like a map,” Gwen said. “A map to guide the magic.”
Jesse’s ears perked. “Of a kind, yes.” She tapped her fist twice against Gwen’s shoulder. “Don’t let Erhent force you. He may know more than you, but you have intuition worth trusting. Or else you never would have come here with a Soul-Eater and a jackalkind.”

Gwen half-smile, though she wasn’t sure if that last part was a compliment. She held up the book. “What should I do with this?”

Jesse’s ears swiveled backward. “Read it once so you can tell Mercury you did your Kurultai duty, then forget it. Using the charts and definitions will only make you rely on the book and dull your senses.” She passed the charcoal stick to Gwen. “First step to understanding your Starcatcher style is connecting with cosmology. To be honest, that’s probably why you weren’t supposed to be partners with Erhent yet.” She crumpled the sheet of tracing paper and spread a new one. “Copy this chart three times—every detail.”

Gwen drew up a chair and leaned into the table. She started with the grid that overlaid the chart, which made Jesse’s tail wag.
Gwen failed most of her Starcatcher lessons. The memorization part was easy if time consuming, and she already knew enough about the night sky to get started. But being an anchor—that tripped her up. Everything about her life had been uprooted, yet her role in this whole Starcatcher thing was to keep Erhent steady. How could she when Mercury might kick them out the next day? Jesse told her to meditate on the issue, but meditation made her restless.

Even spending time with Erhent, the easiest requirement, made her uneasy. After two weeks of sleeping in the same yurt with him and Jack, they still felt like strangers. Jack left before dawn to do whatever he did, and Erhent, well, he made her uneasy in a different way, in the childish high school crush way. Even though she knew he and Jack were together, her stupid emotions latched onto him. At night, curled up in her blanket nest, she’d stare at the stars through the ceiling’s skylight and replay their conversations, grinning until her face hurt. It was silly, but it felt good, normal even.

Until she reminded herself that he was over a hundred, previously a killer (or something), could do weird stuff with his hands, and was the biggest loser in camp. Each morning, Mercury made sure to mention how hated Erhent was when she reported for her assigned tasks—cleaning skins or gutting animals or shoveling shit, ashes, scraps, rocks, dirt. Erhent would wait outside the cabin while Mercury gave orders and asked a series of idiotic questions loudly enough that Erhent and any wilder with half an ear could understand:

*Have you felt strange around the Soul-Eater—tired, fearful, dull? Has he touched you in any lingering way, like hand holding or embracing? Are his hands often uncovered in your*
presence? These are warning signs he is using you, as Soul-Eaters use all living beings. She always glared and answered no, even though Erhent did hold her after nightmares crashed her into waking.

The first time she’d fought the blankets tangled around her like water weeds, he’d pulled off the covers, whispering over and over you’re here, Gwen. It’s all right. Everyone in the gym had nightmares—if your own didn’t wake you, then someone else’s did. She wasn’t sure if Jack slept through her whimperings, but regardless, Erhent always woke her. The first nights, she’d fought him—now she let his voice soothe her.

Whenever Mercury questioned her, Erhent profusely promised he would never do such a thing until Gwen told him to stop, that she didn’t believe Mercury—even if what Erhent had done and what he claimed to be where only half-clear in her mind.

Jesse and Sarah kept saying they’d need trust, so she tried to forget the face he made when he chased Chris off the bridge—or how he didn’t help with the wulvers.

Like today. A snowstorm howled between the yurts, cloaking the canvas in drifts. Since camp chores were halted for those wilders not adapted for the weather, Sarah and Jesse requested they do some extra training. The goal—for Gwen and Erhent to “strike.”

Jesse paced beside Erhent and Gwen, who sat cross-legged before the stove, holding hands like awkward preschoolers.

“It should feel like a spark,” Jesse said. “Like flint against steel.”

Erhent sighed and rolled his shoulders. Scabs rimmed his cuticles as if he were biting them, though Gwen never saw his hands except while training.
Sarah sipped tea, perched on the table and swinging her legs off the edge. “Try to reach a meditative state of mind. Focus on the feeling of the other’s hands in yours, the energy in their palms, their fingertips.”

Gwen closed her eyes. When she meditated under Jesse’s direction, it felt like a river filled the empty space—the rhythm of lapping water, the current’s bubbling rush. Her pulse would ramp, her shoulders tense, her breathing quicken.

She focused on Erhent’s hands. The slight twitch of his fingers against her skin. They were longer than the gloves made them appear—artist hands, her mothers would have called them. Erhent had only given her glimpses into his previous life, and he didn’t mention what he’d done—his hobbies, his work. No callouses roughened his fingers, though.

“Erhent,” Jesse growled. “You’re taut as a snare.”

He tugged back his hands, hiding them in his lap. “What do you expect? My hands are cursed.”

Jesse dipped her head and her tail bristled. “Gods and all the fucking stars, how the hell are you so sensitive?”

Sarah pulled Jesse’s tail. “Now, now. The first time is always hard.”

Her hackles rose. “They are just striking! That’s the easy part!”

Gwen rubbed her eyes. Each time they failed and Jesse stomped around, a thought rooted deeper. They weren’t meant to be partners. Erhent had rushed into it for some reason and guessed wrong.

Sarah growled Jesse’s name, and they stared off. After their silent conversation consisting of Jesse’s tail twitches and Sarah tilting her horns at certain angles, Jesse stomped to the door and lunged into the storm.
Erhent hunched his shoulders, staring at the stove. His hair fell over his eyes, and he looked young, a sullen teenager. She’d held that pose before.

Sarah crouched beside them. “Okay, what happened, Erhent?”

He glared at her, his shoulder shifting slightly—that wilder language Gwen hadn’t learned to decipher, how a miniscule shift in the shoulders could relate a paragraph.

Sarah grunted. “You two can’t strike if you aren’t in tune. There’s a reason we refer to a Starcatcher as a singular being, because you are tethered.” She placed a hand over Gwen’s heart and Erhent’s heart, her arms bridging them. “Eventually, you will know each other so well it will feel like magic. Until then, you will use words.” She tilted her horns toward Erhent. “You smell like old adrenaline and you’re being melodramatic. What’s wrong?”

Erhent drew up a leg, resting his arm over his knee, as if trying to be the mascot of casually-cool. “Oh, the wulvers wanted to have a little fun in the snow—”

Sarah shook her head, which looked more intimidating with her horns. “Not like that.”

Erhent sighed, turning it into a growl. “Haven’t I been humiliated enough? Now I have to humiliate myself in front of my anchor?”

Gwen flinched. “We don’t need to talk—”

Sarah held up a hand. “Erhent, did you tell Jack?”

He nodded.

“Then you tell Gwen.”

He raised his head, looking around the yurt as if trying to find a safe place to stare—anywhere but at Gwen. “I don’t often go around camp alone. More trouble than it’s worth.
But Jack hates this weather, so I went to collect firewood, assuming the storm would deter anyone from taking the time to hassle me. I forgot how much the wulvers love the snow.”

Gwen sighed. Erhent had been gone for much too long that morning, and when he did return, he acted overly—peppy? As if trying to compensate for something.

He rolled his shoulders. “They stole my coat and pissed on it. Nothing a few washings can’t—”

Sarah scrambled to her feet. “The ever-living fuck they did.”

Erhent snatched the hem of her shirt. “Sarah, it will just make it worse.”

She rolled her neck, her horns tossing like a bull ready to charge. “Not if the Starcatcher tells them to fucking stop. Since Dad won’t do his job.” She brushed Erhent’s hair. “I am so sorry. It won’t happen again.”

He shrugged.

Gwen put a hand on his knee. Anything she might say would sound shallow. She couldn’t face them like Sarah could, but she could remind Erhent that she didn’t feel like all the others.

Sarah took a deep breath. “Okay, I will deal with this after we finish the lesson. Try striking again. See if it works any better now that you are on equal footing.”

Gwen closed her eyes. In her private lessons, Jesse instructed her to go into the dreamscape when she prepared to connect with Erhent and anchor him. According to Jesse, each anchor constructed a unique “landing platform” for the starwalker. It allowed for better communication between anchor and walker while also easing the transition from body to sky. Usually, the imagined space mirrored how the anchor rooted to the physical earth.

Instead of creating a new space, Gwen simply returned.
She stood in her living room. A bluish light bore through the picture window her mothers had installed when they first bought the place. White, lacey curtains featuring cutouts of woodland animals billowed in a breeze Gwen couldn’t feel. Below the window, the couch upholstered in sunflower patterns waited for a nap or to snuggle into with a book. Except through the window, a wave blocked the sunlight, its curling fingers just touching the roof. She never wanted to imagine the water, but it always waited.

Certain things were missing. The TV didn’t sit on the stand across from the couch. Instead, a stack of books on astrology and astronomy waited—books her mothers had never owned.

She reached for one, but a roaring shook the house, the sound that woke her on the night she lost her world.

A hand slipped into hers, but it felt cold, ghostly—like a leaf stiffened by frost.

She gripped the presence, and it shattered.

The bluish daylight blinked off. She still stood in her living room, but it had rotted. The roof had vanished and vivid constellations spread over her. Mama whispered their names in her memories: Aquarius, Aquilla, Aries, Canis Major, Cassiopeia, and on.

Trees rooted in the loamy floorboards and spread their branches like shadows. These trees weren’t her childhood pines from New Jersey, but smooth barked, with wide trunks and pythonlike roots.

She picked over the mossy floorboards, hoping her foot wouldn’t punch through the wood. She’d vividly imagined her house as part of her dreamscape, but never with another presence—which had to be Erhent—and she’d never been to whatever this place represented.

It’s just a dream, she reminded herself. “Vision” might be a better term.
She managed to pick a path through her house and examined the shell from the front yard beneath the stars’ lightning-bright glare. The house sagged like it had after the flood, but the trees growing through the rooms looked too ancient, as if a century had passed.

A sound like static made her turn around. Trees had torn apart the driveway’s asphalt. Even older and larger, their shaggy branches blocked the starlight, darkening the driveway.

The scrape and fizzle of a match echoed among the trees.

*What the hell?*

She scrambled over the broken asphalt and snaking roots. The sizzle of lightning made her duck and cover her head. No strike lit the forest, and no trees shuddered.

She walked closer to the new-ancient forest. Pinpricks of light dotted the shadows. She stared until she realized they were staring back.

Eyes. Maybe five pair.

She edged toward the house, testing each step so she didn’t ruin her bad ankle on a loose slab of asphalt or bulging root, if that were even possible here. Somehow, Erhent had gotten a nose bleed from the stars, so who knew.

Five humanoid shadows separated from the trees and stalked toward her.

*Time to wake up.* Except it wasn’t a dream. She tried to shout, but it only echoed in her head. *Erhent!*

She pinched herself but felt numb, her skin rough with gooseflesh.

The five figures stepped into the starlight. They dressed like Erhent—all black.

Except these figures didn’t wear gloves.
They formed a wide circle around her. *Oh fuck, oh fuck.* In whatever mental weirdness she’d found herself, nothing bad could happen—right? She couldn’t die in Erhent’s psyche, if that’s even what this place was.

They circled closer until she could identify them. One was huge—broad shoulders, powerful chest, near seven feet tall. He had long black hair worn in a loose braid. Three others blended together, their features bland and if she looked hard enough, shifting into separate faces. All three were young and wore tight black clothes that showed off linebacker-thick muscles. The final figure was a woman with raven hair. Like the others, she was tall, though less muscular, more siren-slender.

*Erhent! Get me out of this!*

One of the anonymous young figures darted forward. She dodged, but he shoved her.

At his touch, cold crawled over her skin, and she couldn’t breathe. She staggered and tripped on the heaved ground, falling forward.

Between the legs of the attackers, she saw Erhent. He stood at the forest’s edge, panting, his eyes bright. Compared to the others, he looked so small. He dropped to his knees.

*Erhent!*

Someone dragged her by the ankle toward her ruined house. She screamed.

The stars cracked, exploding into pure light.

She blinked. She curled, panting, on the yurt floor. Sarah knelt over her. The horns glistened in the stove’s light. Her body ached as if she’d really fallen.

Erhent had shifted to his hands and knees, his head hanging as if he were about to vomit. Sweat dripped off his brow.
Sarah kept asking if she were all right, but Gwen scrambled to her feet. “Holy hell, Erhent, what was that?”

He sat on his heels, facing the stove. “You have a wave waiting to drown you; I have my ghosts.”

Sarah handed Gwen a mug of water. “Well, you two definitely struck. Maybe too hard. Give me the details.”

After Gwen and Erhent haltingly explained their experiences, Sarah tried to spin the whole thing as a positive. At least they’d connected, even if it was unusual for partners to have such negative experiences. According to Sarah, Erhent’s trees, a shadow of the Guatemalan ficus forest he grew up in, shouldn’t have appeared in her dreamscape. An anchor connecting with the starwalker was a one way street. The anchor utilized the interior space as a way to connect to the walker’s spirit.

Gwen only half-listened as Sarah rambled about the oddness of their striking, pacing in front of the stove. She stared at Erhent, tracing the predatory lines of his face that made her gut coil. It had been worse in the other figures because of their size.

Even if she hadn’t been in any real danger, Erhent hadn’t rushed to help her. He’d just watched. That freaked her out more than some ghosts trying to do who knows what. She had nightmares like that in the aftermath of the flood, people or things or the water dragging her to some hellish death. She could handle that sensation, but Erhent just watching—no.

Maybe for him, it had been like a nightmare where the dreamer can’t do anything or moved with agonizing slowness. But that hadn’t been the look on Erhent’s face.
CHAPTER 12.

On the first full moon a few days later, Mercury told Gwen he wanted fresh game for tomorrow’s dinner, so Jack took Gwen hunting. They left at sunset, hiking around the base of Druid Peak toward Roxe Creek, bordering the Lamar Valley. He showed her how to set snares, and they marked their path in traps.

At the creek, Jack motioned to wait as he loped along the bank, his head tilted down and his ears pricked. Questions flickered through her thoughts, but she’d been practicing whittling her words to the necessary. Erhent liked to talk, but Jesse sometimes snapped for speaking when there was no need. While she’d never been hunting, she imagined silence was important.

She shifted her weight from foot to foot, fidgeting for warmth. The looming moon silhouetted Jack, and with a stiff winter wind ruffling his hair-fur, he looked like myth incarnate. Somehow, he stayed warm only wearing shorts and a blue-black blanket strapped like a sash. Maybe wilders like him and Jesse had inspired the more humanoid werewolves from the movies. In the moonlight, even she felt different. The word *human* became more transparent. Rather than humankind, she merely felt two-legged and hungry.

He glanced over his shoulder and whined, motioning her to join him. She powerwalked, stomping through the snow.

The moon lit the world from below, reflecting off the snow and creating a sense of bareness, a landscape ready to be impressed upon—except winter had only started. The thought made her shiver as she caught up with Jack. So much cold remained.
He slowed to an easy stride, even for her. “We can talk if you like. Smelled a carcass over the ridge, so I thought we’d see what was left over.”

Gwen sniffed, but the stench escaped her human senses. “I thought hunting would be more blood and sweat.”

“I prefer to leave that to the wulvers.”

“Finesse more your style?”

He flicked his tail.

She forced herself into silence until the creek veered toward the tree line. She wanted Jack’s respect and wasn’t always sure she had it when she caught him watching her and Erhent in the yurt, reviewing Starcatcher assignments or trying to strike. Of course, since Jack was two centuries old, she probably looked like a half-evolved tadpole.

“Why didn’t Erhent come?”

Jack’s ears flattened. “Mercury would not allow it. He’s paranoid Erhent will break Kurultai law.”

Gwen swallowed her questions. Other than the first night, Erhent refused to talk about what everyone else whispered, only promising he would never hurt her. Whenever she hinted at wanting to know, he said he’d tell her later, but later had started to sound more like never.

They entered the trees and scrambled through snow drifts. Jack cut a path for her, and she waded up the ridge. Near the crest, Jack twitched his tail and stopped. Gwen kept walking until he glared and motioned for silence. He crept on all fours to the ridgeline. After a beat, he whispered for her to come up.

The carcass waited in a trough, half-covered in snow. From the size and shaggy shape, Gwen assumed it was a bison. And it was still moving.
The carcass twitched as if something crawled inside. Gwen’s pulse ramped.

Jack tilted his head toward her. “Can you see the wolverine?”

She sucked in a breath. “You’re kidding.”

He pointed. “In the ribs.”

A three-foot battering ram of fur ripped off a frozen strip of meat, recoiling into a shaft of moonlight. Sleek fur and a downright fluffy tail made the wolverine look almost friendly, though when it swung its triangular head toward the hill and took two steps forward, Gwen’s body automatically hit flight mode, her pulse pounding until she felt sick. Something about the way it walked promised violence—that it would win.

It stared up the ridge, then returned to the carcass. After a few minutes and a lot of tugging, it ripped off a bison leg and sauntered into the woods.

Jack shifted into a crouch and untied the blanket worn over his bare chest. He propped against a tree with a view of the carcass. “It’s caching the meat. We might have a chance later.” He draped the blanket around his shoulders and held half of it up, as if inviting Gwen to settle beside him.

Her sore thighs protested the crouch, but a long night with a wet ass would be worse. She shared the blanket, their body heat and the wool making the cold bearable. The blanket carried his musky, sandy smell and while he didn’t radiate heat like Erhent, the warmth was enough to make her drowsy.

She shifted, her calves clenching. “Is it all right to talk?”

He flicked his left ear, so she assumed yes. Small talk with a wilder seemed laughable, though, and the things she wanted to know about—Erhent, their past, Jack’s past—he wasn’t going to spill. Maybe she’d have to circle around.
“You said back in New Jersey that you were also half of a Starcatcher but didn’t have your partner yet. Why weren’t you and Erhent partners?”

His gaze snapped to her, and his ears flattened.

She pressed into the tree, the blanket going taut between them. “I’m sorry—I was just wondering.”

He shook his head so his ears flopped. “It’s a fair question. I’ve asked it myself.” He nodded at the stars. “Only they know—whatever turnings of the universe that brought us together did not ordain that partnership.”

The wolverine returned and sniffed around the carcass before rooting into the guts. After a few jerks, a chunk broke free, and the wolverine trotted off.

She sighed and clutched the blanket tighter. “You two would make better partners than us. Are Starcatchers always strangers?”

“Sometimes it’s siblings, life-long friends, old enemies. The stars have their weird ways. I don’t have the knowledge to explain it.”

*That makes two of us.* “I know Jesse and Sarah keep saying everything’s harder because Erhent found me too soon, but I really, really want to be here. I’m glad he did.”

Jack turned and rested his chin on top of her head. Her surprise held her in place. “Me, too.”

#

The wolverine returned a dozen times, then after Gwen’s legs sufficiently froze, Jack stood and tied the blanket around his chest. “It’s gone. Our turn.”
Jack had her sever the neck with her hunting knife while he harvested meat and lengths of hide. He sucked icy scraps while he worked, bagging the rest in the blanket.

With only a few hours until dawn, they retraced their steps. Gwen tried not to stumble, but the wind blasting her face across the open stretches made her want to hunker down and sleep. The adrenaline from watching the wolverine had worn off, and her arms burned after hacking and sawing through the carcass.

As they neared their first trap, a shout, almost surprised, then panicked, bleated through the woods. Over and over, the nasally ahh! echoed.

Gwen winced. “What’s that?”

Jack loped forward, forcing Gwen into a jog. “The snares.”

Along a deer trail, Jack had shown her how to rig a looped line off a sapling. As the dawn slowly swallowed the stars, a mule deer twisted and screamed, rucking the snow. It jerked and jumped and hurled its body in such contortions Gwen was surprised it hadn’t broken its legs.

Jack crouched a few feet from the writhing doe. It lunged and lunged in the opposite direction, flipping on its back, falling over itself.

Gwen’s stomach clenched, but she refused to be sick in front of Jack.

“Watch the hooves,” Jack said. “They’ll slice your stomach open easy as a knife.” He inched closer. “Wait until it falls, then—”

The deer twisted onto its back, and Jack flashed forward, pinning a knee on its neck and another on its ribs. He mimed digging his knife into the chest, then jumped off, allowing the deer to begin its panicked, writhing dance again.
He circled to stand beside Gwen. He panted, and his tail whipped as if the struggling animal excited him. “Your turn.”

She shook her head. “I can’t.”

He touched her shoulder, turning her. “Look at me.”

She met his dark eyes.

“You need the skills to feed yourself. You already knew what a deer trail looked like, now you know the right snare.”

The deer bugled the strangely human *ahhhhh!*

“Killing and gutting are the final parts.”

She jerked back. “What is this?” She pointed to the deer. “Isn’t this like cannibalism for you all?”

He tilted his head. “You are an animal, too.”

She touched her grandfather’s hunting knife on her hip. The deer pulled and lunged and twisted over and over, like the snare was a fresh surprise each time. Hunting with a bow, even a rifle, seemed more honorable than this trap.

Then again, what did an animal care about honor?

She drew her hunting knife, passing it between her hands until it settled in her left. She edged as close as she dared.

The deer flung itself right, tripped in the churned ground, fell on its side, the snared leg beneath it.

She lunged and pressed down its head with her right hand, dropping a knee on its neck while her other knee pinned its hip. Down from the shoulder hump, she stabbed the knife to the hilt.
Except Jack hadn’t told her what to do afterward. She froze.

The deer trembled, but it stopped bucking. She stared into the black pool of its eye as it huffed, its breath whistling.

It died beneath her, and she felt the second the body changed, when the life left, how the desire to live ended and the body went quiet. Not still, as the bodily functions slowed and the nerves fizzled, but silent. No mind behind the movements.

She fell back, crawling in the snow. She rubbed her palms into the whiteness, even though nothing stained them.

Even without blood or gore on her skin, she felt the death in her palms.

Her hands shook, and she stared at her naked fingers. She’d never killed something like that. Sure, she hit a bird with her car the first day she had her license, and the small thud had followed her around for the rest of the week. But this, it had been so deliberate.

Jack stared at her hands, and his ears swiveled, flattening. “Gwen, I brought you hunting with the intention of telling you a story, but I haven’t been able to steel myself to the telling.” He sighed, his breath whistling through his nose so much like the deer’s dying that a shiver crawled over her.

“This is partially Erhent’s story, but it is also my story, so I have a right to tell it.”
Interlude

I was assigned to exterminate Erhent after he had already killed two lesser Hunters. He was what his kind call a runt, a Lowborn in their society. Hunters mostly killed runts as they commonly ran away—stars know they have a greater reason. Escaped runts are often unskilled in surviving without their clan, so the new Hunters or those with loved ones killed runts.

I killed alphas or destroyed new clans—two or three soulkind trying to claim a territory and the humans in it. When I received an order to exterminate a runt feeding up and down the Mississippi, I was surprised. I had the best kill record at ninety-six and had just received news about two alphas trying to edge territory for a second clan in Atlantic City. But this soulkind had already killed two new Hunters. They needed vengeance—and who better than Jack Lunatic.

I tracked Erhent to New Orleans during Mardi Gras. He used the celebration to hide the traces of his feeding. All week, I searched, only finding remains of his kills.

The Hunters who had come before me had learned he often used music to gather humankind and chose his victims from the crowd. He’s still a talented musician—anything stringed, he can play, though he doesn’t anymore. Too many memories, perhaps.

When I couldn’t track his scent, I asked around for a musician or a band with a past of playing riverboats. I found him the next night.
As a Hunter, I had the costuming tools to pass very convincingly as humankind, so I attended his show in a cramped bar, so full of sweat and alcohol I doubt he could have smelled me anyway.

The sharp angles of his face, the brightness in his eyes that hinted he’d just fed, I marked him immediately. He looked so small compared to the alphas I’d been hunting. Even so, he’d killed two of my comrades and over a hundred confirmed humans.

Such knowledge seemed like a pure lie as I watched him perform. Not the frontman, but he sometimes sang and switched between guitar, bass, and violin. When he played, he often closed his eyes. Gods, he looked so young on that stage, sweating in the lights, smiling, joking with the frontman. Just a youngone enjoying himself.

Between sets, I followed him outside, where he’d already had collected a few humans. From the way he touched their hands, brushed his fingers over bare skin, whispered in their ears, he’d marked them and already exerted his influence.

When he saw me, he smiled. A real smile, the kind he flashed on stage when his racing violin overwhelmed the melody. He asked if I was enjoying myself, and I don’t know why, but I said he was better than the rest of the band.

He actually blushed and looked at his shoes. **“Showing off, was I?”**

**“Just a little.”**

He brushed aside his hair, biting his lip. **“Don’t tell them that. I’m the new guy.”** He stuck out his hand. **“Eduardo, but everyone calls me E.”**

I assumed when I took his hand that he’d feed a little, try to ensnare me with his power, but he didn’t. Just shook, his grip strong.
The frontman stuck his head out the door and shouted for E to get ready. He shrugged.

“Duty calls.” He’d paused on the threshold and looked back. “Hey, we’re having a party after this. Would you come?”

“Maybe.”

He propped against the door jam, even as the frontman howled for him. “How do I convince you?”

“Play something for me.”

“I’ll need your name, then.”

“J.”

He’d tilted his head. “The letter or the name?”

“The letter.”

“What are the odds. See, you’re destined to come tonight.” He winked then slipped inside.

Later, when he was sick in withdraw, he claimed he always knew who I was and had fooled me. The great Jack Lunatic, tricked over a love song.

I don’t know, but when he left, I was shaking. I should have knifed him in the alley, burned his body in the dumpster. That’s what any other Hunter would have done. I’d flirted with him instead. Purposefully. To see him smile.

I started to love him in those moments. I knew I couldn’t kill him when I saw him at the afterparty, bright with the lives he’d stolen, feeding on a girl when I walked in. To a human, it merely looked like foreplay as she straddled his lap on the couch, kissing him, his
hands beneath her slip of a shirt. I could smell the taking, the air heavy with energy, thick
and sweet as honey.

Erhent always says I saved him, but really, he rescued me. The bright-eyed boy
playing with his food was not the same one who held an instrument. Not the same one who
shook my hand.

In that moment I felt so tired. The idea of drawing my sword seemed too much. I
think I wanted to save him because I couldn’t keep taking, either.

Erhent still can’t understand that I loved him in that moment, but I’d seen another
side of him and knew he could be more. That other side of him had also seen me for
something other than what I was, a killer with a death list nearly as long as Erhent’s. The
wilders here—they see Erhent as a taker of lives, but I want you to know the name applies
just as thoroughly to me.

When I drew my sword, there was sadness in his eyes. That’s why I believe I’d
successfully fooled him. Erhent doesn’t remember now. It’s a blur, he says.

At that time in the United States, most Hunters traveled by semi-truck. Soulkind can’t
feed through metal, so the trailers had a cage rigged in the back in case we needed to take a
soulkind alive or—or interrogate one. I had no idea what I was doing when I locked him in
the cage, only that I wanted to see the musician again. I’d snarled at the stories of “good”
soulkind with the rest of the Hunters, but now I desperately wanted those stories to be true.

Erhent spent a year in that trailer. That part of the story is his to tell, if he wishes.
CHAPTER 13.

The crisp cut and splinter of the axe head separating wood guided Ace into a rhythm and chipped away the weirdness of the past two weeks. To earn a few hundred before she joined the Park Protectors, she’d worked as a bouncer in Cody dive bar. Each night, a mix of winter tourists, off duty MPs or National Guard, and protestors packed the dingy space, giving the owner her best winter profits to date—a good thing for Ace.

Tensions had burned like a fuse, though. The anti-protestors glowered at her, assuming her position by the color of her skin. The white hippie-dudes chatted her up, saying this was their night to get wasted before they went to be arrested in Yellowstone. Usually, Ace hated tourists, but in this crowd, they were by far the easiest to deal with. It’d been shitty, but it was over now. At least she’d met Beth, Deshawn, and Phelix through the bar.

They’d been dumpster diving behind the bar for supplies. She thumbed rides with them the next day, chattering in the back of a pick-up about previous protests. Phelix, the oldest, had even participated in Occupy Wallstreet. Ace asked where they’d stayed, explaining her mom had joined at sixteen. The conversations ranged from Black Lives Matter to Monsanto boycotts to Mary L’Engle’s murder. Phelix told the best stories since they’d been traveling from protest site to protest site, homeless for thirty odd years. They’d made a life out of it.

After a three hour drive to the protest site, the anarchists invited Ace to camp with them. Maybe Ace could learn from these folks how to make this type of activism more than a few years spent fleeing adulthood. She felt on the edge of a calling but couldn’t see the shape
of it. All she knew was that settling for an apartment, a desk job, scrabbling for less hours and more vacation days—she refused.

She leaned the axe against the splitting stump and stripped off her sweatshirt, the Wyoming winter biting at her sweaty spots. The hoodie steamed as she draped it over the wood stack. The anarchists usually worked gate security at these types of places—directing folks where to park and camp, keeping an eye on who came and went—so Ace joined them and also signed up for volunteer EMT courses. A direct action had been announced for tomorrow morning at the north gate on the other end of the valley. Her arrest record was spotty, especially after a lock-down in Badger-Two Medicine, but she’d decided to go when Beth and Deshawn volunteered.

The vibes here were pretty good, considering the mix of ultra-rich in glam RVs camping beside dirtbags in tarps that security kept yelling to get winterized, but the view—the valley pristine with snow, the foothills of the mountains shadowing bison herds, the river parting all of it like a vein. This place pulled at her heart to protect it. Yeah, it was fucked that it’d been stolen from the Shoshone, Crow, Blackfeet, and Bannock people and now was locked behind ticket gates with prices her mother couldn’t have afforded even if they had a way to reach Wyoming, but the fact that companies like AquaCore had finally wormed their way into drilling here made her rage.

While in Cody, she’d gone to an AquaCore press conference after their talking suit pardoned the latest group of protestors as if he were some corporate pope. He started with the usual bullshit while the police released the protestors in a steady trickle, creating the perfect photo op for AquaCore. Of course, CNN and Fox showed up to hear this guy speak but god forbid they actually cover a protest.
He spread his large hands. “While AquaCore respects the right of these people to protest, I’d like to remind the public that my company is helping the United States gain energy independence. The USA is behind so many countries in this regard, and to maintain our status in the world politick, we must develop all forms of energy until we gain independence, then scale back to focus on renewable resources.”

He straightened that ugly teal tie, the same color as the AquaCore logo. “Thanks to the revenue from our Montana sites and our facility in New Jersey, we are able to invest in environmental causes such as a wildlife refuge in South Africa’s Kalahari Desert.”

Ace strode closer, brushing between the journalists. This guy had been there when she locked down in Badger-Two Medicine. The cameras ate him up because of his movie-star pretty face and because he engaged with the protestors like a patronizing uncle. He always had a response, even when a protester was spitting mad.

“While we will not press charges as long as our equipment is unharmed, we support the police and National Parks Service in encouraging these protestors to go home and voice their concerns through other means. The Yellowstone ecosystem is fragile. My employees are trained to limit environmental damage while the protestors are not. Already, the rangers have reported wildlife disturbances, including increased bear attacks. My staff have planned a decade’s worth of extensive rehabilitation, so Lamar Valley will be more pristine than when we left it.”

Ace cupped her hands around her mouth. “Wrong word, dipshit!”

Reporters swiveled the cameras toward her, the lenses like black holes, sucking in her face.

The man, Noah if she remembered, motioned to her. “Enlighten me.”
Ace planted her feet and crossed her arms as he approached her. God, he looked tall in the news reporters, but he had to be six-eight or six-ten, a over foot taller than her. Looking up was an understatement. His black suit reflected his whiteness, but the teal tie kept fighting for her attention.

“Pristine,” she said, “means in perfect condition, unchanged by people, in a natural state. Correct me if I’m wrong, but pristine doesn’t describe pumping the ground water with toxins or burning off natural gas so acid rain decimates the valley later. And don’t get me started on the earthquakes.”

His racist uncle smile settled into place. “While it’s a common misconception about hydraulic—”

“I wasn’t finished.” She matched his smile, pleasantry for pleasantry. “You might mean the word tamed—not wild, trained to obey, not exciting or interesting. That’s what AquaCore leaves behind.”

He clasped his hands. “Well, isn’t that how civilization has grown, by domestication?” He kept bullshitting, but Ace got lost in his eyes, like staring over the side of a boat. The irises were the same ice-chip blue as his hair, which he wore long so it brushed his shoulders, a few shed strands creating silver veins on his black suit.

Her chest tightened and sweat dampened her layers. She wanted to unzip her jacket but she feared any sign of weakness would cause him to strike. She’d only felt like this once, when she’d watched a cougar pace behind zoo bars for an hour. His demeanor made her think even the reporters and cameras wouldn’t be enough to stop him from hurting her if he chose. He was something else. Something very untame.

He smiled. “You see it now, don’t you?”
CHAPTER 14.

For the past two days, Erhent had sensed his own kind in the Park Protectors’ camp. Not strong enough to track the Soul-Eaters—more like a familiar scent on the wind, gone before he could breathe deep.

Each evening, Erhent and Gwen padded through the Park Protectors’ different campsites, gathering information for Jesse and Sarah. What a change had overcome Gwen after three weeks. Erhent witnessed her awaken like a sapling in the spring thaw. Her body and mind quickened, even through the exhaustive haze caused by Mercury’s training.

Best of all, she started to laugh again. Not just a societal reflex to chase away silence, but true enjoyment. He tried to make her laugh often.

The only time the Gwen from the bridge—the girl caught between, the cornered girl—returned was after nightmares. She’d kick and scrabble from the blankets as if they were strangling her. The first time, he’d woken her by touching her shoulder and calling her name. She’d jolted awake and shrank from him. Her eyes had grown wide, and a sick-sweet fear scent wicked off her.

While Jack watched from their blankets, Erhent had retreated to the other side of the yurt and clasped his hands behind him. “Would you like me to leave?”

She’d pressed her fists to her eyes, rubbing, then took a shuddering breath. “No. Just—no.” She had curled up with her back to him, though he could sense through her tension that she didn’t fall asleep again until nearly dawn. On those nights, he longed to hold her as he had on the diredragon flight. To promise nothing would hurt her because so little could hurt him. The same promises Jack had made decades ago, when his nightmares had
kept him sleepless for days. These feelings had flared after their first starwalk with Jesse and Sarah and after attempting to strike, as if the tether were winding them tighter. Even though he felt it, Gwen seemed unready to accept the closeness.

But that fearful girl wasn’t the Gwen walking, nearly prancing, beside him tonight. They tossed an apple back and forth, trying to catch the other off guard. Usually, that was Gwen.

Jesse and Sarah had brought them on their weekend trip to the Park Protectors. They regularly joined the Protectors so they could understand what the people needed and how to aid from the stars—their duty as a Starcatcher under Kurultai order and the reason Druid Peak camp existed, even if Mercury helped as little as possible.

For the past three weeks, the Protectors had focused on blocking pump pad construction while continuing to protest the wells and truck traffic. For a few months, bodies blockading the only road cleared of snow had slowed progress, but mass arrests, more federal troops, and an order by the Wyoming governor to clear the other park roads regardless of cost had offered more routes to AquaCore. The protest camp’s current location blocked further wells and had been chosen by AquaCore as an ideal location for a man camp. The wilders living in camp, passing as humankind, said some sort of clash was expected. Sarah and Jesse had seen the Dark Stars casting, though the patterns and symbols were unfamiliar—another promise of coming violence.

The grass and snow had been trampled into mud, but the Park Protectors kept the area clean—a challenge since five thousand Protectors supposedly lived in the park, even with two feet of snow. People slept crammed into RVs and all-weather tents clustered around bonfires. The latest rumor said wood was running low. Retired and fired National Park
Rangers were in charge of gathering deadwood while Alt Park Rangers collected from ranchers around Yellowstone. Erhent had told Jack about the shortage last night, the only time Jack could visit the camp that weekend since Mercury had assigned him a long patrol, and he’d promised to pass the word to the Tree Shepherds with oversized herds.

Erhent smiled at the thought of last night. Gwen had been kind enough to go with Jesse into camp for a few hours, leaving the tent empty—

Gwen chucked the apple, and he barely caught it.

She swore. “I thought I had you.”

The past evenings, Erhent took Gwen on a walk around camp for two reasons. He lectured her on different aspects of the wilder culture, and it made him feel safer to walk with her. He’d warned Jesse and Sarah of what he sensed. Lone Soul-Eaters would be attracted to such a gathering for the easy prey—as he would have been, once. If a clan had taken an interest in the Park Protectors, then Mercury and the Kurultai would have known. Still, a lone Soul-Eater could cause plenty of harm, so he told Gwen to not travel alone, preferably with him.

Tonight as they walked the perimeter, they played spot the wilder, which Gwen had started to get the knack for.

She nodded at a lithe woman brushing down a horse by a makeshift stable. She wore long hair in heavy braids while her winter gear covered most of her skin. Dark makeup caked her face.

“Wilder.”

“Good.” He lobbed the apple to Gwen. “Do you remember her kind?”

“Treekind?”
“More.”

She pitched the apple, but he caught it while looking at the walnutkind. “I can’t smell like you and Jack.”

“No excuse.”

She huffed and meandered toward the corral, her hands in her pockets. Erhent waited in the shadow of an RV as Gwen made small talk. Treekind weren’t fond of Soul-Eaters. Well, no wilder was. He hoped she wouldn’t sense him. For a few days, he wanted Gwen to forget how despised he was.

After giving the horse a few pats, Gwen returned. “Smelled sweet and bitter. Walnutkind, maybe?”

He nudged her. “Very good.”

Gwen took the apple and bit into it, speaking through her mouthful. “Not like that would work in the woods.”

Since they’d been walking the perimeter daily for three nights, the Protectors along their path had grown to recognize them, offering a hello or a raised hand. They focused on Gwen, not him. Even if the humans had no idea of what he was, his face sparked something primal. Each night, a male (white, bearded, wearing flannel that reeked of city fumes) would stop them, talking to Gwen, the male’s gaze skittering between him and her as if trying to place what Erhent was. A protective bearing would tense the male’s shoulders, straighten the spine, a question so clearly in the eyes—what are you doing with him? If Gwen sensed these white male’s attitudes, she acted no differently, remaining her part-shy, part-excited self.

Tonight, only the young boy of a newer Mexican-American family greeted them. He ran from their army tent and hugged Erhent around the legs before he could even say hello.
“Tío, vi un oso! ¡Papá no me cree, pero sí lo vi!”

Erhent crouched, a hand on his shoulder. “¿Lo hiciste?”

The father, Javier, chased him outside. “Ángel, no puedes llamar a todos el tío. Ni abrazarlos.” He pulled away the boy and hefted him. “Sorry, my son is already turning into a hippie after a week.”

“No pasa nada.”

The boy wiggled in his father’s arms. “I did see a bear!”

“Wow, Ángel,” Gwen said. “You’ve seen more than me. Maybe you’ll see a wolf next.”

The father shook his head. “If only it were possible.” He faced the camp and patted his son’s back. “Sometimes I think we are already much too late.”

Erhent followed his gaze to the false moon of floodlights marking where clearcutting had already destroyed swathes of forest. A thin row of trees separated the machines and camp. “It still means something that you’re here.” He nodded at Ángel. “He’ll remember.”

“Perhaps.” The man took a deep breath. “Enjoy the rest of your walk. Buenas noches.”

Ángel waved and repeated that he had, in fact, seen a bear. Erhent hoped it was only a little boy’s exaggeration.

Gwen returned the wave. “Adiós, Ángel. Hasta mañana.”

They continued their walk and scaled a small rise, the last stop. Their campsite was on the western slope farthest from the machinery. Jesse and Sarah had chosen the spot so they’d have an elevated area for stargazing and because the diesel fumes gave them headaches. For the same reason, many wilders had pitched their tents at this end. Wilders
always found each other, and they’d formed a little enclave, even allowing him under the auspice of Sarah and Jesse.

They climbed the hill to join Jesse, Sarah, and their guard that looked human enough to pass—Kay, a kitsune from Japan and Ro, a lemurkind from Madagascar. Smog the two-tailed dragon from Texas and Sk the mosskind from Iceland had remained at the Druid Peak camp.

Tonight, clouds obscured the rising constellations, but the thumbnail moon peeked through shadowbox clouds. Even though Erhent and Gwen continued to fail spectacularly at striking, Sarah and Jesse educated them on the book knowledge and practical sides of Starcatching.

Jesse and Sarah sat on a deer hide while Kay and Ro aligned with their directions, east and west. Erhent crouched outside the circle while Gwen stood next to him.

Jesse scented the air, then muttered “fuck it” and tore off her knit cap, her lupine ears popping upright. “All right, Starcatcher. You’ve been in this camp as long as we have—what should we cast tonight?”

Erhent opened his mouth, but Jesse flicked her tail, silencing him. This moment belonged to Gwen. As his anchor, she’d decide what he’d cast and if they disagreed, he traditionally bowed to her ideas. While the starwalker might hold the power, the anchor chose what should be cast, how the stars should be caught.

Gwen sighed and tilted her face skyward. “Practically, firewood is the big issue, but I’m not sure how a Starcatcher would help with that. Um, Erhent and I noticed a lot of tension with the new construction and all. Maybe a feeling of hopelessness?”
She glanced at him and he nodded. “We were just talking with one of the new arrivals, and Javier says it all feels too late. So if he feels that way, I’m sure others do.”

Sarah rolled her neck so her horns dipped. “Very good, Gwen. What would you recommend we cast?”

She shifted her weight, and Erhent leaned closer, his shoulder pressing against her leg. “I mean, I don’t know what you would cast, but for a general astrology casting, maybe use Scorpio? The sun’s in Scorpio for another hour, and the main characteristics of Scorpio are”—she her eyes squeezed shut and her fingers twitched as if mentally counting through a list—“passion, idealism, intensity. Element is water and ruling planet is Pluto. The moon’s in Libra so this can be positive. Beautiful things, easy going, charming. For our purposes, maybe focus on a heightened sense of place, environment, and purpose?”

“Right,” Jesse said. “But that’s an interpretation of the stars—a reading. What should we cast?”

“I-I don’t know.”

“What’s your gut say?” Sarah asked.

Gwen pushed back her knit cap, staring at the night sky. “Use stars from Scorpio and some supporting stars from Libra, which is close by, and cast the Scorpio symbol? Since Jesse is connected to the wolves, maybe have them howl or something? Show there’s still a little hope, something worth protecting?”

Sarah tilted her head so the tip of her horn brushed Jesse’s ear. “Sounds good to me.” She took Jesse’s hand and her body slumped as she went into the stars. Jesse lowered her onto the hide and cradled her.
Erhent straightened, his elbow brushing Gwen in approval. She rarely acknowledged these gestures, but she didn’t shrink from him anymore. He’d asked Jack if he should stop, but Jack said no—the language of skin was part of being a wilder. Gwen would need to learn it.

Jesse opened one eye. “Get some sleep, you two. We’re up early for the direct action, remember.”

They said goodnight, and Erhent walked beside Gwen as she struggled on the slick, compacted snow.

Gwen extended her arms as one foot slipped. “Do you want to try striking tonight?”

He sighed, too loudly. They should. Supposedly, more practice would breed familiarity, but the idea of seeing those faces, failing again to save Gwen—it made his bones ache. “Tomorrow.”
CHAPTER 15.

The protest site was two miles from camp—just long enough that the protest organizers decided to ferry people rather than waste energy walking in the freezing temperatures. The Park Protectors didn’t own enough trucks or snowmobiles to comfortably take everyone, but people got creative. Erhent and Gwen rode in a sled behind a snowmobile carrying four people. Jesse and Sarah were observing from afar with binoculars since chancing arrest seemed too great a risk. Only their West Guard joined the protestors since Kay looked human enough and had the papers to pass.

After fifteen minutes, they reached the work location at the far end of the valley—stripped and levelled for a drill pad, the area just a brown scab stark against the snow. On either side, the valley overshadowed the protest. Bison herds dotted the glistening white, and a red fox padded over the Yellowstone River, just a spark against the ice. In the natural silence, the machinery’s idling snarls and gunshot backfires amplified until it sounded as if the Protectors faced a battalion rather than a handful of bulldozers.

Already, a line of protestors chanted: “Pollution and exploitation will not be solved by corporations!”

Park Protectors formed a body blockade across the one road through Lamar Valley, facing teal AquaCore trucks hauling fracking equipment into the area. Behind the protestors and to the left, a dirt road led to a pump pad construction site, the ground a ragged, dark patch against the snow. Police in black riot gear challenged the line, their faces hidden behind visors and winter mufflers—forty or fifty, with sirens signaling more arrivals. Identical armor turned them into an anonymous herd.
Gwen and Erhent joined a circle of protestors around the organizers, an Alt Park Ranger and an Earth Crew youth leader, probably Gwen’s age.

The teenager explained the goal of the protest: “First, we’re gonna form a line to temporarily halt the construction as a direct action on a public road. A couple of us organizers are gonna lead chants to provide a voice for the people.”

The Alt Park Ranger motioned to six banners already positioned on the road and to either side. “The protest will end with six indigenous and religious organizations leading a prayer over the Valley as the first construction begins. Please be respectful of each groups’ prayers and do not film the proceedings. Arrests are expected, so if you are not able to be arrested, please remain behind that flag.” He pointed to a red windsock placed well behind the linked bodies blocking the road.

The teenager raised a fist. “Go in peace and prayer.”

Erhent placed a hand on Gwen’s shoulder and squeezed. Her pulse quickened as they joined the protestors swelling the initial line. Erhent kept his hand on her shoulder and navigated them toward the rear. More protestors came, spreading the line across the pavement and into the snow.

The Earth Crew teenager jogged along the line, yelling, “Link arms good an’ tight!”

Gwen linked up with Erhent and a short, blue-haired girl on her right. Around her, young folks outfitted in REI gear stood beside elders in patched Carhart. Clean cut RV families joined up with off-the-grid punks who stood with battered cowboys.

Another organizer with a tattered Mni Wiconi bandana pinned to her jacket began a call and response.

“They say get back, we say fight back! Got it? Get back!”
“Fight back!”

“Get back!”

Gwen joined in, though heat flushed her face. She wasn’t the yelling type, afraid her voice would sound silly or that she’d screw up the timing.

“Fight back!”

Over the crowd, the police helmets glinted in the sun. Tangling with cops had been her nightmare in New Jersey as they looked for any excuse to ship off a homeless kid, but something told her a wulver could tear through that shield wall without chipping a claw, and she could now walk past them without her legs trembling. Even if she only shouted, her moms would be proud of her for facing the corporation that wanted to frack her home. Her moms had told her stories of the climate marches and BLM protests. She’d gone to pride parades with them, but they hadn’t pushed their activism. This moment felt different. Standing here, she felt connected to their memory, even if she now lived so far away with creatures they had never imagined.

“They say go away, we say no way! Go away!”

“No way!”

“Go away!”

“No way!”

Her voice strained. Erhent shouted with her. Body heat from the hundreds of protestors created a warm bubble, and the tension of Erhent’s arm linked through hers promised that if something bad happened, they wouldn’t be torn apart.

The police advanced slowly, their plastic shields scratched and muddy. Erhent murmured for Gwen to back up.
“A bit longer?” she asked. She might not have claws like Jack or all-powerful hands like Erhent, but she could stand here and shout. Even if it felt totally useless. The police would push them back, videos would go viral, and the pump pad would go in, anyway. Her shouting didn’t feel like much right now, but it was all she could give.

“When they say shut up, we say rise up! C’mon, now! Shut up!”

“Rise up!”

“Shut up!”

A helicopter buzzed the road, and some of the protestors held their fists high.

“Rise up!”

The police line stood shield-to-face with the protestors. One of the organizers must have motioned a retreat, because the interlocked groups began to shift, one syncopated step at a time. The chant changed.

“We are the rising of the moon, we are the shifting of the ground, we are the seed that takes root, when we bring the fortress down!”

The police line stopped, but the protestors continued to withdrawal for a few yards, forming a gap. The frontline parted in six places. Near Gwen, two indigenous women dressed in ceremonial bright colors approached the police and knelt in the snow, praying and smudging with sage bundles. Along the left and right, more people stepped before the officers: several Franciscan Sisters, a Catholic priest, representatives from the Tohono O’odham tribe, four Pagans, and a Buddhist priest. Each carried religious symbols they placed at the feet of the police.

“No more debate! Action, not fate! Frontlines not bottomlines! Community in trying times!”
The police approached again, nearing the praying women in front of Gwen, but a younger indigenous woman placed herself as a shield between the women and the police.

Gwen felt a tug deep inside, like when Erhent had used the tether, as if something pulled at her blood, at her being, hard enough she tipped forward. Erhent steadied her, and she squeezed his hand and pointed at the young woman. He already watched her. She seemed familiar but separate, like seeing a person from a dream.

An officer shouted for her to move. She shook her head, and a grin split her face. Along the line, others had stepped forward to shield the different praying factions. Gwen wished she could be that brave.

From behind the first line of officers, another policeman raised a shotgun with an orange pump. He fired, and the young woman staggered. A rubber bullet had hit her face, and blood fauceted from her nose.

The crowd fractured, some pressing forward, others retreating. The organizers shouted to keep arms linked.

Somehow, the young woman stayed on her feet. She spat blood. Two more protesters joined her, linking arms. They hollered at the police, and the young woman joined in, spraying blood from her lips.

The shield line parted and an officer with a mace cannister sprayed the trio. They held strong, but as they wiped their eyes on their shoulders and blinked away the chemicals, the riot police charged. They knocked them into the praying women and swallowed all of them.

Erhent dragged Gwen back as the protest line splintered, the riot police gaining more ground until another knot of people linked arms. Erhent wove through the crowd, shouldering open a path when they needed it. They retreated to where some of the indigenous
elders prayed beside a group of Buddhists. Five volunteer nurses backed in a truck and began to set up a first aid station.

Gwen finally released Erhent’s arm. “That girl—you saw her, right?”

Erhent nodded. “You felt something, too?”

“I felt something in the tether. Like when I dragged you down.”

“I’ve dreamt of her.” Erhent rubbed the side of his head. “At least, I feel as if I have.”

The police divided the next line of protestors, and the crowd retreated. The bulldozers rolled forward a few yards.

Erhent nudged her. “We should go.”

Gwen stood on her tiptoes, gripping Erhent’s shoulder for balance, and peered over the crowd. Police led the arrested protesters around the machinery toward a Yellowstone tour bus equipped with snow treads. “What about the girl?”

Erhent tugged her backward. “Neither of us want to draw attention right now. Besides, they usually won’t hold protestors for long.”
That night, Gwen found herself alone, at the edge of a protest camp at the edge of a vast wilderness, in a tiny, two-person tent that really one person could have enjoyed, hip-to-hip with an older guy she’d met three weeks ago, who others, including himself, called a killer. And she had a crush on him like a dumb girl. On top of all that, Jack was seriously in love with Erhent, and could probably smell how she felt since these damn wilders smelled everything. The only two people—er, folks—who cared about her, and she was on the wrong side of both of them.

Earlier that day, when Gwen and Erhent reported to Jesse and Sarah, they were skeptical about the young woman, and Sarah and Jesse okayed Gwen and Erhent to remain an extra day in hopes of finding the woman once the police released her.

Gwen squirmed in her sleeping bag, trying to wiggle the feeling into her toes. “Is there any other reason we could have noticed that woman?”

He settled on his back, one arm pillowing his head. He didn’t use a sleeping bag, and his weird body heat warmed the tent. “Any number of reasons.” His eyes glowed, his face floating in the darkness. “Could have been as simple as her being a certain kind of wilder that inspires such reactions as a defense mechanism. Could be a magic user of some sort. Could be that the stars have connected us for some reason.”

“Like our guard?” She couldn’t tell if she were imagining, but she would have sworn a flash of intuition had shown the girl with them, grinning, but not the “fuck you” grin she’d given the cops—a real smile.
“Usually a guard is formed when the Starcatcher has completed the majority of their training.”

“What about Jack, then?”

He folded his hands over his chest. “Jack and I haven’t parted since we met. These few days are the longest we’ve been separated.”

“Why do you think Mercury wouldn’t let him come if he’s part of our guard?” Over the past weeks, wilders had whispered the rumors to her, one young elf even suggesting he would rescue her if she wanted. If she’d been less of a coward, she’d have punched him. Most of the wilders only acted friendly when they wanted to tell her to disown Erhent. Their stories were never specific, just warnings: he’s been kicked out of camps before, he’s only safe around the jackalkind, only Jack can control him because the Soul-Eater’s a runt. Their warnings reminded her of the Erhent from Jack’s story—the one who killed people, not the musician or the Erhent stretched next to her.

Erhent rolled over and propped himself on his elbow. “He hopes I make a mistake when Jack isn’t here to vouch for me.”

She stared at the tent ceiling, avoiding his eyes. “That sucks.” Except that’s now what she wanted to say. She wanted to ask him to tell her everything. Sleeping so close to him, their breaths a mingled cloud, without the comfort of Sarah and Jesse a yard away, it freaked her out little—if she were honest. Then why did she feel all tingly when she this near to him? Hatred washed over her body like a fever. “So you all have been through a lot, huh?”

He sighed, turning onto his back again. “Not tonight, Gwen.”

She rolled over, pressing against the tent wall even though the cold material ate through her sleeping bag. “Then when? Jack was honest with me.”
“I’m not lying to you.”

“Then tell me something real. Like—like explain what I see in the dreamscape.”

He shook his head. “Why?”

“Because you just stand there every time. Why don’t you come help me in the dreamscape?”

He sighed. “What good would it do?”

“I don’t know. At least I wouldn’t feel like some piece of trash hauled off by whoever those people are.”

“They aren’t people.”

She sat up, hugging her knees in her sleeping bag. “You know what I mean.”

“What do you want me to do, Gwen? Save you from my ghosts? I don’t know how.”

“I want you to try.”

“You are in no real danger.”

She looked away. “Okay, I see.”

He straightened and reached for her. “I’m sorry, I didn’t—”

She flinched. “You know it still hurts, right? When they touch me? I mean, sure, I’m probably just imagining it. But I’m doing this for you, Erhent.”

“Maybe that’s why we’re failing.”

She wanted to jump to her feet, but she just hugged her legs tighter, digging her fingers into her shins. “Yeah, I’m sure it’s my fault because I’m the shithole human girl who doesn’t know anything. You should’ve left me in New Jersey.”

Erhent stared at his hands, picking at the fabric. Gwen waited, then wished she’d done the same, let the silence still her racing heart and actually think through her words.
Except the fact he had time to consider what he was about to say made it worse.

“I need you to be more, Gwen. You have to be more than this.”

She glanced aside as her eyes blurred. “I don’t know how.”

“Then I’m sorry.”

He unzipped the tent flap and crawled through.

She kicked off her sleeping bag and leaned out, but he’d disappeared.

She ground her knuckles into her thigh. “Shit. Nice fucking job, Gwen.”
Erhent crouched on the hill overlooking their tent. A need to have Jack at his side made him shudder. Jack had a way of reminding him he was no longer a predator. It was selfish of him to blame Gwen, after what she’d been through. If only she could understand they were partners—they needed each other. What did humankind call it? *Platonic* love. Pack love. Well, he’d demonstrated little love a few minutes ago. Jack was right—he was selfish. He’d been the Lowborn, the runt, for so long, and he hoped his partner would take the weight away, make him something new. Instead, he had to support Gwen, but blaming her for that realization—it was cruel.

A shadow fell across the moon-bright snow, and he jolted to his feet, sliding in the wetness. A woman stood behind him, silhouetted by the starlight. Like him, she wasn’t robed for winter but wore a dress, oddly short due to her height, well over six feet.

Most likely a young alpha or the mate of one.

Erhent resisted the urge to glance over his shoulder at their tent. He refused to give away Gwen. He drew himself up. No clan claimed him, let alone a chance Soul-Eater. He didn’t have to do what she said.

Her gaze raked over him, searching for a sign of who, of what, he was. “Your clan?”

“I’m a wanderer.”

She laughed. “The names you runaway runts come up. I’ve met enough of you at these places. Easy hunting and all you have to do is wash some dishes or serve in the kitchen before the humankind are falling all over you.”

Erhent hissed. “That’s not what I am.” How badly he wanted to hurl the truth, that he
belonged to a Kurultai camp, but unless the Soul-Eaters had grown bolder than anyone could imagine, it was better to play his role, a runt. She’d have her fun, feed, then leave. His clan had long ago forgotten him—no reward waited. Resisting her would only draw attention.

The woman approached. Lithe but broad shouldered—bigger than him. “Oh, it’s a mutual exchange of energies? There’s enough cracked out hippies here I’m sure you fooled someone with that line.” She touched his face, turned it to the moonlight. He wanted to jerk away, shove her, but he froze at the touch of an alpha, just as he always had.

“You’re a pretty one. I’m sure your clan was sad to lose you.”

Her hunger licked at him through her hand, hard enough he shuddered, his breath caught in the pain. His skin seared beneath her fingertips.

She tilted her head toward the moon. “Oh, you’ve been on your own for so long.” Her fingers dug into his jaw, her hunger melting his skin. He gasped.

Adrenaline shot through him. He wasn’t a runt. He didn’t have to submit to her hunger. He tore free and stumbled a few steps. “No.”

“No?” She grinned and drew her fingers over her lips, as if tasting him again.

He backed down the hill, carefully testing each step. If he fell, he might not survive her desire.

She followed. “I would have been nice.”

Another step, but the hill grew steeper. He’d have to turn and run. “There’s easier prey.”

“Like your girl?”

Heat flared through him, coalescing in his hands. He spit sparks in his own language, a warning. “She’s not mine—and she will never be one of yours.”
She sauntered past him, close enough to touch. “Are you sure?”

His hands burned so hot they hurt. He reached for her.

She whipped around and raised her hands. They locked grips, her hunger meeting his energy through their palms.

Except she had been trained to grapple like this, to fight for dominance and submission. No clan trained their runts.

Her desire extinguished the power in his hands and crackled up his arms, spreading over his chest. His throat hitched, trying to scream, but he had little energy and less desire. She pushed him to his knees.

Hundreds of times, he’d been fed on, so his body did as always, as it had been trained—he gave up, and her hunger swelled over him. It felt as if she were unspooling his guts and pulling them out of his hands.

After acting so selfishly, he deserved this.

She kicked him on his back and straddled his chest, easing off her craving. She traced a finger down the bridge of his nose while he panted through the pain and the weight of her.

“I was going to be nice.”

Her fingertip followed his throbbing lifevein, drawing enough energy to steal his breath again, sucking out his last yearning to fight.
CHAPTER 18.

The next morning, frost coated Gwen’s sleeping bag, and a heaviness settled in her chest when Erhent wasn’t beside her.

Their campfire was cold, and the mingled footsteps from the past few days gave no clue as to where he’d gone—at least to a kid like her. Erhent usually brought some small animal for her to practice skinning and cooking, but she’d royal screwed that up last night, so she searched for the nearest chuck tent.

She listened to the kitchen gossip over two bowls of congealed oatmeal. According to the volunteers prepping lunch, the police had released all those arrested at yesterday’s protest as requested by AquaCore. Camp rumors claimed the protestors had spent the night in cells with no heat and no blankets. One cook said she hoped it was just gossip and not true.

Gwen left the cafeteria tent, her stomach aching after the unfamiliar food. Maybe she should check for Erhent at their camp one last time. Then again, he could always find her. That had been one of his training games in those first days, teaching her how to disappear and then tracking her with disturbing ease. Regardless, the one thing she didn’t like about the past three weeks was being at his beck and call. Not this morning. She smiled. If she’d spent the night in jail, she’d want a hot drink first thing.

She meandered through the camps within the larger camp—White Wolf, Aspen Grove, MLK Jr., Silent Springs, Rosebud—stopping at the largest bonfires and usually sharing a mug of campfire coffee, brewed with the grounds right in the water.

At Rosebud’s central fire, she found the protestors. A group of them in bloody, wrinkled clothes huddled around the fire, talking with an indigenous elder and an Alt Park
Ranger. The girl stood in back, her arms crossed, staring at the fire. Her short black hair stuck at odd angles. A mask of bruising darkened her face, and her nose was crooked.

Gwen drained her paper cup. She hadn’t thought past finding the protestor. That same tether-tug in her gut pulled her toward the girl—more like young woman. She probably had five or six years on Gwen. God, she’d sound like a crazy kid if she tried to tell her about the wilders and Starcatchers. Erhent or Jack should take the lead on this type of thing.

The woman left the fire, and Gwen slipped from the crowd. “Excuse me?”

The woman glanced over her shoulder, then stopped. Her gaze made Gwen want to shrink away.

She crumpled and uncrumpled her paper cup. “Hi, um, I saw you get arrested yesterday.” She winced.

The woman looked her up and down.

“I just wanted to introduce myself.” She extended her hand. “Gwen.”

They shook. “Ace.”

“Ace? Really?”

She crossed her arms and settled into a wide stance. “Yeah.”

“It’s neat.” God, neat? She sounded like an idiot. “I just—I like it.”

The woman sighed. “I gotta get my face fixed up.” She turned, but Gwen stuttered a question.

“That do you believe in magic?”

Ace swung toward Gwen. “What?”

Gwen tore the cup into tiny pieces. “See, my friend and I were wondering. I’m all new to this—he could do a better job, but, there are these people, except their not—”
Ace raised her hands. “Jesus fucking Christ. You people don’t know where to get off.”

“What?”

She stepped into Gwen, snarling. “No, I do not do rituals, no, I will not make you a dreamcatcher, no, I will not swap vision question stories. God!” She whipped around and hurried deeper into camp.

Gwen’s heart raced, and her muscles had gone ridged. Well, Ace didn’t know about the wilders. Gwen wanted to shout after her, catch up and apologize, but she only watched as Ace stalked toward the first aid flag visible over the tents. Pro tip: do not say something that sounds exactly like a racist stereotype.

She shouldn’t have tried without Erhent. He’d know what to do. Except she’d come to rely on him for everything. Ate when he told her to, slept when he said, chopped firewood at his word. Even with the humankind, he usually took the lead. Sure, he was the “adult,” but she’d taken care of herself after the flood—just not in the wilderness.

What would Erhent have told Ace that Gwen didn’t already know? It came down to phrasing and charm. She was capable of that.

Ace disappeared among the tents and RVs, but Gwen followed the path to the first aid station. Ace stood in front of a mirror, dabbing peroxide on her cuts. Thankfully, the rest of the pavilion appeared mostly self-serve with boxes of bandages and peroxide.

She locked eyes with Gwen in the mirror. “Ah, shit, you are going to make me call camp security, aren’t you?”
Gwen dumped the scraps of her coffee cup in the trash and clasped her hands behind her. “I didn’t explain myself very well. My friend and I make magic—well, we are learning to make magic. It’s all from the stars.”

Ace poured more peroxide onto a cotton ball and wiped at her bloody nostrils, wincing. “I told you—no thanks.”

“Here me out, please.” Gwen shifted her weight from foot to foot. Perhaps she should have waited for Erhent. “I’m new to all this, too. All that folklore stuff—it’s real. Well, most of it at least. I know that sounds crazy but I’ve seen it. When my friend gets back, he can show you.”

Ace stopped cleaning her cuts, tilting her head. “Quiet.”

“Look, just give me a chance—”

“Shut up and listen!”

A murmur of noises swelled through the camp—shouts, a scream. Ace shoved past Gwen, stepping onto the footpath. Other protestors blocked the way, looking in the direction of the scream.

Somebody hollered a word that sounded like “bear,” but above the general camp noises, Gwen couldn’t tell.

Then a roar echoed.

The camp went silent.

“Grizzly bear!”

An answering roar sounded behind Gwen—much closer than the first. The screaming started and didn’t stop.
She and Ace turned toward the sound just as a hulking bear sprinted through a line of tents, snapping ropes and poles, gutting nylon. Blood and spit roped from its jaws. It stampeded people, bowled between cars, the shrieking alarms joining the panic.

Ace jerked Gwen by her shirt, and they sprinted, swerving out of the immediate crowd. People screamed and ran in every direction. More roars sounded, then guns, which weren’t even allowed in camp. A man in all camo crashed between them, separating them for a beat, until Ace gripped her wrist.

At the first woodpile they passed, Ace wrenched the axe from a stump, barely slowing.

“Keep going!” she shouted.

Gwen’s thoughts were a steady stream of holy fuck. It couldn’t be happening. No bears behaved this way.

Ace made a sharp turn toward a black SUV. She tried the door, and when it didn’t open, beat out the rear windshield with the axe. “Get in, get—”

A bear charged through a pavilion. Bone splinters stuck from its right leg but that didn’t stop it sprinting.

Ace screamed for Gwen to get in. She climbed onto the bumper and dove through the glass shards while Ace scrambled behind her.

Metal crunched, and brown fur filled the shattered window. The SUV lurched forward.

The grizzly stuck its head through the window, and Ace buried the axe in its face. It bellowed with such pain and rage that Gwen clamped her hands over her ears. Holy fuck, holy fuck—but what about Erhent?
The bear dragged its head from the window and wrenched the axe from Ace. It half-lumbered, half-staggered away.

Ace sagged against the seat. Blood splashed over her face and neck. Gwen vomited. Blood dripped from her face as she gasped and heaved. She’d cut herself on the glass.

“Holy shit,” Ace said.

Death screams, wails, the high pitch of children’s terror, filtered into the SUV. Gwen coughed and sat shoulder-to-shoulder with Ace. “We have to help them.”

“No shit. There are kids out there.”

Gwen peered through the window. Chunks of flesh were churned into the bloody snow. The bear had left bodies in its path. Protestors huddled behind or under RVs rushed out, stripping off clothes to staunch wounds, cradled the screaming.

Ace flicked open a pocket knife and climbed over the seats. “I’m going to try and start this thing. You need to get us another axe.”

Gwen leaned through the window. She turned her head both ways, listening. The car engine whirred but didn’t take. Ace cursed.

She opened the trunk and jumped to the blood-darkened ground. A severed arm stretched in the mud. Gwen tried not to look as she crept past, scanning the tents for a wood pile. Almost everyone had an axe, usually kept in plain sight for the neighbors to borrow.

A weird quiet settled over that section of the camp, a terrified quiet. She wished for more noise to hide her squelching footsteps. A man hissed at her from beneath a bear-smashed pick-up, motioning to join him. She waved him off and inched around the corner of an RV. A half-split load of wood leaned against the camper. Two axes waited, buried in a
stump beside a still-steaming coffee mug. She pulled at the biggest axe, but someone stronger than her had buried it in the wood.

A bear chuffed. She froze as the grizzly wounded by Ace staggered around the RV. The axe handle stuck from the skull like a strange horn.

Gwen held still as the bear sniffed, then locked eyes on her. It swayed, twenty yards away. Her heart pounded until it hurt. She adjusted her sweaty grip and envisioned wrenching the axe from the stump, turning, dropping, and wiggling under the RV. She could do it. The bear was wounded. It couldn’t move that fast—

It charged, and she jerked the axe free, swung around, and dove for the camper.

The bear walloped the RV, lifting it off the wheels. Gwen kept squirming and rolled from under the it as the grizzly crashed into the side again. Windows broke, raining glass. She ran just as a third strike tipped the RV onto its side.

“Ace!”

Except she couldn’t remember in the carnage of fallen tents where the SUV had been parked. “Ace!”

The ground thudded, and she risked a glance. Even with the axe in its skull, the bear could run.

She veered right and spun out of the way as the SUV barreled past. Ace crashed into the bear head-on, the front of the SUV crumpling and the bear half-sliding onto the hood. It struggled to raise its head, mewling.

“Kill it, kill it!” Ace screamed.
Gwen used the car hood like a chopping block and buried her axe again and again into the bear’s neck until she felt the blade chunk through bone. She left it stuck in the fur. Hot blood turned her hands slippery.

Ace couldn’t open the front door, so she crawled out the back. She gripped Gwen by the shoulders and shook her. “You hurt?”

Gwen said no and wiped her hands on her pants. The blood just smeared everywhere. Hot and cold waves washed over her.

Ace jerked both axes from the bear. It twitched, but it had stopped breathing.

She pressed the least bloody axe into Gwen’s hands. “We need to find another car.”

Gwen just stared at the red-stained blade. What about Erhent?

“Hey.” Ace slapped her on the shoulder. “Stay with me.” She loped down a path, stepping on collapsed tents. Gwen ordered her feet to move and finally tripped forward. She had to find Erhent.

They weren’t the only ones who’d taken to vehicles for shelter. They joined a group of eight others in a Ford outfitted for mudding—tall and with huge tires. One of the guys in the back had a crossbow, and the others had makeshift spears from tent poles and a few axes. They cleared the camp one section at a time, crisscrossing the roads or following cries for help. They passed what looked like the remains of dead bears—except hardly anything was left, just a few tufts of fur, bone shards, and an outline in the snow.

The ride turn hazy for Gwen. Her brain shut down except for the in-out of her breath. She stood beside Ace, gripping tight to the side of the truck and her axe, but she scanned the footpaths and bodies for Erhent. Her eyes blurred at the thought of finding him in the bloody mud.
Please, please.

Among the panicked protestors, Gwen noticed odd figures with swords or hand-hewn longbows—wilders. In the fear, only she seemed to see past their human disguises of puffy coats and jeans. They were always bloody, too. Each time, she hoped one was Erhent, but none wore his signature black coat.

When the truck rounded two tipped over RVs, a figure stood in the path. She almost didn’t recognize him. He’d lost his coat, and his shirt was a shredded, bloody mess. She only glimpsed him as he trotted behind a still-standing army tent.

Gwen screamed his name as she swung off the truck.

Ace snatched at her coat. “Hey! What the hell are you doing?”

She slipped in the churned snow but scrambled to her feet, throwing herself around the tent. “Erhent!”

He stopped. Something felt off balance about him. His brown skin shone, as if slick with sweat. He kept flexing his fingers as if he expected claws. Across his back, his skin had reddened and swelled like burn marks. Without looking at her, he pointed toward the truck, which honked out of sight behind the pavilion. “Get back.”

She stepped closer. “Are you—”

Screams and another roar sounded to her left, deeper in the camp. Erhent padded toward the noise.

Gwen ran after him. “What are you doing?”

He turned on her, snarling. “Get back!”

Ace dashed around the army tent, panting. “Gwen! Get the fuck—”
A bear punched through the tent, trampling it and knocking Ace aside. She rolled to her feet as the bear swung its head toward her and roared.

Erhent crouched and imitated the roar, the sound unnatural coming from his narrow. The grizzly looked between the two, then focused on Erhent, drooling. Steam wafted off its blood-spiked fur. It charged.

Erhent rose on the balls of his feet, his hands outstretched as if to tackle the bear.

Arms wrapped around Gwen. Ace jerked her backward as Gwen screamed for him to run.

The bear clawed at Erhent, but he ducked the paw and dove underneath the bear’s chest. He gripped the thick fur.

As if shot through the heart, the bear rolled forward, plowing snow and mud. It crashed into a pop-up tent, flattening it.

The humped shoulders began to sink. At first, Gwen thought the grizzly was melting a hole in the snow, until the head lolled, the fur blowing off like dust. In a few seconds, only bones remained, creamy against the snow. Erhent struggled to stand, crunching bones under his boots. He brushed bear fur off his shirt and pants.

Ace’s arms went slack around Gwen. “Holy shit.”

Erhent swayed. “Are you all right?”

Gwen nodded. “Are you hurt?” She took a step toward him, but he raised his hand.

“Stop. I—I need to cool down.”

Three gunshots sounded, and Gwen flinched, her arms snapping up to cover her head. Erhent took a stumbling step toward the noise.
A cheer followed the final echoes. He tipped his head as if scenting the wind. “That was the last bear—I think.”

More red welts raised the skin along his neck, with deep indents in his jaw like he’d lost chunks of flesh.

Gwen eased closer as if approaching a skittish animal. “Then let’s get back to camp and get you checked out.”

He trembled. “Gwen, I-I can’t. I shouldn’t have done that.” His face twisted, and he looked around, his gaze tripping over the bodies. “It was my kind that did this. I’m sure—I’m sure.” He pointed to the bone and fur leftovers. “They were killing. I couldn’t just stand there.” His head dipped, and he hugged himself. “We’re supposed to help them!”

Gwen took another step, stretching out her hand. “You’re all right now.”

He laughed, his shoulders shaking. “No, I’m not.”

A little closer and she’d be able to touch him. “Erhent, we need to go back to camp.”

She stood in the pile of fur, bones, teeth that had been a raging bear just a minute ago.

His head bobbed up. “He’ll kill me! Don’t you understand?” He stabbed a finger at the bones. “This is his chance to kill me!”

Ace joined Gwen, still holding the bloody axe. “Nobody is going to kill you. You’re a hero. Got it?”

Erhent’s overly bright eyes flicked between Ace and Gwen. His lips curled and he glared at Ace. “You think he’s going to listen to another human?” A spasm wracked him hard enough he slipped to his knees. He hid his face in his hands. On his palms, the skin appeared charred, and a glow pulsed beneath the brittle skin, outlining the bones.

“Is he high?” Ace asked. “If he needs help, the first aid tents will be full.”
Gwen crouched, her hand half-closing the distance between them. “I-I know where to take him. I need a car or a snowmobile.” Jack would know what to do. He had to.

“My friend’s truck is parked not far from here. You can use that.”

“Thanks.”

Erhent let out a long breath and collapsed. Gwen called his name and crawled to him.

“I’ll hurry,” Ace said, jogging off among the flattened tents.

She touched his shoulder but jerked back her hand. His skin burned so hot she had to use her coat sleeves to roll him over. His eyes fluttered, but he didn’t respond. His shirt had been shredded, and in addition to the burns, thin red marks covered his chest like newly healed wounds. No bleeding except for his nose. The blood on his shirt must belong to someone else. His brown skin had turned waxy gray along his arms, and dark circles ringed his eyes. His body radiated heat like a furnace, causing sweat to trickle down her face.

She called his name and touched his cheek. He curled into fetal position, then shivered, more of a convulsion.

She cradled Erhent, the sticky blood on her clothes and hands leaving streaks on his body. She whispered a steady stream as guilt settled over her shoulders. If she had searched for him earlier, maybe she could have helped him. She was his anchor but hadn’t even considered looking. Maybe Mercury was right; she wasn’t cut out for this life.

Erhent trembled in her arms, and she shucked off her layers, using them like blankets even as he sweat through them.

Ace drove up in rusted Dodge truck. Apparently the front door didn’t work because she swung through the open window. “I think your friend was right—they got the bears. Or
at least have driven them out of camp.” She dropped the tailgate. “It’ll be easier for you in
the back. I’ll drive slow.”

“You can’t come.”

She patted the tailgate. “I’ll pass him to you.”

Gwen eased Erhent into the snow and stood. “I mean it. You can’t come.”

“What, is it the secret magic people we are going to see? I already watched him do
whatever the fuck he does.” She slung Erhent over her shoulder, grunting. “Shit, he’s burning
up. Get in before I drop him.”

Gwen scrambled into the bed, and Ace set Erhent on the edge so he tipped into
Gwen’s arms. He remained limp and quiet.

Ace slammed the tailgate. “Just shout, I’ll have the window open.”

Gwen gave her the directions Erhent had drilled into her head, then she huddled over
him, trying to keep off the worst of the wind. His pulse beat erratically, and she whispered
for him to hold on.
CHAPTER 19.

Gwen wasn’t sure how long it took her to reach camp. The road went nowhere near Druid Peak, but Gwen planned to stop at the nearest point and run—about three miles with no trail. Thank god Ace insisted on coming. She didn’t want to leave Erhent alone that long.

She’d taken the most direct route through deep snow and the woods. Halfway, a deer trail made the going easier. As she neared the camp, bear prints marked the snow, and she put on an extra burst of speed.

Once she passed whatever wards or spells hid the wilders, shouting, cursing, growling, howling echoed through the woods. She staggered into chaos as wilders saddled other winged wilders, as weapons were handed out, as groups were assigned.

Mercury stood in the center, the hub of a wheel, calling orders. The moment she exited the trees, he turned his attention on her.

“You!” He limped toward her. His left arm appeared shorn at the shoulder, but he wore no bandage. “What the hell are you doing here?”

For some reason, the shock of his wound stole her voice. She pointed along her trail, finally spewing, “Erhent, back at the road.”

“What did he do?”

“He’s hurt!”

He bared his teeth. “Do you think he’s the only one?” He turned and limped toward a group of coyotekind, barking orders again.

“He needs help! Where’s Jack?”

Mercury snarled over his shoulder, “Not here!”
A group of wulvers intercepted Mercury, speaking in mangled growl-English. The
centaur stamped behind them, nearly prancing.

Gwen stood a few yards back. Why had she even tried? Mercury respected Erhent
more than her, which was saying something.

The crowd around him thickened—another set of centaurs, dryads, some foxkind, a
griffin. Blood dripped from the griffin’s beak, staining his chest. Brown fur stuck to his
claws.

Gwen clenched her fists. Without help, she couldn’t get Erhent to camp, let alone find
out what was wrong with him. She had to make Mercury listen. Ace was right—Erhent was a
fucking hero. She’d killed a grizzly bear today, so she’d make Mercury see her.

With teeth bared and shoulders hunched, just as Erhent and Jack had taught her, she
stormed the crowd, elbowing through snapping wulvers and stomping centaurs until she took
a fistful of Mercury’s cloak and jerked, forcing him to either fall or turn around. He faced
her, snarling. “What—”

“I will fucking follow you around all day! I’m a Starcatcher and my partner is sick!
He needs help! I chopped the head off a fucking grizzly bear today, so don’t think I won’t
keep at you!” She trembled with rage or fear; they felt the same at that moment.

Mercury locked her in his stormy gaze, then nodded at the centaur who galloped off
before Gwen could beg to go with him. Mercury stabbed a finger at her. “Go help Sarah and
Jesse. Now!”
Gwen had to step over a crystalizing bloody pool to enter the yurt. Three of the guard hunkered outside—Smog, Ro, and Sk. Ro nodded as Gwen entered. Jesse worked at the table while Sarah slumped in her chair, situated beneath the skylight, so her face tilted to the stars. Her eyes flickered as if dreaming. Jesse held her hand while tracing a star chart. Two wolves, one white and one black, hunched beside Jesse, leaning into her leg as if providing support. Candles circled the table, creating a pattern on the floor—a constellation, though Gwen didn’t recognize it.

Jesse motioned her to approach with a tail flick. “Kay, show Gwen the supplies, then hit the roof.”

Kay, dressed all in black but with his ghostly fox tails glowing, handed Gwen a shapeless leather bag. The contents clinked. “It’s labeled, in case we aren’t here to help.” He jumped into the rafters, popped open the skylight, and slipped outside, sprinkling snow on Sarah’s face. Jesse wiped it off. “Gwen, cigarette lit off the skinny candle. Leave it smoldering on a length of birch bark.”

Gwen knelt beside the candle at the formation’s peak. She sorted through the bag until she felt a square cigarette box. A leather folio held bark curls. Gwen puffed on the cigarette until the tip turned cherry-hot, then propped it on the twist of birch. “Done.”

Jesse’s tail lashed toward two tea candles. “Pinch them out—and I mean pinch.”

Gwen licked her fingers and snuffed the wicks. The smokes combined, turning the air around Jesse and Sarah hazy.

Jesse growled an expletive. She opened one eye and scanned the chart in front of her, then whispered into Sarah’s ear. She shook herself, her ears flapping. “It’s going to be a long night.”
For the first hour, Jesse barked questions to Gwen, her hackle-hair raised, her ears pinned, but into the second hour, she relaxed, even explaining some of their Starcatcher tools—such as the candles helping to ground her in place and channel the magic. Intermittently, she paused to whisper to Sarah or simply close her eyes and hold still.

Gwen desperately wanted to leave and check on Erhent, but each time she almost asked, Jesse would tense and start barking orders again.

After three hours, Jesse released a long sigh and slumped in her chair. The wolf by her side yawned and stretched before padding to the door, where the white wolf stood guard.

Jesse still held Sarah’s hand. She hadn’t moved yet. Jesse rubbed her eyes. “Just the clean up now. Releasing any pent-up energy, making sure the spells are unwound. You did good, kid.”

Gwen set the leather satchel on the table. “Glad to help.”

Jesse looked her over. “Wasn’t expecting you until tomorrow. You hurt?”

“Erhent is.” Her throat tightened. “That’s why I’m here. I didn’t know where else to take him.”

“The bears?”

“I think so—maybe.”

“You should go to him, then.” Her ears flattened. “Let me guess—Mercury split you up?”

Gwen nodded.

“Fuck him. Go to Erhent.”

Gwen hurried toward the door. The two wolves had curled up together, and she had to step over them to reach the threshold.
Camp had quieted in the past three hours. An edge still sharpened the air, as if sirens shrieked in the distance. To the wilders with their heightened senses, there probably was a warning signal still chiming.

The infirmary seemed made of living trees, their trunks arching and limbs interlocked. Ivy and other crawling plants filled the gaps, though the lack of leaves turned it skeletal. She ducked behind a mossy curtain sealing out the cold. A handful of wilders filled the low beds shaped from living trees, though inside the warm space, the leaves remained, creating arbors for the wounded. She scanned the beds from the doorway, but none held Erhent, so she approached a dryad—a woman with mossy hair, skin mostly made of gnarled bark, and branches growing from her shoulders like wings. The woman knelt at a bench formed from a wide root and ground herbs in a wooden hollow.

“Excuse me,” Gwen said. “I’m looking for Erhent. He should have been brought in a few hours ago.”

Without pausing from her grinding, she spit on Gwen’s boots.

Anger and a string of cussing burned through Gwen, but she didn’t have the energy to erupt. She backed through the mossy curtain and momentarily considered ripping it down. She just wanted to find Erhent and make sure he was alive.

She stalked to the center of camp. The metallic scent of blood and sharp funk of guts overwhelmed her. Wilders gut and skinned a grizzly near the bonfire. Blood melted the snow and turned the slush pink. A pantherkind pulled the heart from the innards bucket and ate it in a few gulps. He stared at her, wiping his bloody mouth on his hairy forearm.

Gwen stared back for a beat, then shifted, turning away. Her heart thudded as she looked over the camp. The wulvers gathered near the fire, and Mercury’s favorite, Sirk,
glared as she passed. She’d thought she’d been alone when it was only her and Erhent in the
tent, but she’d probably been safer at his side than now. The feeling of hostile looks crawled
over her skin as the centaur, three coyotekinds, and several ravens with bloody beaks
watched her. She kept her head high, shoulders down, pace even as she hurried through
camp. Mercury wouldn’t take Erhent far. He loved the spectacle of power too much.

With no idea where else to look, she checked their yurt. A wulver and a dragonkind
crouched by the door, and Gwen hesitated. If Mercury had posted guards, then she’d found
Erhent.

She took a deep breath and approached. They locked golden eyes onto her but didn’t
move as she opened the door and entered.

Her breath condensed in the cold structure, freezing from the past three days with no
fire. Final rays of light speared through the centered sunroof, illuminating Mercury who sat
facing the cold stove. A single fat candle flickered on the table, casting Mercury’s shadow.

His gaze fixed ahead. “Come in, Gwen.”

She shut the door and shivered. The yurt held a chill that the sun had chased off
outside. “Where’s Erhent?”

He motioned toward the stove with his cane. Something dark coated the wood, and a
droplet fell from the tip.

She crept forward and squinted, her eyes adjusting to the dimness. An outline came
into focus—Erhent propped against the cold stove, his hands chained over his hand to the
stove pipe. In the cold, condensation wicked off him like smoke.

She rushed forward. “Erhent—”

Mercury’s cane shot out, catching her in the gut. “Stay back.”
In the faint light, blood glistened around Erhent’s mouth, his nose, dripping down his neck and onto his torn shirt. Blood that hadn’t been there before.

She shoved aside the cane. “What did you do to him?”

Mercury dragged a chair around the table so it nestled close. “Sit down, Gwen.”

“What did you—”

His hand flicked with lizard-quickness. He gripped her wrist, his thumb digging into her pulse. He forced her into the chair.

“I ordered you to sit.”

Gwen perched on the edge, breathing hard. God, she shouldn’t have left Erhent. She knew Mercury would use this as an excuse to hurt him. With Jack gone, she was all Erhent had—and she’d let him down again.

Mercury still gripped her wrist, his thumbnail biting her skin. “Do you understand what Erhent did today?”

She ripped her hand away. “Yeah, I do. He protected me and everyone else in the protest camp from mad grizzlies.”

Mercury wiped clean the cane with the hem of his cloak. “Perhaps that is what your human eyes witnessed, but I need you to think beyond your limited experience. A mammal invaded the nest of another mammal that had entered its territory. Who deserves death?”

Gwen grit her teeth. “There is a difference between a human child and a grizzly bear.”

Mercury shifted, facing her. Candlelight flickered over his face, deepening his frown.

“Tell me how.”

“Anything I’ll say you’ll just disregard.”
“Perhaps we can agree on this.” He gripped her neck, his thumb on her pulse, leaning her toward Erhent. “Your partner is soulkind, a Soul-Eater. He feeds on other living things. Fair, many of us do, but while you may consume a rabbit, its remains still continue the cycle, feeding the maggots, feeding the soil, feeding you so you can spread pollen and stars know what else through the land. There’s a purpose to it all.” His fingers pressed into her throat hard enough to prime her flight-or-fight instinct, for adrenaline to ramp her pulse, which he would notice, of course.

“Sure, fine.”

“Then we agree. When your partner feeds, he doesn’t make a kill as part of the natural cycle. He breaks down the cells, the atoms, and absorbs them until nothing remains except maybe a pile of dust. He takes it all and leaves nothing to enrich the system, to be cycled. Worst of all, he uses that energy to see through what he just destroyed, to see the desires, the hopes, the instincts—what gives that creature meaning, purpose. Their soul. That’s what makes him powerful.”

Gwen swallowed, her throat hitching against his fingers. Mercury was wrong. What made Erhent powerful wasn’t whatever burned in his hands. He deeply desired to live—for her, for Jack—even though so many wanted him dead. He made every effort to make sure she didn’t fear him. He acted so carefully in hope that they wouldn’t be afraid.

Mercury released her, and she pushed off the chair. She knelt before Erhent. Restraints twisted his arms above his head so the cold stove bit into his shoulders and back, forming purple bruises.

“Oh, god, Erhent, I’m sorry.” She wanted to say more, but not with Mercury watching. Part of her brain screamed she was only sixteen, that she didn’t know what to do—
but she did. When someone was hurt, you helped. When bullies cornered someone, you did what you could. Besides, Jesse had given her one rule—don’t let go of your partner. She’d screwed it up and left him to Mercury’s mercy. Not again.

She placed a hand on the cold stove pipe, wiggling it. If she could disconnect it, at least Erhent would be free to move.

Mercury grunted as he stood, leaning heavily on his cane. “Careful, girl. The lives of those grizzlies are hot in him. He’ll go into withdrawal soon and want more life, more energy—not the dullness of trees.”

She bared her teeth like Jack. “The way Erhent talked about you wilders, it was supposed to be better, but you are just as fucking racist as everyone back in New Jersey.”

Mercury laughed, showing his sharp teeth. “What does that make you—that you disregard the lives of your fellow mammals so easily?”

She muttered a “fuck you” then gripped the stove pipe and pulled. The screws groaned.

She crawled onto the cold stove and kicked the pipe—once, twice. It fell apart, the pieces clattering. She swung down, placing herself between Mercury and Erhent’s slumped form. “Leave us alone.”

His gaze skipped over her, settling on Erhent. “Do you see those red marks? As if he were burned? Those are the marks of his kind, a painful feeding. One Soul-Eater sucking off another.”

She hunched her shoulders and pointed toward the door. “I said, get—”
He snatched her wrist again, but this time, he twisted her into a hold, wrenching her arm up and behind her back. He pulled, and she gasped, tipping forward onto her knees to relieve the pressure. Her face was almost buried in Erhent’s bare chest.

“Look at him, Gwen!” He twitched her arm, pain zig-zagging through her joints.

“Understand what he did today. He was vulnerable to attack, and from the amount of marks, he was left for dead by the Soul-Eater that fed on him. Look at his jaw. See how deep those prints go? See his neck, his chest? The only way he could have recovered was to feed and feed deeply. Was it a person? A bear meant to finish him off? Hopefully he overcame the Soul-Eater and did my job for me. But I doubt it. He’s a runt, an omega, one meant to take orders. Then he used his new energy to continue feeding and feeding until he made himself sick.”

He twisted her arm a fraction more. “Show some spirit, girl. Show me you are listening.”

She swallowed a whine. She wanted to shout, curse him out, say that his hate wouldn’t separate her from Erhent, but pain squeezed her chest and every breath pressed against her twisted arm.

She nodded.

“For now,” he said, “you are one of my pack. A weakling, to be sure, but it’s my duty to keep you safe. In return, you listen to me, and when I tell you to show your throat, you show your throat.” He must have leaned closer, because something slick brushed her neck—his teeth. She flinched, then hissed as the movement corkscrewed her arm.

He let go of her wrist, and she almost fell against Erhent, rolling onto her shoulder instead.
“Am I clear?”

She nodded as she rubbed her spasming arm. Anger burned, and she couldn’t bite back the words. She didn’t want to, even if it hurt later. “You know nothing about me. Or what I’ve been through or who Erhent is.”

He smile-sneered, revealing his inhumanly sharp teeth. “We will see.” He turned on his heels, his cloak flaring, and left the door open behind him. A blast of cold air made Gwen hug herself. She trembled, partly from anger, partly from cold. She kicked shut the door. It didn’t latch and bounced open. She took a deep breath and closed it, leaning into the smooth wood.

Erhent slumped against the stove, his bound wrists awkwardly swung to the side.

She crouched beside him. The furnace heat of him had faded. Mercury had been right. The marks on his jaw went to the bone.

Erhent’s chest hitched and his head bobbed back, striking the stove’s edge. He whimpered.

She wanted to pull him close and hold him. That’s what he would have done if their roles were reversed, but something stopped her.

She’d seen him eat once before when he’d shown her that beings like him and Jack could exist. It had been magical, if a bit frightening. Now, the rumors made sense. If slim, five and half feet tall Erhent could kill an insane grizzly bear with a touch—that was power of a sort she couldn’t comprehend.

Erhent struggled to raise his bound hands, murmuring for Jack. His name snapped her out of it. If Jack saw her just sitting while Erhent suffered, he’d never forgive her—and it was unforgivable.
Just as she did when they were Starcatching, she lowered him into her lap. She cradled him, brushed his black hair from his eyes, and cupped her hand over his bound hands. With his palms shackled together, it looked as if he were praying.

“He’s gone,” she whispered. “It’s just me. Jack will be here soon. I won’t let him hurt you anymore, okay? I won’t let him touch you again.” Her throat thickened as she stared into Erhent’s battered face, the fresh bruises slowly swelling, the blood trailing down his neck. Her eyes welled. She should never have left him. How long had Mercury beat him?

For once, his body felt cool. She shifted him to the floor, wincing as he groaned. She built a blanket nest around him, then fixed the dented stove pipe. She must’ve screwed it up somehow because smoke leaked from the seams, but the fire warmed the yurt. She sat beside Erhent, tucking the blankets tighter.

He sighed, though it turned into a convulsive cough. His eyes fluttered open.

“Gwen.” He breathed her name, relief clear in his tone. “Are you all right?”

She scooted closer and gripped his chained hands. “I’m fine. What do you need? Tell me what to do.”

He nodded toward the water pail by the stove. Gwen broke the ice and managed to ladle a slushy cup. She held it to his mouth as he slurped. He coughed up half of it, turning his head away. He wiped his mouth on his shoulder and asked for more. She refilled and helped him drink, bracing him with a hand behind his head.

“What else do you need?” She glanced at the door, willing for Jack to stride in and save the day. “I’m—I’m not sure where Jack is. I can try to find him.”

He shook his head. “Don’t leave me alone.”

“Of course. I promise.”
His eyes half-closed. “Tell me a story. About where you grew up or your family or something from the television.” He shivered so hard the chains binding his hands rattled.

“Anything at all.”

She curled on her side so they were eye-to-eye. “Okay, sure.”

He shivered again, groaning through grit teeth. After a moment, she shifted under the blankets and held him against her warmth, spooning him. The shivering eased.

His shoulders hitched. His voice was tight as if he’d swallowed a sob. “Thank you.”

She rested her forehead against his sweaty neck. Like all families, hers had an anthology of stories recited at Thanksgiving or birthdays or on Christmas Eve. She told him all she could remember.

#

A dream of drowning woke Gwen, and she struggled from her blanket nest, ramming her elbow into the yurt wall. Once Erhent had either fallen asleep or passed out (she wasn’t sure which), she’d rolled into her own blankets, exhaustion leaving her an emotionless lump. She considered staying with him, but he hadn’t asked, and it didn’t seem right. Maybe it was her human morals, but the last thing she wanted was to take advantage of Erhent’s vulnerability.

The fire had burned low, so she crawled to the stove and loaded two more logs. When she checked on Erhent, he wasn’t alone. Jack had returned in the night. Somehow, Erhent had shifted his arms so Jack could duck beneath the chains and nestle against him, an arm stretched over Erhent’s chest and his face pressed to Erhent’s neck. She watched them sleep,
and it reminded her of the two wolves curled together in Jesse’s yurt—fierce and fiercely protective of each other. Maybe she would have that someday. She could never have the closeness with Erhent that he and Jack possessed—some unspoken thing they’d endure together, the lump in Erhent’s throat. He might be ready for that type of deep friendship, but she wasn’t.

Around her, the air felt heavy, rain ready. She’d nearly lost her partner. She couldn’t stand another flood washing away all she loved.
CHAPTER 20.

Ace slouched across from the man others called Mercury. He reminded her of a certain principal she’d experienced in middle school. Mercury’s cabin-office was only missing a clock with an obnoxiously loud second hand ticking away, though the crackling fire did enough to set her on edge. She’d spent most of the night alone in his cabin, dozing off and on until some unfamiliar animal noise jolted her awake—howling and squawking and thumping.

When the centaurlike creature had galloped toward her truck, she’d swung out the opposite door and scrambled beneath, clinging to the undercarriage in hopes of hiding her scent. The cut-off legs had circled the truck, then the tailgate squealed.

Following the hoofprints had been easy. She’d only glimpsed the camp before something snatched her from behind, a furry hand clamping over her eyes. She’d been hustled to the cabin.

Mercury had come in with the sunrise and stared at her over a slab of a desk, his arms folded on the glossy-grain top, though one arm looked malformed, partially hidden by a bloody and tattered cloak.

His eyes narrowed. “Who are you?”

She paused, observing him, considering the room—a weird mixture of personal living space, hermitage, and bureaucratic bullshit. He had an overstuffed file drawer for fucksake. What did he need to keep track of, taxes? It was Wyoming’s version of Lost Boys out there. It’d taken all night for that shock to wear thin.

“Hard question,” she said. Gwen’s comments about magic stuck in her head.
He massaged his crooked arm. “Don’t play dumb, human. You saw what waits outside.” He pointed a lazy finger to the cabin door. “Tell me who you are or I’ll call in the monsters.”

Her leg jittered, and she forced it still, tucking one foot behind the other. “You said what I am.”

He huffed, bearing his teeth. “Witless humans can be turned, bought, bribed.”

She mimicked him and bared her teeth. “Then why are you weirdos so easy to find even a witless human could do it?”

He rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Who broke your face?”

She grinned wide enough to show her newly missing teeth. “Rubber bullet.”

“A protester. One of the humans leaving their trash everywhere.”

The way he said humans proved her guess that he wasn’t one. He might not look like all the monsters outside, but it was just an act. “The Protectors are costing AquaCore millions each week and slowing the drilling. What else do you want humans to do, huh?”

He leaned across the desk, his stormy-gray eyes locking on her. “Is that really why you are in Yellowstone, girl? To cost one company a few dollars?”

She lounged in the chair, trying to ignore the question’s weight settling on her chest. “It’s a start.” She’d asked herself why Yellowstone as she’d hitched rides to Wyoming. The most glam of the protests, she’d fit in better at a Keystone camp in Nebraska or Bear’s Ears in Utah—old fights with dwindling support as the news cycles kept turning.

He limped around the desk. “Only because it’s fashionable. Others have been doing the protecting and still are.”
She pushed back the chair and stood, angling her body in case he pulled a punch. “I saw some of you killing the grizzlies.”

He snorted and braced his hip against the desk. “Sharp eyes.”

“Part of my trade.”

He clutched his wounded arm. “Which is?”

The word *bouncer* sounded childish, and the word *activist* sounded too idealistic. Besides, she didn’t organize, merely showed up. At most, she was a warm body, a place in line. “I keep people safe by taking out the rowdy rubbish.”

He brushed past her. “I believe you misunderstand the meaning of the word ‘trade.’”

He held open the door. “You’re as bad as the other girl. No job, no career that could help the cause. Just a human who can’t feed itself.” He motioned her outside with his cane. “The centaur will escort you to your truck—whether by choice or by force. If you try to find this camp again, you will be killed.”

God, she wanted to punch him. It felt as if a cord wound tighter and tighter between them. Perhaps she would have a chance. “So you’re the savior hiding here in the backwoods? At least I’m standing up there. You’re right—I don’t have much else to offer, but I can stand at the front and be arrested for better water and less poison for the next generation of kids like me.”

He sneered. “You also had a choice to make yourself something useful. Do you know how badly even we are in need of politicians, of computer programmers, of lawyers?”

The Wyoming winter gusted through the door, snow whitening the threshold. Mercury stepped toward her as if he might haul her outside if she didn’t shift. “Get out and do something more than earn a broken nose.”
I was invited here,” Ace said, “by a girl. Something about making magic.”

Mercury tilted his head by a degree, almost lizardlike. “What did she tell you?”

“We were interrupted by a rampaging bear.” She strutted past him. Ah, the bravado of being twenty-two. She loved the feeling and knowing society expected it. Hell, she was usually the adult in the room. Not today.

And like a dumb kid, she exposed her back. For being wounded, he was strong and quick. He pinned her facedown in the snow, the icy crust cutting her already black and blue face until she bled. His knee ground between her shoulders. “You were invited but not by me. Prove you aren’t wasting my time and—”

He hadn’t pinned her hands—a mistake of his own. She pushed-up and bucked him off balance. Slipping in the snow, she struggled to her knees and punched him right in the balls. He dropped beside her.

Somebody snatched her under the arms and dragged her backward, ragdolling her aside. The fantastic monsters and nightmares that somehow existed in this place circled Mercury. A giant wolf-man-beast planted a foot on her chest, pushing her into the snow until her bones popped. She couldn’t breathe. He bared his fangs as she scrabbled at his leg, clawing his fur-skin.

The edges of her vision blurred, and all sound faded into keening and the thud of her heartbeat. Fuck, her mom had always said she’d get in trouble for punching a guy in the balls someday.

Mercury appeared over her, leaning against the naked wolf-man. “Release her, Sirk.”

The pressure eased, and she rolled over, coughing, then started laughing. She couldn’t stop to breathe and laughing hurt as if she’d taken a shot to the ribs.
Mercury sneered. “You will fit right in with that trio.” He nodded to the wolf-man.

“Leave her with the Soul-Eater.”

The naked wolf-man scooped her underneath the arms and set her on her feet as easily as if she were a kitten. He nudged her forward, and she stumbled, still laughing, toward two yurts. That’s what this whole thing was—a cluster fuck. This whole world. She let out another burst of laughter, her head lolling as if she were howling.
The yurt door banging open woke Gwen in the early morning. Sirk the wulver shoved a laughing woman into the yurt and slammed the door.

Jack jerked from Erhent, feeling around for something that wasn’t there. His ears flattened, and his tail doubled in size as he gathered his feet beneath him, ready to spring.

The woman rested her hands on her knees, trying to catch her breath while still giggling.

Erhent raised his head, craning to see around Jack.

“Well now.” The woman straightened, and Gwen recognized the protestors, Ace. Crap, she’d been in the truck and gotten here somehow. Gwen hadn’t thought of her since she reached camp. Exposing Druid Peak—yet another reason for Mercury to hate her guts.

“It’s you again,” Erhent said.

Ace approached Gwen, still wobbly. She wiped away tears. “Shit, kid, could have told me it was a bestiary out here.” She clapped her on the back.

“A what?”

“A book of monsters,” Jack said. His tail lashed. “Anyone care to enlighten me? I’ve only been gone for three days and it seems like it all went to shit.”

Ace looked him up and down, even leaning around for a better view of his tail. She extended her hand. “Call me Ace.”

Jack ignored her. His lips twitched, but he didn’t bare his teeth.

She hitched a thumb at Gwen. “The kid brought me here.”
“We saw her at a protest,” Erhent said. He struggled to sit, trying to hide his chained hands beneath a blanket. “Gwen and I both felt something.”

Ace stepped around Jack. “Shit, man. You okay? You look worse than when the centaur thing picked you up.”

Jack’s tail drooped. “Erhent, Gwen, you can’t rush this!”

Erhent jolted upright, trying to stand. He half-fell against the yurt wall like a drunk before getting his feet under him. “The Compass Guard tradition is barely older than you! What does it matter how we find them?”

“Magic changes and grows. The Kurultai have rules, Erhent!”

Gwen steadied him, linking her arm through his.

He leaned on her. “Then obey the rules! You started all this by breaking them!”

Jack’s hackles rose along his spine and his tail whipped. “I’m trying to help you!”

“By ignoring what I am! By—” A coughing fit choked Erhent, and he doubled over, wheezing. Jack brought him a cup of water. His tail wrapped around Erhent’s leg.

Watching Jack and Erhent fight made the situation worse. If they couldn’t stand strong, then there was no way she could keep it together. “Look, she’s here.” Gwen’s voice quivered, and she took a deep breath. “Doesn’t that mean Mercury okayed it?”

“If he’s not planning to execute me,” Erhent said.

Jack’s ears swiveled flat. “Stop it.”

“He doesn’t trust me,” Erhent said. “He’ll blame me for the bears, and if he doesn’t, then he’ll blame me for whatever happens next.”

“We won’t let him.” Gwen slid an arm around his waist, supporting him, though she wanted to do more—to touch him in the small ways he and Jack were always sharing.
Ace toed off her boots, setting them along the wall beside Gwen’s. “Why’s the asshole got you chained up?”

Erhent smirked. “Met him, have you?”

“Oh yeah. A real trip.”

“I broke the law when it comes to Soul-Eaters living among the Kurultai. I am not to feed on a sentient being.” He ducked his head. “The bears were killing people, driven mad most likely by a Soul-Eater. I had to try.”

Ace gave Gwen a look, and Gwen shook her head. She’d explain later. God, for once she didn’t know the least. Another human girl with no wilder background—Gwen already felt less alone.

The door wrenched open. Mercury stepped inside, and for a moment, she froze as Erhent shrank beside her. She shifted in front of him. Jack blocked Mercury and crossed his arms, flexing.

Mercury’s stormy gaze swept the room, then he jutted his chin at Jack. “Get your gear. We’re going hunting.”

Jack’s hackles spiked. “I don’t do that anymore.”

“You do when I ask.”

For a moment, they faced off, and Mercury swelled, his chest thrusting and his muscles tightening until he looked ready to spring.

Jack’s tail tucked between his legs. “Yes.” He lowered his gaze.

“At the path, then.” Mercury stalked out, leaving the door open. Jack slammed it for him, growling and snarling in a cadence that made Gwen think of curse words.
Erhent lowered himself in front of the fire and held his bound hands to the warmth.

“When Mercury was . . . conversing with me, I told him the bears had been recently fed on, that most likely a Soul-Eater had driven them mad—the same one that fed on me, I imagine.”

Jack approached Erhent and trailed his fingers through Erhent’s hair. “I’ll come back. I promise.”

Erhent pressed into Jack’s touch. “I know.”

He pointed his tail at Gwen. “Do not leave him.”

“Never let go of your partner,” she said.

He wagged his tail, his ears pricking, then he followed Mercury.

A silence settled without Jack. Gwen had slept some, though interrupted by a few of the usual flood and drowning nightmares in addition to her new favorite dream, running away from grizzlies. She yawned.

“Well, shit,” Ace said.

Erhent smiled at Gwen. “Want to try the lecture?”

“I’ll give it a go.”

“First.” Ace hefted the kindling hatchet. “Want your hands free?”

Erhent raised his arms, demonstrating the narrow inch between his bound wrists.

“Aren’t you afraid there’s a reason I’m bound?”

“Nah, that Mercury dude is a racist—or would it be speciesists? Anyway, he’s got a stick up his ass.” She rested the hatchet over her shoulder. “Do you want to or not?”

Erhent stood and drew apart his wrists as far as possible, placing them on a log set on top of the stove.
In a few swings, Ace hacked apart the chains. Erhent rubbed the bloody welts and groaned with pure pleasure.

Gwen dragged over a chair for him as pangs of guilt and jealousy kept her from looking at Ace. Even another human could do better by her partner.

Erhent arched his spine and rolled his shoulders. “God, I hate him.” He hobbled to the water bucket. He stuck his face right in and gulped.

Ace perched on the table, the hatchet beside her. “So you’re dangerous, according to him? You don’t look it—no offense.”

Erhent shook the water from his hair, then motioned to Gwen. “Take it away.”
Jack’s gear dragged at his arms and legs while his breath felt off-step. He’d grown used to living in his own skin, maybe a blanket around his shoulders in winter. When hunting soulkind, he wore close-fitting pants and shirt, double-layered with steel plate between—about the only armor that could slow the touch of a soulkind. It covered him from his chin to his boots. He kept his mask clipped to his belt, but as they walked through the Park Protectors’ camp, his cloak’s hood covered his ears. Beneath the heavy fabric, a longsword hung from his waist while coils of hemp rope reinforced with steel thread crisscrossed his chest. The Soul-Eaters could burn through the fibers, but a twist would slice them with the metal.

Mercury wore a copy of his gear, though it appeared newer, not as patched as Jack’s. A smith’s forge of anger burned in Jack’s chest. Decades ago, he and Mercury had crossed paths when both were Hunters by trade. Jack never liked him. Mercury hunted soulkind for revenge, to torture them the way he’d been tortured. He didn’t care about their humankind and wilder prey, or if the soulkind lived peacefully. Each soulkind was a monster to exterminate.

Once, Jack felt the same, but he hadn’t talked like Mercury the few times they’d shared campfires or bottles, a bed once when they’d both been hurting and needed the touch of another. Even that night, Mercury described his arduous kills with a gleam in his eyes—how he’d made them suffer. Mercury preferred slow poison to the sword.

They padded through the Park Protectors’ camp. The metallic tang of blood hung in the air like mist, filling his nose and coating his tongue. While they followed the least-trod
paths, the humankind took no notice, too busy helping each other: bandaging wounds, righting tents. Protestors in jackets painted with a red cross moved among the wounded. Death scented the air but not heavily. The bears had caused chaos and perhaps a reason for the local sheriff to claim the protestors were endangering themselves, but the Protectors had survived.

Beneath the sour bear musk, Jack sensed soulkind trails, as if they’d followed the bears, driving them deeper.

Without conferring, they veered toward the hill where Erhent had been attacked.

Fresh tracks lined the hillside, and the hot-sun smell of soulkind yellowed the air.

Mercury lowered his metal mask, shaped like a hissing lizard. Jack lowered his, a jackal. The tang of sweat, the pressure below his eyes, how his ears flattened—he flashed to the last time he wore this mask as a Hunter, to kill Erhent. He tried to tell himself he was doing it now to save him.

His anticipation thrummed, even though it sickened him. He loped forward, low to the ground, his hand on his sword. Mercury darted after him, barely limping.

The scent strengthened into the ozone of a lightning strike and desert wind. More than one soulkind held the hill.

They crested the rise and entered the trees. He settled into the shadows, moving from darkness to darkness, just another swaying sapling. Half a mile into the woods, they found them and watched from a thicket’s shade.

A metal rod staked a soulkind through the shoulder into the ground. She tugged at it while three other soulkind circled another bloodied and beaten one, likely fed on from the way he shivered.
Clan business. Jack had stumbled on these scenes before—Erhent wasn’t the only Lowborn who wanted freedom, but escaping clan territory and the runt trackers took an act of the stars.

Jack darted toward the pinned soulkind, freeing his sword.

“Fool!” Mercury hissed barely loud enough for his heightened hearing.

Jack slide to his knees by the writhing girl. It put him within striking distance of the others, but his armor had saved him from worse decisions. She clutched his arm but didn’t try to feed on him. Gods, she was younger than Erhent when he had first tried to escape.

Jack yanked out the rod, and she screamed. Blood splattered the snow. Another soulkind reached for him, but a flick of his sword turned the hand to a blood-gushing stump. He somersaulted backward and kicked to his feet.

The other soulkind did not attack but repositioned, twitching and feinting forward. They were young, probably clan children trying to earn the respect of older alphas by hunting runaways. A crest embroidered their jackets: the Dark Star symbol of a circle with a long horizontal line through the center. All in teal, which was unusual. No clan insignia—interesting. At one time, he’d known each clan’s signs and their alliances, but he didn’t remember soulkind only serving the Dark Stars with no other ties. Mercury had said nothing of such pacts.

The alpha, a woman that fit Erhent’s description, sneered at her squealing companion. “Well, well. Hunters. They said the closest we get to one of yours was in the dungeons.”

Mercury limped to Jack’s side and hissed.

The third soulkind licked his lips. “We still have a few of you locked up. Best battle fuel.”
Rage flared through Jack. He’d been good at his job because he hated them. He’d spent little time in the hands of a soulkind clan, but Mercury had been captured long enough the Hunters believed him dead. His leg had never healed.

Mercury glanced at Jack. “Shall we?”

It didn’t take long. They were young and stupid, untrained by their elders since the Hunters had disbanded twenty-five years ago.

The soulkind Jack had freed evened the odds by draining one until he was dust and a broken spine. While they finished dispatching the other two, she approached her friend and gave the energy to him, feeding it into his wounds.

While she knelt, Mercury lunged toward her.

“Wait!” Jack leapt, but Mercury brought down his sword, decapitating her. When her partner screamed and struggled to stand in the slippery gore, Mercury stabbed him through the chest, pinning him to the ground, then stomped on his throat until it was pulp.

Jack shoved him from the body. “They were trying to escape!”

Mercury lifted his mask and spit. “They’d come here to feed.”

“You don’t know!”

Mercury pointed toward the camp. “I keep those mewling humans safe from these monsters!”

Jack ripped off his mask. He knelt beside the bodies and whined in his language for their souls to find peace and forgiveness in the stars. When he stood, Mercury was sneering.

“You dare call them the monsters,” Jack said.

Mercury unclipped his fire kit from his belt. “Your pet has made you grow soft.”

Jack growled deep in his chest. His ears flattened and his tail spiked.
Mercury sprinkled gunpowder over the first body and sent sparks raining down with a
snap of his gloved fingers. The fire burned hot and quick, reacting with the energy still
trapped in the soulkind’s veins. “Keeping him close to the human girls—you’re playing with
fire.” He set alight the second body.

Another growl shook Jack, even though he tried to swallow it. Shouting at Mercury
wouldn’t change his mind, only assure Mercury that Erhent had ensnared him.

Mercury finished with the third body then approached the final two where Jack still
knelt. “You were a good Hunter, one of the last.” He sprinkled gunpowder. “What changed
you? Did that runt really turn you?” He snapped his fingers and sparks drifted down. “That
ugly weak thing has you by the tail—”

Jack’s anger flamed with the bodies. He tackled Mercury and bit his throat just
enough to draw a trickle of blood. Of course, Mercury pressed a knife to his guts.

He released his throat but shoved his reddened teeth into Mercury’s face. “Next time,
I’ll do it in front of the whole camp.”

Mercury laughed, his tongue snaking between his lips. “You think yourself an alpha,
but only your runt would get on his knees for a broken Hunter.”

He wanted to beat Mercury’s face to splintered bone—but it wasn’t his place. This
wasn’t his land or his kind. Even among the Hunters, he was a shameful memory.

He released Mercury and ran.
Qasim Zreiq, grandson of the tallest mountain in Palestine, felt the heat of the Yellowstone volcano through his soles. How the snow settled so thick with a roiling Being beneath, he couldn’t fathom.

He knelt on one knee and pressed his fist through the snow, digging his stone-crusted knuckles into the ground. As he practiced with all Beings, he stopped and waited once he sensed their presence, requesting passage. Large and small, dozing and wakeful, they’d registered surprise and curiosity over a traveler so far from his roots. Every place understood ideas of exile, how their inhabitants had been sent wide by humankind or poisoned water or dying flora. So young, they’d reverberate through his stone-cast feet: How can you even know what you are?

Well, he knew what he wasn’t. Mountain material. Grandfather had made that clear when he recast him in stone, banishing his boyish body for one armored, one that could not be mistaken as human. Without a word, he’d disappeared from his private school, his girlfriend, his friends, from his band of protestors, from his Shadow guards that loved him like a son, and went walking.

His grandfather had tasked him: You are to join a Starcatcher made of the drowned and the damned. Remain until the stone breaks from your skin. Perhaps then you will know the language of Time.

As soon as he left his grandfather’s territory, he tried to pry off the stone sheathing him. Even a bullet couldn’t chip it permanently. The stone skin possessed a spirit of its own,
forming and shifting, leaving just enough boy visible so no wilder mistook him for a golem or troll. The stone hadn’t worked its way into his voice either, the softness now at even greater odds with his body.

A tremor shifted the dirt beneath this feet as the volcano requested he approach the nearest thermal.

Qasim, a mountain walking, entered Yellowstone National Park.
CHAPTER 23.

Now that Gwen and Erhent had found another member of their guard, Jack felt comfortable leaving Gwen alone at the Druid Peak camp. Of course, Jesse and Sarah would have looked after her, but Ace reminded Jack of his older sister, the kind to keep the pack in order and sort out trouble with a snarl or firm fists—and Ace had proved her aim with an axe.

When Jack woke Erhent before dawn, whispering *let’s run*, Erhent insisted he was fine. It’d been a week since the attack, and Jack had performed the most simpering, tail-tucking display to win Mercury’s permission. He’d agreed on one condition, that Jack report what exactly happened to Erhent at the protest camp. He’d lie, of course. Jackals were known for their cunning, even if he least liked that trait.

The night before, he’d told Gwen about his plan, so when Erhent claimed he couldn’t leave her, Jack whispered she had already agreed. Erhent mumbled another excuse about training, but Jack hauled him toward the door.

The run felt glorious. Both he and Erhent were too tired to push the other, so it’d been slow, steady through the valley. Jack’s legs still ached from the park-wide patrol run Mercury had assigned on the weekend of the grizzly attack, and Erhent hadn’t recovered fully from that day, either—his eyes dull, a gray cast over his hands and arms. The scars still rent his skin. Usually, Erhent healed himself, but Mercury only let him feed on deadwood. Erhent needed living energy to heal. Even one healthy tree would have made a difference.

They ran for hours, and that alone had been soul-cleansing, even if their exertion hadn’t reached the ecstasy of truly running wild. Through the valley, west toward the Gallatin Range, surrounded by the subtle quiet, the rhythm of their breaths—it had been
enough. When they’d stopped at Slough Creek, dipping their faces in the icy water, sputtering, he’d taken Erhent’s hands, peeled off the gloves, shredded the fabric. He tossed the remains to the current.

On his long patrol, he’d found a cave in the foothills, and he led Erhent to it as the moon rose. While Erhent gathered spruce boughs for nesting, he spent an hour hunting and eating. Erhent must have also fed because he smelled of loam and dry wood, the cave warmer than the night air.

Jack pawed through the branches, arranging them the way Erhent liked, then Erhent stripped off his shirt, smoothing it like a blanket so branches didn’t scratch their skins.

They curled together, Erhent’s chest against Jack’s shoulders, burning through energy and radiating heat for Jack. If he closed his eyes, the past few months faded. Merely him and Erhent, traveling and exploring, settling into their nightly winter routine, rarely using words or sometimes slurring through the other’s language. Yes, some nights they’d spoken until their voices cracked, arguing about whether to join the Kurultai, where Erhent would be accepted, where Jack would be accepted. Sometimes they told stories to ease the aching in their chests. Sometimes they made up hero’s tales about one another because even though they had many more years to live, the land seemed so wounded, the air burning their lungs, their paths blackened by wildfires, droughts searing their skins—someone had to be a hero and change it.

Tonight, Jack needed to hear the story of the protest camp. And Erhent would surely not want to tell it.
He rolled over in Erhent’s arms, facing him. The moon shone into the cave, glinting in Erhent’s bright eyes. His new scars stretched pale on his brown skin. The flesh along his jaw remained uneven, dented. Jack brushed his knuckles against Erhent’s chin.

“Tell me.”

Erhent twisted away, his angular face profiled. “Must we?”

“You’re hurting and afraid.” He took Erhent’s hand in both of his. “I can smell it on you.”

Erhent sighed. “There was a Soul-Eater—”

“Soulkind.”

Erhent rolled his eyes. “There was a soulkind at the protest camp, and she found me. Obviously, there was more than one to turn that many grizzly bears senseless. But she found me and fed on me and left me for dead. I woke up when a bear took a bite.” He massaged a mess of half-healed scars marring his shoulder and collarbone. “The only way I could survive was if I fed and used the power to heal myself. So I killed and kept killing the bears while looking for Gwen.”

“She didn’t merely feed on you.” He’d counted six new scars, the kind of deep, burnlike marks soulkind left behind when they didn’t destroy the body completely.

Erhent’s jaw clenched. “Leave it, Jack.”

He inched closer and rested his forehead on the scarred shoulder. “I’m sorry I wasn’t there.”

Erhent gently tugged Jack’s ear, then kept stroking it, rubbing his thumb over a nick at the tip. “What could you do. Mercury sent you away.”
He shouldn’t have gone, and Erhent knew he shouldn’t have gone. Wilders could say no to orders if there was good reason, and he had one—he was not native to Wyoming. A coyotekind or wolfkind should have taken the patrol. Mercury wanted to separate them. Maybe he’d sensed the coming trouble and hoped to catch Erhent. For decades, they’d kept their pact to spend no longer than a day apart. When it broke, he almost lost Erhent.

“What are we doing?” Erhent whispered just loud enough for his ears. “Being a Starcatcher changes nothing.”

Jack always knew the title Starcatcher wouldn’t alter what wilders saw in Erhent, always a soulkind first—except Gwen. Regardless of how hard he looked, he witnessed no twitch of fear, no hesitation, not since they first met. If she hadn’t taken care of Erhent after the attack—his tail curled between his legs.

“You can’t follow this path merely for yourself, Erhent. Or for Gwen. It’s too long of a life, one that will grow harder if it ever grows easier.”

“She’s awfully brilliant—isn’t she?”

Jack smiled. “You are her partner, so it’s your duty to believe that, but yes. She’s doing well.”

Erhent turned onto his side and propped his head on his fist. “Come on, more than well. She faced Mercury. And a grizzly bear.”

Jack swatted his tail against Erhent’s leg. “We aren’t done talking about what happened that night.”

“Please. Leave it.” He trailed his fingers down Jack’s chest.

He caught Erhent’s hand, rubbing his thumb over the knuckles. “The last time this happened you—you didn’t recover well.” He couldn’t bring himself to say Erhent had tried
to die, how he’d stopped eating, sleeping, talking. It had been only a few weeks after Erhent sobered enough to tell Jack his name, some of his past, where he was from, how he’d escaped his clan. Trackers had attacked them, just like the scene Jack witnessed on the hill.

Erhent pulled at Jack’s arm and ducked under it, pillowing his head in the curve where shoulder turned to chest. He draped Jack’s arm across his torso. “I have something to live for now. You. Gwen. The stars. I was terrified of you back then. I thought you would kill me because I was so weak and worthless.”

He nuzzled into Erhent’s hair and closed his eyes. He wanted to say he’d loved him from the moment he saw him, but Erhent hated hearing that, as if loving him in such a moment stained what they had now. He only murmured, “Never again.” Their love had become an unspoken thing. Of course they loved each other—how often had one saved the other’s life?

Erhent twisted in his arms. He brushed his lips over Jack’s chin, then along his jaw.

They held each other all night.
CHAPTER 24.

Gwen’s stomach growled. The past weeks, Jack usually brought dinner to their yurt, so tonight, she had to risk the cafeteria-cabin-thing. Not eating sounded more fun, but stupid popularity games were no excuse. She’d feel sick tomorrow if she didn’t eat after what Mercury put her through earlier—up and down Druid Peak for a seven mile “run” then cooling off by splitting a cord of firewood. She needed calories if she wanted to survive whatever he had planned for tomorrow.

She waited for Ace, hoping they could go together, but when hunger made her reread a paragraph about dwarf stars four times, she tugged on Jack’s favorite wool sweater, perfectly slouchy on her, and hurried through the chill.

Outside the long cabin, she hesitated. She had the same right to eat as they did. She’d earned her food today. After a deep breath, she entered the cafeteria.

A stew pot that could have cooked a whole deer hung over an open stone hearth. A dozen wilders hunkered near the blaze, usually the maladapted types: prairiekind that should be hibernating except AquaCore’s construction destroyed their burrows; Ro the lemurkind from Madagascar and the only friendly face since she was part of Jesse and Sarah’s guard; some sort of snakekind that looked like a human wyvern; a frogkind soaking her webbed feet in a bucket. A wulver still recovering from the bar attack fletched arrows while sucking on a bone.

The wulver’s ears flattened as she approached. She scooped a lumpy clay bowl into the pot, her arm disappearing to the shoulder as she scraped bottom.
Only Ro winked at her while the rest continued chatting in one of the growling languages.

She retreated to a table that split the long hall lengthwise. More wilders gathered at the table—coyotekind, foxkind, treekinds—knitting, sewing, carving, dozing in the warmth. She recognized some of Jack’s friends, the coyotekind brothers Char and Scar and the foxkind Fang, who nodded at her and flicked his brush of tail in something like a wave. Or a dismissal.

She stared into her stew bowl as if it held her future. Her seat faced the door just in case Mercury or one of his goons entered, but only Ace trotted in a few minutes later, shaking snow from her short hair. It’d grown enough that it stuck at odd angles no matter how much she finger-combed it.

The wilders around the fire called hello, and the wulver even served her a bowl while she warmed her hands.

Gwen stared into her half-empty bowl, a heaviness settling in her chest. Ace had only been here a week, but already they treated her as if she had fur instead of skin. Gwen even noticed it with Jack and Erhent—an easiness. Even though just as human as Gwen, Ace wasn’t a tagalong.

Gwen watched her from behind her hair. What was so different other than their age? Ace was a little taller and definitely stronger, but Gwen had been working out, even more than Mercury ordered—extra pushups, crunches, squats. What else was there to do around here when the stack of books felt too overwhelming?

Physique didn’t explain how Ace was so much better at chatting up a centaur, a wulver, and a dragon like they were the old guys smoking outside the gas station.
Ace caught her staring and smiled. Gwen ducked her head, heat flaring along her neck. Crap, now she looked like a creeper on top of sucking at being a wilder.

Ace walked backward toward Gwen, calling to the wilders, “I’ll catch you all later.”

The wulver growled something and flicked his tail toward Gwen in a way she would have sworn was sarcastic.

Ace shook her head as she set down her bowl. “Be right back.” She stalked up behind the wulver. “You want to say that again, Lucky?”

He stood. Naked, as usual. He probably had two feet on her plus a hundred pounds of muscle. His tail twitched, then went limp.

They stared for a few more seconds.

Ace leaned toward him. “Yeah, and I better not hear it again.”

She returned and gave Gwen an exasperated look as she swung over the bench seat.

Gwen picked up her bowl but couldn’t bring herself to sip. For christsake, Ace already understood the growling. “How do you do that?”

Ace half-stood, then wagged a finger at the bowl. “No spoons. Each time I think I forgot to pick one up.” She took a long slurp from her bowl then wiped her mouth on the back of her hand. “Do what?”

“They say hi to you.”

“Not you?”

Gwen shook her head.

“I’ve lived in places like this before. Well, not like this. The human versions.”

Gwen forced herself to swallow the congealing stew. She’d need the calories tomorrow. “Got any advice?”
Ace propped her chin in her hand. “You do anything in camp without Erhent? He’s social poison around here.”

“Just whatever chores Mercury gives me.”

Some of the wilders further down the table, including Char and Scar, padded out of the cafeteria. Ace watched them go, then finished her bowl in another long gulp.

“I have a way for you to earn some cred. Plus, you got to show them it’s all lies what Mercury and some of the wulvers say, that he controls you, he’s feeding on you, blah, blah.”

“Uh, I’m pretty tired.”

Ace picked out a final chunk of carrot. “C’mon, it’ll be fun.”

Gwen had a feeling their definitions of fun were different. “Like get a split lip fun or steal a case of beer fun?”

Ace grinned, showing her missing teeth. “Both.”

#

Just across the park line in Montana, AquaCore had created “the Bakken of the West” by tapping into Montana energy reserves. Three man camps bordered the park close enough

Gwen watched workers piss through the AquaCore fence. The white 208odular spread like a relief camp, each with a trio of trucks parked in the churned mud. Spotlights turned the camp into artificial day and made the frosted fences glisten.

Ace pointed at the nearest spotlight. “That’s because of them.” She hitched her thumb at the wilders hugging closer to the shadows. The fences tended to swerve away from tree cover, so a stretch of spotlighted snow showed every track and shadow. “They hit the man
camps every few days. They steal small stuff, but I’ve had other things on my mind.” She
tapped a duffle bag slung over her shoulder and explained that the two times she’d ran with
the wilders, she’d experimented with street art designs, hoping national news channels might
display the “vandalism,” thereby spreading the message.

They crouched in a final finger of woodland pointing toward the man camp. Ten
wilders and two humans versus the largest fracking corporation in the world. Totally what
Gwen would call a party night. The wilders had protested Gwen coming, saying Mercury
would have all their asses. Most of these wilders weren’t the popular ones. Char and Scar, the
coyotekind which were already on the outs for being friends with Jack; Rico, who seemed
unpopular because he didn’t follow a kind but shared features from several species, including
antelope horns and a wolfish ruff; five harekind who lived in a burrow a mile from camp and
were named by numbers One, Two, Three, Thirteen, Sixteen, and Twenty-Four; a talking
wolf named Resin; and a crow named Sparkle, old enough to have silver around the beak and
deaf but understood sign language.

“I thought you said this would be fun,” Gwen said.

“Look,” Ace said, “this is an important part of the camp community. How do you
think they get money?”

“I don’t know, trust funds?”

Shadows loped into the clearing, silent enough Gwen muttered “crap” as her breath
caught.

Jesse stepped into the moonlight, a pack of dogs nudging her legs and sniffing around
the trees. Sarah leaned over, panting. “Sorry we’re late.”
Gwen crouched and held her hand out to one of the smaller dogs, but Ace pulled her upright.

“Those are wolves, Gwen.”

Char and Scar sneered at her and flicked their tails, growling in their canine language.

Jesse took a seat at the base of a tree. “We’re burning moonlight, folks. Choose your entrance. Remember, we are carrying all this shit back without sleds so no more TVs.”

Ace tugged at Gwen’s coat. “C’mon, you can run with me.”

Sarah blocked their path. “Oh no, not on the first run. Let Gwen watch a round and see the Starcatcher side, then she can go.”

Gwen side-stepped. “Please, Sarah. I’ll be careful.”

Sarah rolled her neck, horns dipping. She pointed at Ace. “If anything happens, I’m coming for your ass.”

Ace grinned. “I have so many jokes I’m not making right now.”

Sarah lowered her horns and fake growled as Ace and Gwen jogged into the trees.

The wilders barley left tracks, and most of them looked like paw prints anyway. The wolves who had accompanied Jesse scattered, darting and yipping as if chasing rabbits. A few moments later, an eerie howl washed over the land. Gwen couldn’t help looking over her shoulder. Snarling, a squeal, followed by more howling congregated toward the east—probably drawing attention away from however the wilders entered the man camp.

Gwen fidgeted for warmth as they waited in the tree line’s shadow. “I thought the Kurultai were big on the moral high ground.”
Ace tied a bandanna over her nose. “You could say the same of humans, us smart, civilized folk, but considering that domestic violence, drug abuse, and rape reports go up with each camp, we’re just as bad.”

A heavy fog, out of place in the dry winter air, trailed through the trees and swirled across the fence. Ace elbowed her. “Hope you’re not claustrophobic.”

They darted forward, cutting a trail through the mist. Ace dropped into a slide, stopping at the fence. She scooped aside armloads of snow, revealing a hole under the fence. She shoved her bag through, then wriggled to the other side, Gwen crowding behind.

They scrambled behind the first modular in the man camp. The lights were off and the untouched snow suggested it was empty. Gwen’s heart pounded, and her hands shook. She hid them from Ace in her coat pockets. After the flood, she’d done plenty of illegal stuff but refused to feel guilty since the capitalist powers that be forced her into the situation. The man camp felt harder to justify. She’d seen the people who lived in these camps back in New Jersey. When their trucks filled a gas station or parked up a restaurant late at night, she went somewhere else. It felt unfair to consider them all dangerous or contributing to the stats Ace had mentioned, but at night, imagining them as happy family men took more effort.

Ace unzipped her bag and pulled out spray paint cans. She offered Gwen a cannister. “In case you got something to say.” She nodded at a dark trailer across the wide dirt road. “I’m going to tag this house, then that one. Keep an eye out.” She swung around the corner, and the fog swallowed her trail.

Gwen scanned the road, wringing the cold metal heavy as a challenge, while Ace spewed jagged letters onto the siding. She’d seen protest street art before—plenty in her town. Once the punk squat had moved in, they’d painted the destruction: hopeful murals,
condemnations of the New Jersey governor, fuck yous to AquaCore. At first, she’d thought it was useless, just a way to blow off steam, but one of the popular stencils, a simple design spelling *AquaCore* in block letters with bars sprayed overtop, became a popular symbol for marches across New Jersey.

Ace’s message took shape. *Remember, remember the 12th of December when AquaCore security beat a reporter!* She finished with painting a large AC then circling it, a slash through the center.

The thick paint glistened in the moonlight, the letters dripping red. Ace glanced at Gwen, who flashed a thumbs up, then she darted across the street, nearly crawling.

The can hissed and red splattered the paneling. It followed the same format except a change in date and situation, this one citing an Bakken oil spill on AquaCore’s watch a decade ago.

They followed the fog, Ace tagging 212odular while Gwen played lookout and the wolves howled on the other side of camp. After fifteen minutes, Ace said they should hit one more.

“You down to try?” she asked.

Gwen nodded. Her mothers had said protest wasn’t comfortable—otherwise why would people change? Protest should disrupt the system. If AquaCore was pissing all over this land, then she could piss on their walls.

Ace squeezed her shoulder. “Then write. I’m going to paint on the road.”

Gwen tried to press on the nozzle, but her fingers ached. She shook her hand, then sprayed, but she didn’t hold the cannister close enough. Her first letter looked fuzzy and faint: *Remember, remember the Sixth of September when a broken dam broke a town.* She
hesitated, the red paint dripping from the nozzle onto the snow. How to say all of it—that AquaCore bought up property right away, how the town would die and all be sold to them? In this moment, she had a voice. She was more than a passive anchor to keep Erhent in place or some orphan stuck in the high school gym. Except now she didn’t know what to say.

A truck spun onto the street, high beams turning the fog into a white wall. Gwen dropped into a patch of fog banked against the modular as the headlights swooped over the road. Crap, where had Ace gone?

The paint gleamed in the lights, and the truck halted, idling. A man climbed from the cab. “Ah, shit. Not this again.” He spoke into a cellphone. “Yeah, they’ve been on this side, too.”

Fog roiled thick in front of the truck, though it flowed over a lump. A human-sized lump that army-crawled until nestled beneath the huge truck. Ace rolled from underneath, easing open the driver’s side door.

*Oh shit, oh shit.* Gwen inched around the modular while the driver examined the paint across the street. If Ace was going to do what Gwen thought she was about to do, she’d only have a few seconds to sprint and grab onto something.

The trunk lunged forward, swerving as the driver stumbled aside, bellowing.

Gwen dashed and leaped for the driver’s side door, catching the oversized mirror while her feet scrabbled on the running board. Ace yelled to hold on as they turned a corner, the rear tires fishtailing. The engine revved through the snow, lurching forward.

Ace slowed and cracked open the door. “Get in!”
Somehow, Gwen managed to crawl over Ace’s lap with the truck only swerving once. Ace whipped onto asphalt and held the speed at a steady twenty, flipping off the lights. She panted, grinning.

“We’ll ditch this a few streets over.”

Gwen slumped in the seat, pressed into the corner of the door. “Should-shouldn’t we drop it now?”

“Gotta get to the next hole in the fence.”

The truck bounced and Gwen yelped, whipping around to look through the rear window. Char and Scar hunkered in the truck bed, their ears pinned flat. Each carried a sack over his shoulder.

Ace nudged her. “Relax. We got this.” She turned down a few more streets, then pulled off at a cul-de-sac. Char and Scar slipped from the bed, darting to the fence.

Ace locked the keys in the truck. “Let’s get out of here.”

Char and Scar passed through a hole beneath the fence, quick as shadows, and waited for Gwen and Ace. They dashed for the tree line.

Once she passed the first tree, the sickness roiling in Gwen’s stomach settled. Her legs loosened, and with a burst of speed, she passed Ace and came within tail-grabbing distance of Char and Scar. The snow sucked at her feet like a strong current, but she surged forward, the air brittle with cold while her muscles burned.

Char smoothed his hackles. “You always cut it close.”

“Had to give Gwen a chance,” Ace said.

Scar slowed so he ran beside Gwen. “You mean an anchor did something for once?”
Her steps faltered, and the joy evaporated. It sounded like a joke but that seemed too
good to be true. “At least I didn’t need help getting out.”

Ace swatted Scar’s tail. “She got you there.”

An alarm cut the quiet, making Gwen yelp. Spotlights swung into the night, their
beams fighting the stars. The beeping continued, frantic and painfully pitched.

Char’s ears flattened. “Quiet. Let’s move. They had snowmobiles last time.”

The light reflecting off the snow brightened the groves, and Gwen felt naked as they
hurried one at a time across empty snow to the next copse. Fog swirled around their waists,
hiding their tracks and dulling the searchlights. The alarm worked into her brain and her
breaths kept matching its pace, too quick and shallow.

Another noise pulsed beneath the alarm and the snow breaking under their feet—a
hum, a keening. Almost celestial. Fog smeared the trees as they hurried. The humming grew
louder, accompanied by grinding, like two stones rubbing to dust.

She tugged on Ace’s jacket. “You hear that?”

Ace shook her head as Char hissed, glaring over his shoulder.

The trees thickened, which didn’t seem to slow Char and Scar. They picked paths
through the crusty branches while Gwen kept stopping to untangle her coat. Ace waited in
between, fidgeting.

“Go on,” Gwen said after the third time. “I’ll follow your tracks.”

Ace crossed her arms. “Nah, Jack would flip. He gave me a few stern looks before he
left.” She waved on Char when glanced back, his yellow eyes glinting.

The alarm silenced and Ace sighed, rubbing her forehead. “See, they gave up. No
hurry now.”
Gwen finally floundered out of a drift and caught up with Ace. “I don’t know why Jack did that. I can survive for a weekend.”

Ace tipped her head to the moonlight, gusting her breath so it joined the fog. “He just didn’t want you to feel alone. He feels guilty about whatever happened with Erhent.” Her gaze slid to Gwen, questioning.

Gwen tugged off her knit cap. The humming felt louder, as if it vibrated over her skin. “You really can’t hear that?” It pulled at her—the same feeling Erhent, Jack, and Ace inspired. A comforting magnetism, like the draw of home after a long trip.

Ace shrugged. “The wind?”

Gwen took a deep breath and closed her eyes. She rotated her head, catching the celestial sounds. She stepped off Char and Scar’s trail toward a line of silver trees. Ace whisper-shouted to stop, but that instinctual sense, like when she’d seen Ace, tugged at her gut.

The trunks, spongey with soft bark, grew so close together their branches barred her way. She paced back and forth like a dog, then shouldered and scrabbled through the interlocking branches. A twig scratched her face and frosted sticks tore at her clothes. The branches released, spilling her forward. She tripped into a clearing. The trees formed a perfect circle.

A statue stood in the center, and a shaft of moonlight glittered off the frost-crusted stone. Something about the figure seemed boyish, even though too bulky and spikey to be an actual boy, more like an imitation. Stone spikes pierced the boy’s shirt, and black rock grew from his skull in the shape of a crown. White tree roots wrapped around the legs, dividing and growing smaller until they pressed between the cracks in the stones.
The celestial humming and the grinding radiated from the statue. She stepped in front of the boy.

His gaze flicked toward her.

She yelped and backpedaled.

The ground disappeared beneath her feet. She fell through a crack in the earth and splashed into darkness.

Water bubbled around her, and the narrow hole pinned her arms. She tried to raise her hands, her elbows beating against the walls. Her lungs ached. She thrashed, scrabbling against the dirt, but her boots, her sodden clothes, all dragged her further from the scrap of moon.

Her chest hitched, and blackness edged her vision. No, this couldn’t be happening. The water couldn’t get her, not after all this time, not after Erhent. They were just trees. It was just a forest. And a statue with human eyes.

A shadow blocked the moon. A hand gripped the collar of her coat and hauled her to the surface.

Ace dragged her into the snow. She coughed and spit dirt. Grit crunched beneath her teeth while dust half-blinded her. No water other than the surrounding snow.

She rubbed her eyes. “What’s happening?”

Ace eased upright, pulling Gwen to her feet. “I don’t know.” She felt each step toward the statue, gripping Gwen’s hand. “Stay close.”

A patchwork of stone made up his body. The stalactite crown grew from his head, the shining tips ready to gut someone. Another stone ridge curved over his skull and down his spine. While he already had wide shoulders, marble spikes capped them. The roots holding
him place had shredded his T-shirt, and different veins of stone covered the planes of his chest, though his defined abs still looked human. Jagged rock lined his forearms, and quartz shards tipped his elbows. The roots grew into every cranny, wrapped around his spikes, and even twisted over his mouth.

   His rock skin produced the grinding noise, and pebbles dotted the snow around him, as if he were breaking apart.

   He met Gwen’s gaze, and the tether-tug pulled at her arm. She raised a hand and touched his neck, webbed with roots. A pulse thudded beneath her fingertips. She jerked back her hand.

   “Well, he’s alive,” she said.

   Ace flicked open a jackknife. “You work on the roots around his mouth. I’ll try to free his feet.”

   Gwen drew her hunting knife. A thick, knobby root cut into the boy’s mouth while smaller tap roots grew between his lips, probably choking him.

   She held his gaze. “We’re going to get you out.”

   His eyes flicked from her to the treetops, then back to her. Frantically. Signaling her to turn around.

   Fear froze her, the knife resting against the root over the boy’s lips. She swallowed, still staring into his eyes. “Ace.”

   “What?”

   “Is—is there something behind us?”

   “What the fuck are you talking about?” She stabbed her jackknife into a root and looked up at Gwen.
Her lips parted, but she didn’t scream, just trembled.

Gwen raised her head.

A decaying body draped over the branches. No, more than one. A dozen dripped gore on the silver trunks.

One moved, half-rolling, half-falling from the tree. It hit the snow, splatting, one arm popping off. Except it kept moving. Not some freak of gravity, it dragged itself upright, then took a staggering step toward them.

Ace plunged into the circle of trees. “Oh shit, oh shit.” She scrabbled at the bark, wedging herself between the trunks.

Gwen screamed for her to wait as a body fell between them, bursting like a rotten fruit, spraying them with gore. Ace tripped as she scrambled away, but the upper half of the body crawled toward her. Scraps of cloth and skin hung from blackened bones and oozing flesh. The jaw snapped as it dragged toward Ace.

Stone cracked as the boy tipped forward an inch, then the roots constricted, rasping across his skin.

Gwen slashed at the root over his mouth, and it recoiled, swirling to join the others choking his neck.

“My hands! My hands!” he shouted.

Thick roots wrapped around his torso, pinning his arms. Gwen dragged the down his chest, hoping he had stone there, too. The roots snapped apart, recoiling and slithering down his torso. The knife cut deep into the soft bark, sap oozing like blood. The boy grunted, twitching, then twisting. With a bellow, he raised his arms, severing the roots.
Ace scrambled to her feet and stomped the zombie’s head. Another fell from the branches, clipping her shoulder, and she screamed.

He shook off the rest of the roots, then snatched a fistful of Gwen’s coat and charged through the gore, dragging her along. He kicked aside the two zombies cornering Ace, and the rotting smell made Gwen gag.

He hauled Ace upright and shoved her toward a tree. “Climb!” He pushed Gwen beside her, then faced the zombies staggering and crawling closer.

The glimmering trees grew together like a wall, but their interlocking branches almost made a step ladder. Gwen dug her fingers into the white spongy bark to keep from falling as the lowest branches snapped and bent, as if trying to dump her into the nightmare. Water trickled, slicking the bark, and a sound like a rushing river made her pulse jump, her hands shake.

Ten feet high, the branches thinned. The trees creaked, and the bark whorled, a slippery living thing ruining her grip.

“Jump! Jump!” yelled the boy.

Gwen shoved Ace through the branches, then fell. She landed crouched and rolled forward like Erhent had taught her, but her bad ankle twinged anyway. She crawled backward, kicking away from the trees and floundering in snowdrifts.

A boulder crashed next to her, and she shrieked, rolling into Ace.

“It’s okay!” The statue-boy struggled from the snow. “They won’t leave the trees!”

Ace dragged Gwen behind her, angling between the boy and the trees. “What the fuck was that?”

“Terror Trees,” he said. “A carnivorous tree. As you probably guessed.”
Ace ran a hand over her face, smearing zombie leftovers. “What the hell?”

Gwen pulled off her scarf and gave it to Ace. “You okay?”

Ace scrubbed at the gore, though she paused twice, her eyes half-closed and her lips parted like she might vomit. “Maybe?”

He brushed himself off, and bits of stone pattered in the snow. A whole shoulder spike fell when he poked it. He squinted at Gwen. “You’re the one who found me.” When he spoke, his voice sounded off, immature and contrasting with his stony bulk. Resonate, yes, with a Middle-Eastern accent that matched his brown face, dark eyes, and short cropped hair—what the stone didn’t obscure, at least.

He offered her a hand, which she accepted. At his touch, an aching pull manifested in her wrist, like the first time Erhent pulled on the tether. Like when they’d seen Ace at the protest.

“Who are you?” she asked. Beneath the stone, she could recognize his humanness in a way she couldn’t with Erhent or Jack, as if she might see him making out with the cheerleader of the week at the football game.

“I’m Qasim Zreiq, grandson of Jabal aţ Tūr, the tallest mountain in Palestine. I’ve been sent here to join a Starecatcher’s guard.”
Mercury paced along the line of wilders. “According to Kurultai law, you have committed treason of the highest order.”

Sarah and Jesse stood at the far end of the line, and Gwen huddled next to Jesse while Ace slouched beside her. When they’d returned to camp, Mercury had snarled for his wulver guards to make sure they waited while he saw to their esteemed guest. He became something else around Qasim—deferential, respectful, even though Qasim had told Gwen and Ace he was only sixteen.

After they escaped the Terror Trees, it’d taken them an hour to find the others because wandering groves kept blocking their paths. Qasim explained he’d heard stories about Terror Trees but didn’t expect to find them without a soulkind clan nearby, hence how he got trapped.

Gwen had shared a look with Ace when he said soulkind instead of Soul-Eater. If this guy ended up on their guard, maybe he wouldn’t hate Erhent. How unexpectedly nice.

“So what are you, exactly?” Ace had asked.

Qasim cut a path through the snow, apparently oblivious to the cold. “A sixteen-year-old Palestinian?”

Ace had lobbed a snowball so it stuck on a shoulder spike. “Sure you are.”

Gwen trotted behind Qasim, observing how the stone moved with his muscles, as if it were fluid. “You said you were the grandson of a mountain. I didn’t know mountain could have children—accept in stories.”
Qasim glanced behind, the moonlight glinting on his obsidian crown. “Oh, I’m a Being.”

“Sure, that helps a lot,” Ace said.

“How did you know about me, though?” Gwen asked.

He shrugged, the stone grinding. “My grandfather. He read the stars and sent me off. Well, after her me made look like this.” He knocked his knuckles on his rock-crusted chest.

“So who’s your partner? I’m surprised to meet half a Starcatcher.”

She took a deep breath. *He’s with his other partner.* “He needed to get out of camp for a while. You’ll see why when you meet Mercury.” She examined his broad back, the serrated stone ridging his spinal column, then flaring into his quartz shoulder spikes. He could probably kill someone by falling down. “You don’t got a problem with soulkind, do you?”

He frowned. “Why would I? I was practically raised by my shadow guard, and they’re soulkind.”

Gwen grinned. “You have no idea how happy I am to hear that.” If someone with Qasim’s strength defended Erhent, maybe he’d get some respect—the respect that their position and his partnership with her should have brought. Her grin slipped, and she stared at her boots as she followed the broken trail. Once again, someone else could do her job better than her. Any of them would have been a better choice for Erhent.

At least Erhent wasn’t here as Mercury to humiliated her—again. He slowly limped down the line, then circled behind them, before pacing along the front again.

Gwen grit her teeth. *Please don’t stop here. Please don’t stop—*
He planted his feet in front of Ace. Even worse. Her pleading changed to mentally begging Ace to keep her mouth shut for once.

A few wilders had gathered, mostly wulvers, some of the dryads since Mercury made them wait near the infirmary, Jesse and Sarah’s guard—and Qasim crept from Mercury’s cabin, the small crowd parting for him, some even bowing.

Heat flared up Gwen’s neck. Qasim probably didn’t have any respect for her already, being human, but after Mercury laid into them, she’d lose any cred for rescuing him from the Terror Trees.

Mercury twisted his cane into the frozen ground. “While I expect such disrespect from humans such as these girls, it is my Starcatcher that angers me. It is my wilders, who know better than to participate in such trivial antics—”

Ace leaned into him. “I thought thanks were in order. You want the Kurultai asking why the grandson of the tallest mountain in Palestine was found dead in your territory?”

Mercury pressed closer, their breaths mingling. “You only demonstrate your ignorance more by even suggesting a Being needed your help.”

Qasim stomped forward. “I did. I’ve never faced Terror Trees before. If Gwen and Ace hadn’t found me, I’d still be stuck.”

Mercury turned from Ace and performed a half-bow. “Your humbleness does Jabal at Tūr honor.” Since he caught sight of Qasim, he’d been tripping over his cloak to fawn. And insult everyone else.

Mercury shifted, standing in front of Sarah and Jesse. “While the humankinds’ disrespect is bad enough,”—he glanced at Gwen—“the thought of my Starcatcher, the ones
meant to lead in my absence and advise me, would guide other wilders to disobey me.” He shook his head.

Sarah lowered her head. “It wasn’t disrespect, Father.”

“Quiet—”

Jesse shifted in front of Sarah. “We have given you advice, and you refuse to listen—”

Mercury stepped into Jesse, chest-to-chest, bearing teeth. “Careful, Jesse. I’ve had enough of your arrogance and influence on my daughter.”

Mercury’s wulvers flanked him, their hackles raised and tails puffed, as Sarah and Jesse’s guard crowded behind them.

The tension lightning off the group made Gwen edge aside, crowding Ace. Qasim fidgeted as if he wanted to cut in and apologize to everyone involved.

Sarah took Jesse’s hand, and Jesse’s tail tucked. She half-closed her eyes and looked left and up, bearing her jugular.

Mercury growled something that sounded like approval. Sarah bared her neck next, then he turned his storm-dark eyes on Gwen.

She copied Jesse, showing her throat. Heat flushed her face. When Mercury turned to Ace, Gwen clutched her coat collar around her neck. With his gaze on her vein, she’d felt worthless. If Erhent felt like this all the time, no wonder he so desperately wanted her to see him as something else.

Of course, Ace just returned Mercury’s glare. He leaned in with bared teeth. “I expected nothing less from you.”

She winked. “I’ll take that as a compliment.”
“For now.”

He prowled down the line, pausing for each wilder to show throat. After Rico bared his neck, Mercury simply turned away.

“Thank you for your patience, Qasim. Shall we return to my office?”

Qasim nodded but met Gwen’s gaze for along second, his mouth turned down. He mouthed sorry before following Mercury.

Gwen wiped her throat, as if Mercury had touched her.

#

They didn’t see Qasim again until that evening. Gwen hoped to just sleep off the long night, but Mercury’s favorite wulver, Sirk, knocked at their door a few minutes later with a list of chores direct from Mercury. Ace said they should just blow them off, but Gwen didn’t want it to come back on Erhent and Jack when they returned.

After dark, Qasim ducked into the yurt and sagged against the door. “Gods, I thought he was going to ask me to sleep there if I didn’t get away.”

Ace sat cross-legged by the stove, sharpening their kindling hatchet while Gwen reviewed her constellation flashcards.

“Sucks to be you,” Ace said.

He rapped his knuckles against his stone shoulder pad. “In more ways than one.” He held up a glass mason jar. “But it also means I’m not going to get in trouble for swiping this. Mercury has quite the stash.”

Ace scrambled to her feet. “Shit, nice.”
Qasim unscrewed the lid, the alcohol’s sharpness cut the air. “Shall we?”

Gwen tapped her flashcard stack. “I got to study.”

Ace jerked on her boots. “God, Gwen. You aren’t even in high school anymore.”

She tossed the cards on the table. “I got two weeks, Ace. Two. Then Mercury kicks me out.” The deadline kept her staring at the stars these past nights, sleepless, even though lack of sleep would just make her slower and duller. Still, she positioned her blankets beneath the skylight, hoping to absorb the stars through her dreams.

“What’s going on?” Qasim asked.

Gwen slumped in the chair. “Mercury was not happy when I showed up because I’m human. He told Erhent we only had until the Solstice celebration to become a Starcatcher. So far”—she shrugged—“nothing. We can’t even get past the easy part.”

Ace snatched the notecards. “C’mon, at least complain over a drink.”

They took the mason jar beyond the camp’s light, and Ace made a small campfire for warmth. They huddled over the flames, passing the jar. Ace would name a constellation, and Gwen would point to it, then list all the attributes, general history, astrological connections, interactions with other constellations, and past major uses of magic by other Starcatchers. If she screwed up, they all drank. Qasim claimed it was good for him since the constellations were different here, and he needed to brush up on his history.

The studying only lasted until the moonshine made the stars grow fuzzy. Ace kept prodding Qasim with questions about Palestine politics, but Gwen let their voices fade, focusing on the stars instead. When Erhent first started training her, they spent most nights stargazing, but once she learned the basic constellations and astrological patterns, they switched to quizzing each other inside.
Despite the cold, she wanted the prick of starlight on her skin, almost like rain on the verge of freezing. Erhent talked about the stars as if they were tangible, breakable. As if the starlight was a road he could walk. She only saw dots except on good days, she felt the braille of them.

But what if the stars were roads? What if she just needed to create the path?

She shook her head, forcing the stars into focus, the moonshine bitter on her tongue.

What if the sky dome was just a graph of paper and their tether the ink? What if Erhent was the porchlight welcoming her home after a journey? Her Brightstar.

The sky changed.

For a moment, she saw it all. Every journey she and Erhent would make, every trail blazed by their tether, by his light. Every map burned into the heavens as they spread magic, as it burst over the earth then faded. Gwen charted the stars. They told stories of power.

She blinked, and the stars blinked back.

“Whoa.”

She struggled to stand but fell on her ass like a drunk, nearly hitting Ace. The ground tipped, and stars burned behind her eyes like the first time she saw the tether.

“Shit, watch it.”

Qasim helped her rise. “Gwen, what is it?”

Gwen pointed up. “You—you didn’t see that?”

Ace used a tree to help her stand. “If you say a spaceship I will slap you.”

Gwen shook her head, grinning. Of course, of course. Just like Erhent said, what was the sun but a star—and to her what was a star but a navigational point? She’d grown up around maps and stars, Mom and Mama, enough to know they were both magic and both
combined as humanity used the stars to make their maps. The worn edges, the creases, the colors and formations, legends and scales, stories behind the maps and those that drew them. The stars held a similar power—always calling to humankind, inspiring even to death. How had she not seen it before? Her dependency on maps was part of what made her human. And maps were charted with starlight.

Her throat thickened as she stared at the North Star, then expanded to the Big Dipper. Her mothers, had they known? They’d taught her to read maps on paper and in the night sky. Somehow, they must have sensed what she would become. Even if they weren’t here to see it.

Ace brought her out of it with a hand on her shoulder. “Hey, don’t go all trance on me. What’s up?”

“I know how to make magic.”

“Umm, yeah, I hope so—”

“No, I know how to make magic. Maps. Maps are magic.”

Qasim tilted his head, his obsidian crown glinting in the moonlight. “How much did you drink tonight?”

Gwen hurried toward the yurt. “I’ll show you!” She couldn’t wait to tell Erhent tomorrow. This had to be it, the breakthrough they needed. Once they struck, they’d have a way to make personal spells, just like a real Starcatcher. They wouldn’t have to rely on broad symbols of power like a sun sign.

She called over her shoulder, “Maps are my magic and the stars are points on a map. I just need to figure out what story to tell because all maps tell a story—then magic!”
Ace let out a guttural laugh as she jogged to catch Gwen. “Dude, you aren’t making sense.”

Gwen took her hand and pulled. “I need to show you.”

At the yurt, Gwen dug through her backpack while Ace stacked wood in the stove and Qasim lit fat candles.

She hadn’t opened her bag in weeks, and it smelled like home, like the Pine Barrens’ sandy dampness. She carefully removed a wad of paper held together by rubber bands, which she broke with her teeth. Layer by layer, she peeled off the paper like flower petals, arranging the pieces on the table. Her mother’s maps, blessed by the river.

The stained scraps tugged at her veins, just like the tether. She couldn’t stop grinning. She’d found it, really found it. God, she couldn’t wait until Erhent came back tomorrow.

Ace drew up a chair and straddle it. “All right, Gwen. Show me what you’re on about.”

She tapped a curve in a blue swathe of river. “Here. Imagine if Erhent traced this part of the river between Cetus and Capricorn.”

Qasim leaned over her shoulder. “Which ones are those again?”

Ace bit a splinter from her palm. “The river monsters, right?”

“Right,” Gwen said.

Qasim hovered his finger over the map. “So this line of the river would connect the constellations.”
Gwen grinned. “Exactly! If Erhent released the power by tracing the river in the stars, the physical river would be the perfect channel for me. I can let the magic wash through to the rest of the water and the whole earth.”

Ace shrugged. “I mean, sure. Sounds about as concrete as the rest of what you do.”

Gwen tapped the map. “Except now I know how to see it. That’s what I was missing before. The stars were just stars. But if the stars are part of a map, then I can use that image to guide the magic. And it’s perfect because it’s such a human thing. I mean, animals have migration routes, but they don’t have this.” She held up the water-logged paper. “This is me.”
Ten days before the Solstice, new wilders drifted into camp. The unfamiliar faces reminded Gwen of her failure and her future—ten days until Mercury kicked her out. Even understanding stars through the eyes of her mothers and their maps had done nothing to banish her ghostly flood.

Erhent left the yurt less and less as visitors crowded camp. Twice, Ace and Jack left around midnight and returned an hour later, bloody but swaggering. When Gwen asked, Ace just shrugged and said they had to shut up some rumors. Qasim began walking with Erhent whenever he went outside, which deflated Erhent even more—if that were possible after what Mercury did to him in the yurt. At least Qasim limited the number of insults and nobody tried to hurt Erhent with mountain-boy chatting and telling jokes at his side.

Besides, with Mercury reminding Gwen daily of the deadline, it wasn’t like they had time to sit around the campfires and shoot the shit. The hostility gave them another reason to hole up in the yurt, studying astronomy, astrology, star-charting, navigation—hoping the research would spark some new understanding, a way to strike. They’d quiz each other on what moon sign and day of the week was best for a rain spell? A good crop year or success in battle? What constellations could be seen in which hemispheres and when. As they finished books daily, Sarah or Jesse passed along more. The current stack contained a degree’s worth of math and physics books.

Gwen thumbed a physics textbook. “Great, another impossible task.”

Still, physics was better than talking about their failure to strike, even as they continued to try.
For study breaks, Erhent helped her with Mercury’s tasks such as extra wood-chopping or shortening her run-time up Druid Peak. He rigged a bar between two of the roof supports so she could also fail at chin-ups. When words slurred together on the page, they’d jog around the camp. Gwen waffled between physical and mental exhaustion.

Mercury oversaw her training less and less, instead giving her a list of chores each morning, tacking the list to his door. Each time, she thanked the stars she avoided Mercury telling her, again, that Erhent would be taking her back to New Jersey soon.

Eight days before the Solstice, a scrap of paper fluttered on Mercury’s door—a rough map of the valley with an X marking a location a few miles off. Gwen sighed, her shoulders slumping. She’d hoped to hurry through Mercury’s chores so she could focus on training with Erhent. Instead, she chose a pair of wooden skis from a rack outside the cafeteria.

She made good time, covering the few miles in an hour and a half, mostly due to backtracking while trying to read the map that wasn’t really a real map. Wilders were not mapmakers. Thankfully, Mercury hadn’t tried anything crazy like turn right at the weird iron smell, directions wilders often gave each other.

He did put a stream in her path, Slough Creek if she remembered right, with a large X broken into the snow on the other side. She searched up and down the bank for a crossing but eventually waded, her legs soaked. From the bank, she hadn’t seen the smaller words carved into the snow—*Can you survive the night?*

She groaned and leaned over, her hands on her knees. “Fuck you, too.”

A small copse grew a hundred yards downstream, so she hurried as her legs froze, then ached, then burned, then nothing. Erhent and Jack had drilled the rules of survival into her head, probably expecting Mercury to pull a stunt like this. Shelter first, fire second.
Her grandfather’s hunting knife saved her from failure, and by the time the sun set, she’d built a trench from snow bricks, the floor and walls layered with pine boughs and the roof covered with more branches. A small fire burned just inside the entrance, and she huddled over it, using the heat-reflecting stones ringed around the coals to roast bits of the rabbit she’d snared a few hours ago.

She’d started to doze when the thump-thump of wings made her lean from the trench. A few minutes later, Mercury limped into the fire’s glow.

She swallowed but didn’t say anything. Settling into the silence of emptiness and work had been, well, pleasant, and she didn’t want to break it with someone so unpleasant.

He crouched over the flames, his weight balanced on his strong leg, and held his hands to the warmth. “When you return tomorrow morning, you may consider our lessons finished.” He peered into her shelter, then nodded. “You can mark a direction, shelter yourself, feed yourself, which is truly more than I imagined you capable of.”

Gwen white knuckled the handle of her hunting knife. At least she wouldn’t have to report to him every day.

He extended his other leg and massaged the knee while staring into the fire. “When we first spoke, you promised me that your youth meant you could change, and you have honored that promise. Whether you succeed or fail in casting starmagic this Solstice, know that you have earned my respect.”

She wanted to growl then why did he continue threatening to kick them out? Didn’t they deserve more time? From strangers to starmagic in five weeks had seemed an impossible task, and so far, Mercury’s challenge was proving impossible. Still, breaking her silence to snap at him felt like a bad idea.
He locked her in his stormy gaze. “I say this so you understand what I say next does not come from a place of revulsion. Please, Gwen, be careful of Erhent.”

She huffed and shook her head. “Stop. If we’re done training, then I’m not going to listen to you talk about Erhent.”

He bared his teeth. “I said you were finished in the morning.”

She hugged her knees, the fire hot against her shins. She wanted to kick the embers into Mercury’s face. “If you hate him so much, why did you let us train here? There had to be other camps.”

He rested his cane over his knee. The dark wood reflected the firelight, reminding Gwen when it had been glistening with Erhent’s blood. “Jack was once a brother in arms. If Erhent is truly reformed, then my oversight would only make him better. If the wolf hides with the sheep, then Jack the Hunter, old Jack Lunatic, would want me to expose the Soul-Eater at any price.”

She straightened, pulling her shoulders back and raising her head like she’d seen when the more dominate wulvers intimidated others. “Erhent cares about me, Mercury. I know you can’t comprehend that, but I believe it.”

Mercury smiled and looked as if he were about to pat the top of her head. He stood. “In the future, if you need help, you come to me. Not Jack—me.” He stepped into the darkness.

When Gwen returned to camp the next morning and told Erhent about her night, he’d grinned and said she must’ve really won over Mercury.

Gwen couldn’t help but feel like it didn’t matter. In nine days, Mercury would kick her out, and they weren’t any closer to striking.
Six days. The number settled on Gwen’s chest as she stretched, her bare arms testing the yurt’s chill. Light filtered through the snow capping the skylight. Erhent had let her sleep in. Usually, he woke her by heaving a fresh log into the stove, clanging the door closed. He’d call a good morning, then open the yurt if she still hadn’t shifted, a blast of winter air pushing against the yurt’s heat bubble. Gwen would burrow under the covers, but Erhent left the door open until she finally dashed over and slammed it shut, snarling and shivering. He’d crouch by the fire, grinning and biting his thumbnail through his glove. Jack, Ace, and Qasim had early morning patrol duties most days, so they’d already be gone, their blanket nests cold.

Today, silence spread through the space, and she rose on an elbow.

Erhent slumped over the table, his head pillowed on his arms. Two books spread open in front of him, their pages lifted slightly like wings.

A pang made Gwen sigh. He slept so rarely. Even when he curled up with Jack, she’d wake from a nightmare to find his bright eyes fixed on her, alert and questioning. If the nightmare was bad enough, he’d be the one to wake her, a gloved hand caressing her face. Even though he needed less sleep, he’d looked tired since the bear attack—his face thinner, his eyes alternating from dull to feverishly bright.

She rose, staggering a bit as her balance kicked in. Oh, to have the balance of a wilder. The room’s chill nipped at her bare skin, the long T-shirt Jack had passed onto her only just passing miniskirt length, so she wrapped a blanket around her waist, tying it off. In order to keep her clothes smelling fresh longer, she’d taken Ace’s suggestion and only slept in the long T-shirt, which she’d rinse out and dry every few days.
She stood by the table, watching Erhent’s shoulders rise and fall. A few weeks ago, standing in nothing but a worn-thin T-shirt, would have freaked her out. When Ace arrived, she just stripped naked to sleep the first night, which helped normalize it for Gwen, even if Erhent and Jack hadn’t been shy about showing skin. Qasim tried to act cool, but he kept his head down whenever someone changed, which Gwen thought was cute.

She sat down and copied his pose so they were eye-to-eye. His black hair hid his face, and her fingers shifted to tuck back his tangles, but she paused, her hand hovering. She’d swallowed her silly crush for the most part, but the wilders’ language of touch still went right over her head—she wouldn’t want to make the wrong gesture. She wanted to see his face, see if his eyes were dull or too bright. Sometimes, she worried she failed him by not understanding how wilders valued touch. Ace had started to pick up on it, and would nudge or brush or tug on a shirt. Maybe she should ask her, but she hated being behind, even with another human around.

Erhent shifted, the table groaning. He blew back his hair and peered at her with one eye. “We overslept, hmm?”

“I’m just glad you slept.”

“Oh, you needn’t worry about me.”

She rested a hand on his arm. “I do worry. You’re all I have. You know that, right?”

He took her hand, rubbing his gloved thumb over her knuckles. “I know, I promise.”

She worried he didn’t. If not for Jack, she’d constantly fear Erhent wouldn’t come back some night, either by his own choice or someone else’s—just like at the Park Protectors’ camp.

He frowned. “What’s wrong?”
She sighed. She hated being so freaking easy to read. “Five days. Then what?”

He grinned, though it didn’t reach his eyes. “We become the best Starcatcher there ever was. Legends, just like I promised.”

She used filling the stove as an excuse to pull away. “I mean it. If this is all over in five days—you could move on, with Jack.”

“Gwen.” He padded behind her and held her, his arms around her waist and his warmth spreading across her back. “Name a place you’ve always wanted to visit. Any place.”

*Home.* Even if her house had turned into a forest for fungi, to smell the sandy Pine Barrens, hear the woods whisper, enter the shade on an August afternoon. Maybe Erhent could help her make some sort of grave marker.

“Somewhere warm,” she said to stop Erhent from asking what was wrong again.

“Jack wants that, too. He misses the desert.”

Except Erhent spouted total bullcrap. A few weeks ago, she would’ve believed that line about going anywhere, but he couldn’t, not without putting himself in danger and by extension, the rest of them.

She turned around and placed a hand on each shoulder, staring into his face.

He tilted back his head. “What?”

She’d stared at his face enough from Starcatching to know the angles and shapes, to feel familiarity when she looked at him now and see the exhaustion, the fear and anger twitching right below the surface, like the warning steam from a geyser. It’d grown worse since the new wilders arrived. He acted more sullen, even around Jack.

“Let’s go exploring,” she said. “Get out of camp.”

He raised an eyebrow. “You want to take a break?”
“Yes, one that does not involve push-ups.”

He ducked his head. “I can’t leave camp. You know—”

“Screw it. Mercury’s busy with the preparations, and he’s going to kick us out in six days anyway.”

“We should keep trying to strike.”

They attempted to strike a few times a day, but it usually ended with Erhent’s ghosts surrounding Gwen. Sometimes the broken house filled with dark trees would release a torrent of water, washing away everything. After so many failures, Erhent’s ghosts filled Gwen’s nightmares. She wondered if he dreamed about her flood.

“Then let’s do it somewhere beautiful, away from Mercury and his wolfboys. Yellowstone’s been on my bucket list since I was, like, twelve.”

He clapped his gloved hands together. “Then dress warmly. After a day together in the vastness of Yellowstone, perhaps we will strike.”

Erhent searched for their National Park Service maps while she sorted through the pile of clothes left near enough to the stove they didn’t feel like ice. “Damn it, Jack’s wearing his sex jeans.”

She smirked as Erhent’s voice rose an octave. “What?”

“Those tight jeans he wears before you two sneak into the woods.” She glanced over her shoulder. Erhent braced against the table, his face flushed and eyes bright.

“Oh my god, you’re totally blushing.” She tugged on a pair of long underwear, then jeans Ace had donated to the pile.

“Soul-Eaters don’t blush.”

“Soulkind.”
He rolled his eyes. “Gods, Jack has convinced everyone.”

She pulled on a wool sweater that hung past her hips. “You know, you can always tie a sock to the door or something.” She nudged him as she sat at the table, her feet propped on the second chair.

He flicked a paper wad at her. “Did you find something warm enough without stealing Jack’s jeans?”

“The sex jeans?”

“Those are the only long pants that fit him!”

She swallowed a laugh, pressing a hand to her mouth. “Oh, they fit all right.”

He glared, but a smile tugged at his lips. “If you don’t stop, I’ll tell Qasim how many times I’ve caught you looking at his ass.”

She hurled the paper ball at Erhent’s face, but he ducked. “Don’t you dare.”

Sunrays from the yurt’s skylight slanted over Erhent’s face as he grinned—young and old at the same time. “Then stop talking about sex jeans.” He spread a tattered NPS map on the table. “Where do you want to visit?”

“Wherever gets us back in time for you and Jack to—”

“Stop!” he said, laughing. A real laugh that reached his eyes and broke apart the worry in Gwen’s chest.

She let him choose the spots since he’d been in Yellowstone before, and he X’ed locations they had to visit. A day off to spend in Yellowstone. Her prospects a month ago were saving enough money from two fast food jobs to move out of the high school gym.

She caught Erhent staring while she scanned the map. She tilted her head, like she’d seen Jack do to signal a question.
“I’ve seen a century pass,” he said, “and you’ve not seen two decades. Yet, here we are.”

“Maybe that’s why I’m a terrible anchor. I’m young and your ass is ancient.”

He folded the map and tucked it inside his coat. “Maybe I’m a terrible starwalker. Or tonight could be the night. The moon is?” He gave her a look.

She squinted the skylight. “Uh, full. Duh, yeah, it’s full tonight.”

He snatched an old army duffle bag from a hook in the ceiling. “I’m sure a few of the dogs will be up for a run. You ask, and I’ll gather some supplies and meet you outside the tree line.”

#

Gwen hunkered behind Erhent’s narrow shoulders as the dogs followed the road through Lamar Valley. Sunlight glittered off the snow, and the sky stretched clear and winter blue. Gwen leaned back and raised her hands to the sky. Erhent called, “Let’s go, let’s go!” to the four canines—a wolfdog and three coydogs who had trotted from their dens when Gwen asked if anyone wanted to go for a run around the park. They shot down the hard-packed road. She howled.

First, Erhent stopped at a pull-off half an hour from camp. Unlike Gwen, he only wore his usual clothes and coat with the addition of a black knit hat.

“As far as Yellowstone goes,” he said, “this isn’t one of the many wonders, but it is my favorite view of the valley.”
Here, no machinery marred the vista. Lamar Valley’s ridgeline cast a shadow along the snowy bottom, and only the shrinking shadow marked time. Bison herds moved slowly as clouds. A coyote’s bark echoed, causing the dogs to shift and whine.

“Why do they want to destroy it?” Gwen whispered.

“I don’t know. I’m not human.”

#

They traveled for hours, stopping whenever Gwen pointed to a sight or Erhent sensed they’d neared a spot on their map (he rarely opened it, operating on a sixth sense). For lunch, they disembarked at the Mammoth Hot Springs warming hut. They had the hut to themselves, a quaint log cabin with a pump for snowmobile fuel. Erhent suggested she explore the area’s namesake while he prepared lunch, so she climbed the walkway leading around the pyramid-esque formation, the dogs following her. Hot springs steamed and ran down the mineral-covered rocks, a warm mist bathing her. Snow piled on the formation’s dry parts but couldn’t conquer the water.

Gwen returned even hungrier, expecting the usual dried rabbit or squirrel meat, but Erhent had spread a wool blanket on the floorboards, though she could barely see the check pattern for all the food. Cheese, white bread, dried fruit, nuts, apples, canned peaches in thick syrup, hard boiled eggs, thinly sliced meat, and smoked salmon. Two thermoses set to the side.

Erhent sat cross-legged before the feast. “How much do you think we can finish off?”
Gwen had learned to enjoy the camp food, usually stews with root vegetables, but whether the travel had stirred her hunger or Erhent simply knew her tastes, she packed away more food than she had since her arrival.

Afterward, she stretched on the warm floorboards, a mug of cider balanced on her gut. The other thermos had contained vanilla sauce topping for dessert—bread pudding.

She tipped her head, looking at him upside-down. “Thank you, Erhent.”

“It’s as much of a treat for me as it is for you.”

“Liar. Besides, you did all the work.”

Erhent tossed a cashew into the air and caught it on his tongue. “Jesse and Sarah go on about being partners, but perhaps we should be better friends first.” As if embarrassed by the sentiment, he made a show of cleaning the vanilla sauce off the inside of the thermos with his finger.

Gwen crossed her arms behind her head. “Do you think that’s possible? Like you said, I’m a toddler compared to your century.”

He licked the sauce from his fingers. “I don’t see you that way. Neither does Jack.”

She almost asked what he did see, but it sounded like compliment fishing. Besides, she wouldn’t believe him. She began cleaning up the leftovers.

Erhent touched her arm. “Sit for a moment. Moonrise is a long time off.”

She poured herself more cider and filled Erhent’s mug when he held it out.

“Gwen, this needs to work tonight.”

The sweet steam bathed her face. “I know we are running out of time.”

Six days before Mercury would kick them out. He was probably planning the best way to humiliate them right now.
“We can’t tread the same ground tonight,” he said.

“You have an idea?”

He fiddled with folding the cloth wrappings he’d packed the food in. “Perhaps if I tell you the stories of my ghosts, it will change something.”

She stared out the window, watching the hot springs steaming. It reminded her of the volcano below, waiting. “And I tell you about the flood.”

“The last thing I want to do is slice open old scars, but I don’t know what else to do.”

“Worth a shot, at least.” Already, her chest ached. It’d been such a nice day, too, but that’s what the flood did. It leaked into all her memories and left stains on the new ones.

His face looked drawn, the oldest she’d seen—at least fifty, if she’d passed him on the street. “May I go first?”

She nodded.

He settled cross-legged, his back straight. “The three indistinct figures, the younger ones. They are simple to explain.” He picked at his gloves, staring at his hands. “First, you must understand how my society functions. There’s a caste system, you might call it. Lowborn and Highborn. As it sounds, the Lowborn are something like peasants, if peasants were also used as a food source. When prey is scarce, the Highborn feed on the Lowborn rather than resort to feeding on non-sentient beings like trees. Over generations, this split has created physical differences. Lowborn are small, slight.” He hunched his shoulders.

“Highborn are tall, broad. The difference has earned the Lowborn the title runts. We are taught deference to the Highborn, to follow their requests no matter what they may be unless we find ourselves and our families fed upon in lean times—or just for the fun of it.”
He rubbed his face, fingering the scars left by the Soul-Eater. “Those figures are the specters of the different Highborn who have made . . . requests of me.”

Gwen scooted beside him and took his hand in both of hers. She hesitated, then leaned her head against his shoulder like Jack did on occasion. Tension radiated from Erhent, as if each word twisted a screw, winding him tighter.

Erhent squeezed her hand. “Now, the tall soulkind. As a child, I would dream he was my father. My mother was impregnated during a joining between two clans, which involves mostly random rutting among the clan members. For the Highborn, it’s a celebration. For the Lowborn, a nightmare.”

His voice deepened, an edge hardening his word. “My mother would tell me the only one she remembered that night was him, one of the clan leaders, because he’d been kind.” He bared his teeth. “A rarity, such a rarity for a beautiful Lowborn like her.” He smelled hot, of char and smoke. “I inherited some of her beauty and was considered pretty—for a runt. So the tall woman took me, made me part of her personal consort. I was her pretty, breakable doll—sometimes her prey, sometimes her pet.” He screwed his eyes shut. “God, I worshipped her. I didn’t know how else to survive.”

When he didn’t continue, Gwen said, “But you did survive, and you are where you’re supposed to be.” She laced her fingers with his.

He sighed. “Those are my ghosts—well, some of them.”

“Thank you for sharing.” Her mothers had always said that to her and to each other after a difficult conversation. Until now, she hadn’t understood why, hadn’t felt the weight of each word dropping like a stone.

He exhaled, his breath scented with wood smoke. “Let’s hope it’s not in vain.”
“My turn, then.”

He shifted so he faced her. They still held hands like when they tried to strike. At first, she spoke with her head down, staring at the blanket’s checked pattern, but when she glanced up, she caught his bright gaze, his dark eyes shining as if with an inner light, unlike any other wilder. So she told the story to him, anchoring in his steady look.

She told how the dam should have been repaired long ago, how a stress test had been done just a week before, claiming it was safe—but it wasn’t. She described the streetlight spearing through her window, how her mothers screamed and screamed for her to run, and she did. How her trapped foot had pinned her and she seemed to stand on the asphalt while the water raged. She told him the part nobody else knew, about the otterwoman who had breathed into her, who had said to follow the stars. That part made Erhent’s eyes flash, and he softly smiled.

She choked up when she told about going back home for the first time, when she really understood her mothers weren’t waiting somewhere. She looked away as a subdued sob shook her. “Sorry. I’m fine.”

He pulled her close. “You’re not. Neither am I.”

Another sob swelled, and she couldn’t stop it. She’d only cried once for her mothers, at the mass funeral the city held, and that had just been leaking. She didn’t dare cry in the gym—didn’t dare show that weakness. Now, months later, in front of the guy who needed her to be tough, the sobbing started.

She tried to curl into herself, but Erhent clasped her tighter. He was shaking—no, crying, too. His tears wet her shoulder.

They held each other for a long time.
Gwen stepped off the sled runners and hugged herself. Without Erhent’s warmth, the
cold stripped through her layers. Sunset rimmed the hills and the temperature dropped each
minute. Her snot-stuffed nose felt like a block of ice.

Erhent had pulled the sled off the road in a hilly area near the Mammoth terraces
Gwen had explored. Sparking could take them an hour or more, so standing on a snowy hill
wasn’t the best option, but Erhent assured Gwen he had the perfect spot.

“I thought you said we were going somewhere warm.”

Erhent tugged two blankets from the sled’s bags. “Just wait.” He took her hand and
led her through the snow. His face looked raw, too, red-eyed and blotchy.

A few sets of boot prints and two old ski trails created a makeshift path, guiding them
down the easiest slopes toward a river breathing steam. A sulfurous smell mixed with the bite
of snow on the wind.

“Boiling River,” Erhent said. “Where the runoff from the Mammoth Hot Springs
meets the Gardner River. I can’t think of a more powerful place for you, my anchor, than a
river sharing your name.”

The last sunrays set the snow on fire and cast rainbows through the steam. The full
moon commanded the darkening sky. A deep silence fell with the darkness until only the
shushing of the river remained. To know that she might be the only human for miles—that
simple aloneness made the place feel magical.
A rough fence lined a portion of the steep bank and marked a gentle drop leading to the water. Erhent brushed snow off the top rail and rested against it. Gwen stood on the bottom rail and leaned over the water, the blooming steam washing her face. When she pulled back, the cold nipped at her damp skin.

“This is a good place,” she said, her voice just above a whisper.

“Should we try in the river? It will be warmest there.”

Gwen unlaced her boots.

#

They stood in the shallows, facing each other. Gwen’s feet ached after the brief moments in the snow, but the water warmed her slowly. It rippled around their shins, their pant legs rolled above their knees.

Erhent had left his gloves with his boots, and unlike at camp, he didn’t automatically hide his hands. He dipped his hands in the water, then ran his dripping fingers over his face and through his hair. It seemed appropriate, so Gwen also swirled her hands through the warm water, then offered them to Erhent.

As the sunlight faded into valley shadow, the rising full moon turned the snowless banks black. Beyond the river’s warmth, the silver snow remained and reflected the sky’s brightness, a land of light and shadow.

Erhent gripped her hands, and they closed their eyes.
A pulse thrummed in his fingers as they twined with Gwen’s, and the unnatural warmth of his palms spread heat along her arms. She matched her breath to his and retreated into her dreamscape.

Except when she opened her eyes, it had changed. The wave wasn’t waiting outside the house but had already crashed through the picture window, tendrils of water and glass swirling toward her an inch per second. Like an eclipse, darkness crept through the room, and the roof groaned, water slowly leaking and dripping onto her head.

*Oh god, not again, not again.*

A cold touch gripped her fingers, and when she dragged her gaze from the slow-motion wave, she stared right into Erhent’s shining eyes.

He wrapped his arms around her. His voice brushed her thoughts. *You’re an anchor.*

*You can survive this.*

It collapsed. A great pressure whipped across her back, dragging at her clothes, her legs, her hair. Water stole her breath and crushed her ribs. The current swept at her feet, but Erhent only hugged her harder, hiding her face against his coat while he buried his face in her hair. The water sucked at him, prying fingers between them, but she dug in her heels and clenched fistfuls of his coat.

The cold weight eased, and the current pulling her legs slowed to a sad tugging.

They both came up for air with a gasp. Water dripped from their hair, running down their faces into their mouths, and they coughed.

A circle of debris had formed around their legs, and Gwen stumbled out of it, crunching over empty picture frames, clay flower pots, coffee mugs.
The dreamscape had changed to Erhent’s nightmares. The flood had shorn off the roof, and the stars hung too close. Nebulas tinted the moon red so it hung swollen like a pomegranate. Stars burned strangely bright, but in familiar forms—the Big Dipper, Draco, Orion’s belt—the components of their magic.

As before, shaggy, primordial ficus trees grew from the house, their trunks too wide for Gwen to stretch her arms around.

Erhent’s face folded into fear. He staggered toward the still standing doorframe, though the door had washed off its hinges.

She wanted to call to wait, and just as she reached for him, he crossed the threshold.

Other hands hauled him outside.

She ran to the doorway and braced against it. The same five Soul-Eaters circled him. He looked so small before them, and he made himself smaller, hunching his shoulders and bowing his head, his knees bent as if expecting a blow.

The tall male took him by the throat and threw him to the ground. As he tried to stand, the three younger figures darted forward. They kicked and stomped on him.

She screamed to fight, and more words came, the phrases foreign to her. You can bend the light of stars to your will! You walk among the powers of ancient creation. You breathe stardust. You are more than them!

The woman stopped the beating with a raised hand. The Soul-Eaters stepped aside.

Erhent crawled toward the house and Gwen. Blood dripped from his mouth and streamed from his nose.
Gwen wanted to run to him, but what could she do? Even if she knew how to fight, she couldn’t take on five. They would drag her away like before, and it would hurt before she woke. Another failed attempt at striking.

The woman placed a foot on Erhent’s back and forced him to stop crawling, to press himself into the dirt. She laughed, the sound like breaking glass.

This scene differed in one way from the dozen other times it had played out. Gwen never stood in her house, only saw it from the outside. As Gwen knew from scavenging ruins, the flood always left the strangest things behind—a single book on a shelf, a shirt still on the hanger. So she looked beside the door where her mothers had an umbrella stand, except amidst the umbrellas there had been an axe, kept handy after threats from neo-Nazis turned into a brick through the window.

Gwen faced the corner and the umbrella stand waited for her, except it held two axes. She took both.

She sprinted, tossing an axe toward Erhent and raising the other. Erhent’s reminders from when he taught her to chop wood rang in her head. *Aim through the wood, otherwise you’ll only bury your axe head and not split the piece.*

She aimed through the woman. The Soul-Eater burst into a blood mist.

Erhent struggled to his feet, hefting the axe. They stood back to back as the four ghosts circled them.

The Soul-Eaters attacked at once, swirling in like rolling fog. Gwen ruptured a young one with an overhead blow just as another collided with her. His touch burned as he grappled her, but she’d kept one hand on her axe. She smashed it into his head, and he turned to blood mist, soaking her clothing.
She scrambled up just as Erhent hacked into the final ghost—the tall man—and split him from head to chest. The Soul-Eater evaporated in a red cloud.

Erhent let out a half sob, half groan and dropped the axe. He staggered, but Gwen ran to him, hugging him and letting him lean on her. They sunk to their knees together, sticky with blood.

Erhent released a breathy laugh. *Oh, god, can you feel it?* He looked at the too-close stars. *I could touch them if I wanted.* He raised a blood-splattered hand.

A tingling spread through Gwen as if she’d felt a chill. Erhent was outlined in silver and weightless in her arms. She clenched a fistful of his collar.

*Don’t you dare leave me here.*

*Can’t you feel it?*

She tilted her head. The stars—they were right there, within reach! The constellations felt connected, radiating veins of power promising magic. The power flared inside her, burning in her gut.

*We did it, Erhent.*

He slowly drew his gaze back to her and grinned. He rested his forehead against hers and placed both hands on her shoulders.

Gwen closed her eyes and felt water stirring around her shins. She gasped, and her eyes snapped open.

The moon bloomed over them, turning the world bright as ice. Erhent stumbled in the river, nearly slipping, all while laughing, catching his breath, and trying to talk. “Gwen, I could have leapt into the stars! God, they were right there. Right there!”
No longer clutching each other, it became obvious the moon wasn’t the only silver light.

“Uh, is this normal?”

A silver thread unspooled from the veins in her right wrist, coming out her palm. It fell through her fingers and lit a silver crack beneath the water, leading to Erhent. He raised his right foot. The silver thread pierced his skin, entering the veins in the top of his foot and webbing around his ankle before disappearing.

Erhent poked the thread, then held it. He pulled, and Gwen’s hand dipped forward. The tether-tug in her veins, as if Erhent drew deeply at a part of her, made Gwen gasp.

“It must be the tether,” he said.

Gwen twisted her wrist, wrapping the silver light around her hand until it went taut to Erhent’s foot. “I thought that was metaphysical or something. Like the dreamscape.”

“I believe it’s supposed to be.”

He plucked the line, and it vanished like lightning.
Part V, Snow and Stars

Interlude

Noah savored walking between worlds. From corporate tower to snowy wood, he plied his power. Once he’d come off the ice and revealed what he was to the Dark Stars, their plans had changed. Here was Extinction staring them in the eye. So they fed him.

Business executives, lobbyists, professors, scientists, public relations experts. He collected lifetimes of knowledge, though humankind lives were so very short. He drained them all.

Today, he posed in a long winter coat before the purified whiteness of his AquaCore camp as reporters questioned him about the recent break-in, the graffiti, the strange tracks crisscrossing the snow. The reporters asked if he would blame the protestors.

He flashed his teeth, something between a snarl and a grin—the look that had plastered his face on their screens, had what passed for pretty humans following him at events. “Without evidence, I refuse to cast blame. The police will investigate, and we will go from there.” He unbuttoned his coat and shrugged it off, handing it to his assistant while he rolled up his sleeves. “Now, I have work to do. If you’ll excuse me.” He joined a few men scrubbing off graffiti. The smell of them made his mouth flood, made his stomach stir, but there would be time for that later. For now, he joked and scoured and made a pretty picture.

The Dark Stars didn’t like his publicness, but what could they do—stop him? If the protests were splashed over the news, then he would be there, too. He found it fascinating more companies hadn’t chosen this route—the charmer, the loveable playboy who really understood what the protestors wanted. Humankind in the United States had written it into
their foundations: Odysseus, Bacchus, Solomon, Hugh Hefner, Bruce Wayne. They wished him to come and flash his flawless teeth and explain he truly wanted what the protestors wanted, but the world wasn’t perfect. Tell them why the police had to raid the Lamar Valley camp right before Christmas, explain it was for the safety of all, that the last thing he wanted was more missing activists. You must understand, he would say the day after, it was for the good of all involved.

Perhaps the humankind behind his competition had chosen to trust politicians and forgotten the will of the people.

Noah would never forget. Not again.

So he would placate them, smile, answer their questions, kiss them, fuck them, whatever they needed to forget.

Once the reporters finished snapping shots, he returned to his modular office, a prowl in his step as his hunger grew. The Dark Stars always made sure his meals waited, ready how he liked. He scented the fear of his food before he entered and flexed his fingers.

His hunger burned into rage when he opened the door. The tiny trailer stunk of god, and the offender sat at his desk, feet propped on a stack of papers.

Noah grinned. “I wondered how long it would take before one of you showed up.”

The god wore tight jeans, a black T-shirt, and a leather jacket. The musky, horse barn smell teased Noah’s memory.

The god looked him up and down. “So it’s true. But how have you returned?”

“Your stupid humans have fucked this place so hard the glaciers are dying. And freeing whatever they were created to protect.”

The god sniffed, wrinkling his nose. “Just one of you.”
“For now.”

A whimper made them look toward the couch where Noah’s assistant had left a girl tied, blindfolded, and gagged.

Noah perched on the armrest, crossing his legs. “If you wouldn’t mind, I prefer to eat in private.” He motioned to the girl. “Unless you would like to join me? I could make her worship you however you please.” He touched her head and fed enough to weaken her will, to take a taste of her soul, delightfully sour with fear. He turned her to his desire—silence.
She could scream for him later.

The god sneered. “We prefer real devotion, which you may be in a position to encourage.” He stood and paced around the desk. “Here’s what I can’t figure out. Why Yellowstone? It’s of little value to you. And gods, this has been taking months.”

“Hope,” Noah said. He glanced out the window. A squall darkened the mountains. “It gives the humans hope. That was my mistake before.”

The god brushed back his pale hair. “You might find us more amendable to your desires, especially if your kind force the humans to place their hope in the gods. Well, any god other than fucking Jesus.”

“I can handle him.”

“If we control their hope and you control their population, maybe we can save something of this planet.” The god strolled toward the door but paused and gripped Noah’s shoulder. “Show us how you and the Dark Stars handle the Yellowstone situation. The Dark Stars have disappointed us in the past—see that you don’t.”
As the god left, Noah twisted on his perch. “Remind me again, which one are you?”

He wanted to laugh as the god stiffened, his shoulders hunching and head lowering as if he expected to gore something. He braced against the doorframe and glanced over his shoulder.

He winked.

The human tied on the couch exploded, spraying blood on the walls. The white space spelled a name.

*Loki*
CHAPTER 28.

The first night of the Solstice celebration, a twelve-foot pyre lit the camp. Holly, mistletoe, and pine decorated two massive tables situated parallel, the pyre between them. Smaller fires lined the outside of the seating area, creating a hall of warmth.

A few days ago when the camp and surrounding woods had begun to fill up, Jesse explained that other wilders from the greater Wyoming, Montana, and Idaho areas had come to pay their respects and celebrate, showing their value to the Kurultai by gifts of food, furs, herbs, tools, magic. Unlike the Druid Peak wilders with nonnative backgrounds, these wilders were mostly native—bisonkinds, bearkinds, elkkins, treekinds.

Once it became clear Gwen and Erhent would be able to cast successfully on the Winter Solstice, Sarah and Jesse scheduled Gwen, Ace, and Qasim for an etiquette lecture, where they broke down the Solstice celebration. Jack even made Erhent show up for most of it since it’d been decades since they celebrated with a clan rather than on their own. The core idea, as Jesse put it, was a four-day celebration with each day representing a season. Day one, spring and more generally, a celebration of the cycle of life.

As part of the celebration, no extra food was prepared. Instead, day one was a hunting day, and the most successful hunter would be given gifts by the rest of the camp as thanks for their year-long work. The kills would be butchered and prepared as the first feast that night.

As clan leaders lined up to greet Mercury, a group of mountain goat satyrs played pipes and small stringed instruments. Their music intertwined with the crackling fire until the sounds glittered and popped like sparks.
Gwen and Erhent chose seats at an empty section of the long table. A trio of wolfkind approached Mercury where he reigned behind a polished slab carved from one giant trunk, the pyre behind him. The trio deposited hide bags of what looked like dried meat and bone tools.

Gwen tossed the contents of an abandoned mug and searched for a pitcher. “Paying tribute seems rather medieval. I thought wilders were about wildness, freedom, and all that.”

“They were,” Erhent said. “Gatherings like this were private, among members of a certain kind or place—not so wide ranging.”

“What changed?”

He snatched a jug from further down the table, sniffed it, then poured two mugs. “The Kurultai leaders want us to have an identity, to feel bound to each other. Otherwise, how can we defeat the Dark Stars?” He raised his mug. “For better or worse, here we are.”

Gwen clacked her wooden mug against his and took a long drink—a sweet, wheat beer with the bite alcohol at the end, the promise of getting very drunk.

Erhent grinned. “You wanted some revelry.”

She downed her mug, and Erhent refilled it.

Gwen remained beside Erhent as the celebration grew. According to Jesse and Sarah, the first day wasn’t too wild—folks were just getting warmed up. The party really started tomorrow on the day meant to represent summer.

While they watched, Erhent explained some of the traditions, like candle colors or certain toasts called on the hour. She asked questions about the wilders that didn’t live in camp: how they stayed hidden, how big were their clans, how could the land still support them? They were easy to spot—shaggy, dressed in furs, sticking to their own kind.
The best part was when a pack of diredragons flew in from the Rocky Mountains’ foothills, guttering the bonfire. The *thump-thump* of their wings drowned the music, and conversations paused under the onslaught. Mercury rose to greet them. Gwen half-stood, searching for Daði and Daðey. They stood behind the leader, a three-tailed diredragon with blue scales and black fur.

Gwen elbowed Erhent. “Let’s say hi!”

He’d nodded for her to go on. “They might not want to be associated with me at this celebration.”

Gwen rolled her eyes, but Erhent stared into his cup, so she motioned over Qasim and Ace, then waited to the side as the diredragons finished bowing to Mercury.

Daði and Daðey must’ve smelled Gwen because they turned to her as soon as Mercury dismissed them. Daðey trotted over, their tail wagging, and rubbed their face like a cat on Gwen’s shoulder. She scratched the side of their neck. “Good to see you, too.”

Qasim half-bowed, while Ace just grinned, finally muttering, “Damn.” Gwen introduced them.

Daði’s tail brushed Gwen’s leg. “I am gladdened to see you and Erhent becoming whole. I worried for you as word on the wind is the camp falters.”

Ace crossed her arms. “The Park Protectors are doing just fine—”

Daði stretched their wings, then refolded them. “I did not mean your kind.”

Jack trotted up, speaking in some sort of canine language. Daðey lowered on their front paws, then pounced. Jack dodged before tackling them while Daði smiled in the way only dogs can. The other diredragons called for Daði and Daðey, and they joined a flock of griffins flown in from the Gallatin Range.
Gwen returned to Erhent. While nobody came near their spot at the table, the wilders tolerated, if ignored him. At such a gathering of what her culture called monsters, Gwen expected to feel unnerved, even afraid, but too much laughter rang out. Wulvers danced with bisonkind, and river nymphs drank with an envoy of lava-skinned Beings (Erhent said they were representatives of Yellowstone’s volcano). Qasim joined the Beings, then switched to dancing with the nymphs when they fawned over him.

Jack finally sat down, nudging between Gwen and Erhent. He slung his arms around them. “What’s to eat?” Wilders had sought him out all night, sometimes forming a line. Even representatives from visiting clans greeted him with the same bows and forehead-to-forehead gestures they gave Mercury.

When Erhent had caught her watching, he said, “It’s easy to forget the honor he gave up for me.”

Now, Jack leaned into Erhent, whispering something that made him smirk. He reached down the table and snatched a flask. “Come now, your mugs are empty. What’s this on the first night of Solstice?”

Before Gwen could drink with them, Ace dragged her away, saying that the fey envoy wanted to meet her. She led Gwen to a low table beneath an oak tree that Gwen would’ve sworn hadn’t grown there the night before. Green flame burned in a silver bowl on the table, casting a springlike warmth. The gathered wilders differed from the rugged hunters and fighters that filled the camp. Their faces reminded her of Erhent: human but troubling, something unfamiliar she couldn’t place.

Most fey looked humanoid with pointed ears, though some had folded wings, too. She recognized one creature from her childhood books—brownies. The small furry humanoids
darted beneath the table, sometimes running into the fray of larger wilders and returning with a prize: a tuft of fur, a bootlace.

Other wilders relaxed at the fey table, mostly the types that inspired stories about elves, dryads, and satyrs. They’d undressed in the warmth while the fey wore gossamer gowns and shirts clinging like spiderweb.

The fey across from Gwen had dark skin with an afro of silver hair. Ace introduced her as The Meadow.

The Meadow extended her hand in such a human gesture Gwen felt instantly at ease with her silky wings and sweeping, pointed ears. “Ace has been sharing part of your story. My kind always live closer to humankind than others, but the changes in your world have driven us apart. I know of your flood because we also suffered.”

The Meadow and other fey asked questions. They understood the flood had been caused by a structural failure in the dam but couldn’t fathom why the humans had allowed such a failure in the beginning—or why the dam even existed.

Gwen explained what she knew about the town’s history, how the dam and the lake it produced had once been a tourist attraction, then supposedly for hydro-energy. Ace helped her with some of the larger political ideas, talking more than Gwen ever heard at one time.

Ace leaned forward, her elbows settled on the table. “See, first, before you understand how anybody could let a flood take out a town, you have to understand that our country is run by the wealthiest of the wealthiest, and they buy out the politicians. If a politician wants to get votes from the normal people, they have to make ads and travel around and promise all these things with pretty enough language to get the votes. Then, they got to fulfill enough of the promises to get elected again. But they need money to do all this. Where do they get the
money? The company owners who have all the wealth by making the average person pay out the ass for healthcare or half-decent food—or by not spending money on safety, like in Gwen’s case.”

She touched Ace’s shoulder. “Qasim’s calling for me. Be right back.”

He wasn’t. He leaned against a tree where Jack and Erhent drank, all three watching the best hunter (Sirk—Mercury’s favorite wulver), being crowned with holly branches as recognition for his year-long work.

Gwen skirted the crowd. Maybe in a few years, the righteous anger over what had happened would ignite and make it easier to talk about her mothers’ deaths like another political campaign but not tonight. For this celebration, she wanted to forget as much as she could. She snatched an abandoned bottle that still sloshed. If it took alcohol and whatever the wilders called fun to forget, then she’d do it.

Qasim shifted so she could lean against the trunk without poking herself on a shoulder spike. She swigged from the bottle—mead, from the honied muskiness—and passed it.

Qasim took a long draw, then sighed. “There’s no reason this stupid stone should change my metabolism, but I am having no luck getting drunk.”

“Well, maybe your grandfather doesn’t want you to have any fun.”

“You have no idea.” He drained the bottle. “Thanks to Pop, I can navigate a party with the children of ambassadors but not this.”

“You and me both.”

“You weren’t born wild?”
She called to Erhent for another bottle, and he handed her a wine flask. After a swig, she said, “Erhent and Jack found me a few months ago.”

She focused on Erhent instead of Qasim. He smiled, for once, as some very drunk wulvers toasted Mercury. Jack laughed, hiding his face in Erhent’s shoulder. She knew what Qasim would ask next—what all new kids asked, where you’re from, what do your parents do, where they were now. The last questions she wanted to answer. “My turn.” She faced him, her heartbeat quickening. “You said your grandfather sent you away—why, if you don’t mind me asking?”

Redness spread over his skin until it glided into stone. “Sixteen human years. I’m no good so young, not when I would be counseling those who have lived fifty, a hundred, two hundred years. I need to mature.” He picked at black stone scabbing his knuckles, prying off a chunk. “As if I were a bottle of wine set to age rather than his grandson.”

“Well,” Gwen said, “I’m glad you’re here. I’m tired of being the only one. I feel like a baby around all these folks.”

He grasped her hand. “We will just have to prove them wrong together.”

Gwen froze, not sure what to make of his gritty palm but gentle fingers. If a regular wilder had taken her hand, she wouldn’t have thought much of it. They were a touchy-feely crew, but Qasim wasn’t a wilder, at least, not like Erhent or Jack.

Mercury managed to end the wulvers’ drunken speech by signaling some of the musicians clustered around the fire. They struck up a reel, pipes blaring and violins nearly screeching. Ace hurried over from the fey table and called to Gwen.
“I know this one!” She took a place in a slowly forming line, surrounded by bearkind, wulvers, elkkind, elves, even a “regular” wolf Gwen had wrongly assumed was an animal companion. “It’s fun, I promise!”

Gwen pulled Qasim’s hand. “Let’s dance.”

He let her go. “I don’t want to hurt anyone.” He shrugged a shoulder, stone grinding.

She hesitated, but he told her to go just as Ace hollered again.

The dance involved a lot of passing partners, but once Gwen caught the rhythm, it made sense. Not separating the partners by gender screwed with her head for the first round until she oriented by direction rather than male and female, the pattern clicked into place.

She danced for hours, only pausing to gulp the closest mug of alcohol. In the twists and turns of the music—so alien to the thrumming bass she’d only danced to before—her humanness fell away. Maybe it was the drink, but her body felt just that, a body, something to be enjoyed whether she had claws and fur or skin and fingernails. One type of physicality among so many other forms, none elevated above others in the dance.

Nearing midnight, a slower song broke the dancers into couples, and the musicians called for a celebration of spring. Jesse had explained during her the two-hour sex portion of the Solstice lecture, that on the first day it was customary to mate as a way of honoring the coming spring and to complete the cycle of the morning’s hunting—death and life. Ace had left hours ago when an elf from Idaho, her skin like ice, had sauntered up and offered a hand.

Ace grinned and drawled, “Hope you aren’t as breakable as you look.”

The ice elf had bared her iciclelike teeth. “You’re one to talk, human.”

Ace had taken her hand, and the elf had practically dragged her into the woods.
Nobody approached Gwen, and she wasn’t sure she wanted them to. She shifted away from the slow-dancers, some already departing for the woods, and searched for her pack—Erhent’s favorite description of them in his idealistic moments. The word came easier after a few drinks.

She spotted Erhent and Jack near the bonfire, but halfway toward them, Erhent touched Jack’s shoulder and left, heading for their yurt. Jack stared after him with such a longing that Gwen felt the pang halfway across camp. Jack must’ve sensed her watching, because he met her gaze and flashed a half-smile that didn’t reach his eyes.

He padded to her, and they stood at the outskirts of another dance, something old with drums and deep thrumming voices.

Jack flicked his tail against her leg. “Enjoying your first Solstice?”

“Well enough.”

“Have you celebrated spring yet?”

She shook her head and crossed her arms. He nudged her. “Me neither. Too risky.”

“That sucks.”

Jack’s ears flattened. “We’re used to it. Have your eye on anyone?”

She almost said Qasim but only shrugged. “Just when in Rome, you know?”

He rested a hand on her shoulder. “Remember, a wilder can feel another’s look.” He turned, and Gwen followed his gaze. A lithe willow spirit, more fog and foliage than bodied, swayed in the shade of a willow tree (which had also magically appeared since Gwen swore there had been no willow trees near camp). Her green eyes, glowing in the shade and the darkness, pinned Jack. He closed his eyes and inclined his head. The willow spirit moved on.

“If you’re worried,” Jack said, “it’s the best of the human world—”
“God, Jack, I’ve done it before.” Heat rushed over her face. She elbowed him. “I’m not having this conversation with you.” The last time had been with Zeke. God, she hadn’t thought about him in weeks. How could she be so selfish—even if there was no way to help him out here, she could at least remember him.

Jack’s tail curled around her leg. “What’s wrong? I’ve upset you.”

“No, no. It’s fine. I had a boyfriend back home—back in the Pine Barrens, I mean.”

Jack faced her, crouching so they were eye-to-eye. “Oh, Gwen, I’m sorry. I should have asked. Do you miss him?”

“His—his name was Zeke.” She chewed on her lip. “I forgot about him. He went to the hospital the night I met you. So much has happened since then, but I just forgot.”

Jack drew her into a hug, and she hid her face in the hollow of his neck. His sandy, sunlight smell eased her sudden ache. He murmured in his canine language, the words thrumming through his chest, and he brushed her hair.

They slowly swayed to the music.
CHAPTER 29.

The second day celebrated summers past and a different kind of prowess—strength, intelligence, cunning. Shows of dominance without (too much) bloodshed ruled the day and night. In honor of the games, Erhent suggested a private game of their own. He even wrote invitations, which Gwen thought made him a huge dork but also cute.

They took a few bottles of mead, hard cider, and fruit wine from the tables and gathered bark platters of festival food: roasted mule deer, bison, elk, pronghorn; acorn bread and flatbread; baked vegetables and winter tubers; pickled apples and pears.

For their party, she and Erhent shifted the study table near the hearth to keep the food warmish and spread all the blankets, hides, and pillows against the curved walls—Erhent’s idea.

Gwen peeled off her hoodie and wiped her face. If she wasn’t moving, the toasty yurt felt perfect, but rearranging the furniture had her sweating. “I didn’t know you were so into get-togethers.”

He stuffed his gloved hands in his pockets. “With the right people. Once I left Guatemala, I came of age in the nineteen-sixties, so I spent plenty of nights in basements, smoking and listening to records.”

Gwen laughed. “You? Can’t picture it. Please tell me you wore bell bottoms and tie-dye.”

He winked. “Even worse.”
The door opened, blasting cold air, and Jack hurried inside. Erhent grinned and he clapped Jack on the should. He held a bottle filled with golden liquid. “Last bottle. Been saving.”

“You dog.” Erhent unscrewed the lid and gulped. “Chin, chin!”

Jack snatched the bottle and downed a long drag. “Salud!”

“Hey now,” Gwen said, “don’t hog it.”

Jack passed her the bottle. “You kept up with the festivities the past night, so you deserve it.”

“Cheers.” The fumes made her lightheaded, so she only sipped. Fire consumed her tongue and throat. Her chest clenched, but she got it down. “Holy crap, what is this stuff?”

“Firewater, a South African specialty.” Jack hugged her, his tail wagging so hard his hips shook. “Good to see you smiling.”

Gwen’s one swallow already threatened to go to her head, so she poured a mug of tea. Last thing she wanted was to be sloppy drunk—at least before everyone else. She’d been overly tipsy last night, but Erhent and Jack seemed ready to get happy.

Qasim and Ace arrived a few minutes later. She raised a half-empty moonshine bottle, two more under her arm. “What’s up, fuckers?” She passed the jars to Erhent and Gwen before saluting Qasim. “Courtesy of Qasim, sweet-talker extraordinaire.”

Jack raised his firewater. “To the walking mountain.” He swigged then passed the bottle to Qasim, who took a shot with much more grace than Gwen.

Erhent clanged the stove with a piece of kindling. “Now that we are all here, tonight is about comradery. Only the stars know how much of our lives we will spend together, but we can assume there will be many days to come.”
“Chin, chin,” Jack said, taking a swig. Ace followed.

“But we are still friends growing to family,” Erhent said. “So tonight is about stories and secrets, inside jokes and arguments, history and futures. The libations are to loosen tongues.”

Gwen stole Ace’s bottle. “I’ll drink to that.” She took two gulps, the moonshine’s ice-fire settling in her stomach and making her laugh. Only a few fingers remained.

Erhent snatched it and chugged the last swallows. He crouched and set the bottle on the floor, spinning it and keeping it spinning. “What should we know about each other? Choose a category.”

“Spin the bottle, really?” Gwen said.

“Secrets instead of kissing. Well, maybe kissing.” Erhent winked at Jack.

“Sex fantasies!” Ace said.

Jack swatted her with his tail. “Don’t listen to her. First kiss.”

“You are just as bad,” Qasim said. “Favorite memory.”

Erhent pointed at him. “Good.” He released the bottle and it slowly came to Jack.

He rubbed his furry hands together. “Hmm, right. My hyena lover and I running wild through the Kalahari Desert, hunting antelope.” He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. His tail curled and uncurled. “We raced a pack of wild dogs, watched the lions stalk, ate and ate again. We made so much love, the earth shook with us.”

Erhent tapped the glass. “You forget yourself, brother. Explain what running wild means for the children.”

Ace flashed her teeth. “Bite me.”

He mock-bared his. “Happily.”
While the story hadn’t embarrassed Jack, now he rubbed his temple, half-shielding his eyes. “It’s when a Wilder”—he cleared his throat and slurped a shot of firewater—“when a Wilder gives their body to instinct. I suppose humankind can do it, too, but your society frowns on it.”

“In Palestine, we call it going feral,” Qasim said. “I’ve seen it happen before. It’s an intense experience for those lucky enough to have it.”

Erhent spun the bottle again. It pointed to Ace. “This should be good.”

“If we’re being honest, mine isn’t what you would think.” She shook her head slowly. “I helped my mom’s dog give birth to puppies. Three of them.”

Gwen leaned against Ace, who took the bottle from Gwen’s lap. The slithering moonshine made her feel golden and light. Tightness caused by the past months’ troubles eased off her shoulders.

Another spin, this time pointing at Erhent. His face flashed dark, though Gwen wondered if the alcohol had blurred her senses.

“Hmm.” He rubbed his chin. “It would have to be the first time I saw the ocean.” He stared at Gwen as he spoke. “The water stretching to the horizon, coming and going, washing the beach clean, the tug and pull against my legs.”

“I felt the same,” Qasim said, “when I saw the Mediterranean Sea. As a child, I wanted to be a sailor because it felt as far off as possible from being a mountain.” A soft smile smoothed the jagged ridges of his face, and Gwen wished she sat beside him, could slip her hand in his.

As if he guessed her thoughts, he smiled at her. “What about you, Gwen?”

“Duh,” she said. “Meeting all of you.”
Jack raised his firewater. “To magic and life.”

They drank, and Erhent spun the bottle again. “Next category?”

The night wore on, marked by the logs tossed into the stove and empty jars lining the wall. Most of the categories were lighthearted—favorite food, best joke, first kiss—but some, like worst nightmare and what scared them most about starmagic sobered the room. Long, slow talks of violence, the fear of death, of others being hurt because of their mistake quieted them until someone called for shots. Even with the darker moments, Gwen slid into a happy drunkenness. Jack’s tail wouldn’t stop wagging, and Erhent laughed at everything. Qasim and Ace kept picking on each other like siblings, shoving and trading sarcastic comments, though Qasim had little talent for sarcasm.

Ace demanded the final category be most memorable fucks, and since the group had denied her all her other suggestions, they agreed. Of course, the bottle pointed to Qasim first, and Gwen hoped it was the alcohol making her face feel hot a not the flush she feared. He told a threesome story where the third party might have been a sentient tree. Ace had a good story about making love with a girl at the bottom of the Grand Canyon, and Gwen followed with having sex in a tree stand because New Jersey. Jack returned to his opening story, though Gwen zoned out, the alcohol spinning her into a dream of cuddling with Qasim (she was truly drunk to think that would work), of long kisses—nope, nope.

She shook her head and focused as Erhent told a story of fucking a fey but ended up only staring at his profile. Really, he wasn’t good looking, she told herself. His nose was too long, and his dark hair curling around his ears didn’t suit his face. Usually, she liked defined cheekbones (like Qasim), but his made him look thin, almost unearthly, but not in angelic way, rather underfed. His features filled out when he laughed, his face broken into crinkled
pieces. He laughed with his whole expression, his mouth wide and head tilted. He hadn’t looked this happy since she’d known him. It turned him boyish.

He sprawled in Jack’s lap, their quiet words passing from English to Spanish to canine. Qasim demonstrated different fight holds while Ace attempted to break them. Gwen watched, trying to decide if it were some type of wilder foreplay, before joining them on the floor.

“I want to learn, too.”

Ace cracked her knuckles. “All right, basics first.” She tackled Gwen, and in a few minutes, the three of them wrestled like wolf pups.
CHAPTER 30.

Gwen and Erhent rested side by side in front of the stove. Day three of the celebration embodied autumn, a day of sleep and hibernation after two days of exertion and little sleep.

In the dreamscape, Gwen leaned against one of Erhent’s ficus trees, cradled in the thick roots, while Erhent towed the tether, a brightness arcing through the stars, tracing the month’s astrological constellation, Sagittarius. He lingered, like he always did, then signaled through two quick jerks that he would send the magic at her pull.

She pulled the tether, and he pulsed like a shooting star. The cosmos dripped power through the IV line of their partnership.

Gwen released the magic like a long breath, an ancient weight blanketing her, then the pressure passed through as if she were a ghost.

A quick touch signaled Erhent’s request to return. She reeled him in, hand over hand, the tether fading into her skin as if reclaiming a part of herself.

After his first starwalk, she’d asked him what it looked like—if the Earth just kept growing bigger, if he passed through different levels of atmosphere, but he described it more as being pulled into a silver fog, then emerging in the dreamscape, falling through the ficus canopy.

She swung him to the ground. As usual, he grinned, and his eyes shone as if he’d just fed.

Ready? she asked.

He gripped her hands. When you are.
Pushing him into his body was the hardest part. She could bridge the gap between landscape and dreamscape as easily as blinking but taking Erhent felt different. It forced her to recognize the reality of their situation—his spirit somehow sharing space in her head and that he needed her help to return to his body.

She pressed on his chest and pushed him through the ficus’ trunk, breaking the dreamscape.

When she opened her eyes, Erhent took a deep breath beside her.

Their third success as a Starcatcher.

His eyes were half-closed, but he grinned. “Does it feel as right to you as it does to me?”

“Yes,” she said. Which was only a partial lie. Maybe three quarters. Sometimes, when Sarah and Jesse suggested easy symbols—good luck charms, casting astrology constellations like they just did, peace symbols—she wanted to ask how that magic would have helped her town or save her mothers? If that’s all the Kurultai wanted in a Starcatcher, what practical good was she? Her mothers hated people or groups that fronted being helpful while the CEOs raked in cash. Somedays, the Kurultai seemed like pretty words and no action.

Erhent rolled on his side, his head pillowed in the crook of his arm. His eyes burned bright enough to light his face beneath his long hair.

She tucked his hair behind his ear. “You always look good when you come down. Bright.” With each trip into the stars, his exhausted, hungry look left over from the bear attack faded.

He laced their fingers. “I think I absorb the starlight. Some of my kind feed on sunlight, so I know it’s possible.”
She sat up and crossed her legs, opening the stove door for extra heat. Erhent rested an arm over her shoulders, and she leaned into his warmth.

“Can I tell you something?” she asked.

“Always.”

“After the flood, if I let myself stop and—and feel good, I would start to get panicky. Like, something bad was coming.”

He rubbed his hand over her back. “If it does, I’ll be with you.”

She elbowed him. “I don’t want any of that ‘I’ll protect you’ bullcrap. I mean it.”

He chuckled. “I know better. Only, I promise to do all in my power to make sure you don’t face it alone. Not again.”
CHAPTER 31.

Erhent tipped his head to the crisp stars. A good night for starmagic. The bitter cold felt clean, new. The past year had ended better than it started, and overall, had treated him well. The souls he cared for most in the world huddled on either side, the start of a pack.

The shortest day of the year featured an aggressive celebration meant to free the last energies so all could start fresh. Erhent, Gwen, Jack, Ace, and Qasim all huddled as near as they dared to a campfire. An icy wind gusted over Druid Peak and guttered the flames, causing them to edge closer and block the wind. They’d been waiting for an hour, and Erhent assumed Mercury punished them out of spite. He grinned, the cold stinging his chapped lips. Mercury no longer barred their way. They’d earned the title Starcatcher—a soulkind and a humankind. Now, he’d show the camp, all who spit at him, threatened him. They would watch him turn starlight into magic.

They’d climbed the peak a few hours before sunset since he and Sarah would open the night at first dark with a traditional casting around the Winter Circle. He would lead the second casting at midnight.

Ace shifted closer to the fire, her boots almost in the coals. “What a cheery fuckin’ party. I am going to get so drunk as soon as we are done.”

“Careful,” Erhent said. “They’ll be plying you with drinks. A Starcatcher’s first ceremony is cause for celebration—even if it’s the likes of us.” He shifted so his shoulder pressed against Gwen’s.

As had become their routine, they’d spent the end of the hike to Druid Peak lagging behind the others, adjusting, as he thought of it. Allowing stresses or irritations to slough off
while talking softly, sometimes about their day or memories. Tonight, Gwen had asked what the future looked like: when they might be assigned to a new camp, how it would work to be the only Starcatcher, her excitement to leave behind Mercury and his followers. He didn’t ruin it by saying he would never be accepted. During the feverish hours chained in their yurt while Mercury questioned him, he’d realized it had all been a hallucination. Stories would shadow him, but the stars burned brightest in blackness.

Gwen nudged him. She pointed to something only she could see. “Sarah just went into the stars.”

Erhent stood and took his bare hands from his pockets. “Shall we?”

Jack straightened and adjusted a hide wrapped around his chest. “Signal’s flashing from camp.”

Ace rubbed the sword strapped over her shoulder as she took her position beside Gwen. Nobody expected trouble, but every ceremony required guards to carry their gear, hence the sword, more symbolic than realistically protective. “Let’s do this so we can go party.”

Jack faced south while Ace faced west. Qasim took his position in the east, standing tall, his chest out. He refused to carry weapons, and with those stone spikes lining his edges, Erhent imagined he could do plenty of damage, regardless.

Erhent held Gwen’s hands and let her pull him into their dreamscape. It never returned to their individual nightmares but stayed empty and broken—the ruin of her house, the old growth ficus trees from his long lost Guatemalan home.
Usually, he spent little time in the dreamscape since the space only helped separate him from the physical and climb into the stars, but tonight, he touched Gwen’s shoulders and rested his forehead against hers, breathing in her sandy, green smell.

*We will make legends, Gwen. I promise you.*

He sensed her smile, and his fierce love burned. How foolish he’d been to once regret what she was, ignoring her power.

*Go on, she said. The stars are calling.*

He grasped a fistful of starlight, pulling into the dark.

Beams speared toward earth, a constant stream of millennia-old light cutting through space—and he could touch it. Starlight pulsed in Erhent’s hands. The shocking joy continued to leave him grinning, speechless. The first time he’d entered the stars alone, the power sent him spiraling into the part of himself he kept caged below his ribs, his hunger. The stars had filled him until he hadn’t felt like himself and hadn’t wanted to leave. When Gwen drew him down, Sarah called it starsickness, a common occurrence and one of the many reasons a starwalker required an anchor.

Tonight, he tried to keep pace with Sarah as she wove her tether among the forest of starbeams. Usually, a second Starcatcher would weave counter to the first, but since jumping from beam to beam still confused and exhausted him, Sarah instructed him to follow her. After a few times tracing the pattern, he caught the rhythm of swinging over and under the thick beams—as he had described it to Gwen, the stalagmite and stalactite teeth of a cave coming together, two trees’ twining roots. Now their tether laid in his tracks joined the beams, connecting the ancient lights.
At the eighth turn, he caught and held Capella’s more solid lightbeam, the spell’s main pillar. The tether fenced around the starbeams, following his circular trail. For Starcatchers like them, the tether held the true magic, a connection between earth and the stars held by chosen partners. The more times a starwalker could trace a pattern, the tether layering and thickening, the magic would pulse greater when completed and leave a lasting impression. While nine was a lower number of power, combined with Sarah’s turns, it created eighteen—a solid bit of magic to encourage new growth and good change over Yellowstone.

Sarah swung onto the starbeam, her form the color of buttercup with two horns curling from her radiant outline, sometimes bursting like lightning. He wanted to know what parts of his form were emphasized in the blackness, but he feared to ask.

Sarah’s light pulsed, and her thoughts touched his. *Need a rest?*

*Only a moment to enjoy the view.*

Their glittering tethers traced the constellation. His and Gwen’s tether tinged gold compared to Sarah and Jesse’s reddish line. After one more turn, they would meet in the center at Betelgeuse and release the magic, flooding it down their tethers, where it would disperse through their anchors and guards.

Erhent kicked off Capella’s beam into the ninth turn.
CHAPTER 32.

As Erhent’s hands left her shoulders in the dreamscape, Gwen’s eyes snapped open, and she caught his limp body. With a grunt, she eased him to the snowy ground and pillowed his head in her lap.

“ Took a moment,” Ace said. “Any hiccups?”

Gwen pulled Erhent a little higher, adjusting her legs. “No, he’s up there.” Under Jesse and Sarah’s eye, Erhent had entered the stars a dozen times over the past few days. Feeling his electric presence in her dreamscape, the stretching sensation while he climbed as if part of her went with him—it felt special, fleeting.

She rested her hands on his shoulder. A sudden desire to run her fingers through his black hair made heat wash her face. Just the excitement, she told herself. The ceremony would draw a lot of power through her—hence the lap rather than simply holding hands—but for now, she waited, sometimes half-closing her eyes to enter the dreamscape and check their tether. The split attention needed to focus on the dreamscape while remaining in the physical world had come easily, to Jesse’s surprise. Gwen blamed it on the necessary skill every teenager possessed: walking while staring at a smartphone.

The tether shone in the dreamscape, but it hadn’t come to life again like after their first striking. Sarah and Jesse claimed it wasn’t unusual, that some Starcatchers never saw their tether in the flesh. Of course, being Erhent, he’d asked if it marked them as different if they could regularly manifest it. Jesse’s ears had flicked like an annoyed mother wolf, and she told him to focus on the basics so Mercury didn’t kick him out.
Gwen searched the stars for Erhent, catching his glimmer. Even though Mercury did his best to screw them over, here they were, performing the ceremonies to cement them as a Starcatcher. After tonight, she could do something. Not trapped in a gym, not in her upper-middle-class house, now she had a purpose. Maybe not as fruitful as she hoped, but she could actually do something instead of dozing in her eight AM math class—which she regretted.

Ace crouched by the fire, muttering how the ceremony was going to take a longass time. Qasim held his position, even as the wind frosted the stone layering his skin. He claimed he’d lost his sense of cold or heat except in the extremes. Wyoming felt extreme to Gwen, but Qasim wasn’t human, even if his face could’ve floated past her in the high school hallways.

Jack stalked to the edge of the peak. His tail twitched.

From this elevation, the Park Protectors’ camp spread like a small village. The specks of their bonfires had grown larger—perhaps they celebrated the Solstice, too. Westward, spotlights made the encroaching machinery glisten. Even the moonlight reflecting off the snow couldn’t outshine the work zone, which made Gwen ache. If she knew how to apologize for the drilling and the clearcutting, she would. She’d said as much to Erhent, who told her to channel her grief into the stars.

“It’s not grief,” she’d said as they slogged the final hundred yards to the peak, the sled dogs barking below.

“Maybe not,” he’d said. “But it is all right to grieve.”

“You make it sound like it’s over.” Her hands clenched. “I want to fight. Isn’t that why we’re doing this?”

He’d slipped an arm over her shoulders. “We won’t win every battle.”
She hadn’t told Erhent yet but that frightened her the most. She wanted to leave camp, but when the Kurultai reassigned them, winning or losing would be their responsibility. The old fear, tinged with Mercury’s cutting voice—that a young, stupid human wasn’t meant to be a Starcatcher—made her stomach clench.

She shook her head and closed her eyes, standing in the dreamscape where the tether turned her hand silver and rose into the stars. Here, starlight brushed her skin, almost like the sun, except cool and sharp—a blade barely touching. The lightning streaks of Erhent and Sarah traced the Winter’s Circle (more like a hexagon), welcoming the turning of the year from dark to light.

The magic would be complete at nine turns. Even on Druid Peak, a faint line emphasized the Circle. The average stargazer might call it a trick of the eye, a superstitious one might consider it good luck. Even before Erhent and Sarah dispersed the magic, a peacefulness untangled the tightness in her chest.

Jack still stood at the mountaintop’s edge. His ears pricked, and his tail fluffed. Gwen wanted to ask if something was wrong, but the tether thrummed, heavy with magic. Erhent would need her soon.

Jack called over Ace and Qasim with a growl.

Ace touched Gwen’s shoulder. “You good?”

She nodded. Wind stole their words, but Ace’s body language matched Jack’s—hunched shoulders, rubbing the hilt of the sword she’d only begun to practice with. Qasim crossed his arms and tipped his head forward as if he wanted to gore someone with his stony crown.
A yank on the tether drew Gwen into the dreamscape. An extra brightness ringed the star Betelgeuse, which meant Erhent and Sarah were ready to release the magic. Gwen split herself—half in the dreamscape, half in the flesh—and called to the others.

She wrapped the tether around her wrist and set her feet. While Jack, Ace, and Qasim couldn’t enter the dreamscape, she felt their presence. A full guard would have helped her channel the magic, but Mercury disregarded Jack’s request to search for their North Guard. Whatever, they’d show him tonight.

She took a deep breath as power radiated from the tether. She pulled, signaling their readiness.

The Winter’s Circle burned, bathing her in starlight. The tether strained, then power surged, crashing against her, drowning her as it forced into her mouth and nose, filled her ears with a musical ringing. Power built and built as if it would rip her in half. Outside the dreamscape, she gripped Ace and Jack, bending over Erhent. God, it hurt and she didn’t know where to send it. Jack shouted, but his words were delayed, fuzzy as they broke through the celestial keening.

“Relax, Gwen! Let it go!”

To imagine controlling the power was crazy. It swelled and knocked her from the dreamscape into her body. She gasped and opened her eyes. Silver outlined her hands, and her skin burned hot and cold. The tether flashed, a lightning bolt. She held Erhent’s limp shoulders, hunching against the pressure even as Qasim braced her back.

The magic stopped. Ozone scented the air. The overwhelming music faded to a ringing wineglass, then silence. She gasped, collapsing over Erhent. The Wyoming cold had vanished, and sweat stung her eyes.
She gulped icy air. The smaller practice spells felt like a slow tingling. “That wasn’t like the others. That was like a lightning strike from hell.”

Jack cupped her chin, brushing aside her damp hair to check her eyes. “You cast magic for a whole year. It’s a powerful star spell.”

Ace craned her neck. “How do you know it worked?”

Gwen ran a hand through her hair, causing static to crackle. “Well, it did something.” She took a few deep breaths, then closed her eyes. Time to spool in Erhent.
CHAPTER 33.

Erhent clutched Betelgeuse’s starbeam. He panted beside Sarah, her yellow aurora pulsing and her horns like prongs of lightning. He felt as if all his desire had spilled into the tether.

She shook her head, spraying sparks. *I haven’t performed that spell with a second starwalker before. Powerful stuff.*

*It doesn’t always feel like this?*

*Hardly ever.*

How unfortunate. He had never felt more satisfied, clean. The feeling reminded him of feeding off humankind, but pure—joyful, even. Sometimes, he’d caught a tendril of this emotion when stargazing as a child, but this power filled every part of him, soothing hunger, worry, and pain. God, he wanted Gwen to feel this. He laughed into the deep stars. The starbeams surrounding him blinked brighter.

Sarah’s aurora brushed his, static sparking between them. *Heady, I know, but let’s return to our partners and start the celebration. The others will be the drunk by the time you hike off that mountain.*

*Oh, don’t remind me.*

Sarah nudged him again. *You first. I don’t want to come back for you because of starsickness.*

Erhent swung his foot so the tether wrapped thrice around his ankle, drawing in the loose line. Leaping into the stars was nothing, but only Gwen could pull him down. Of the starcatching basics, coming to earth still gave them trouble. It wasn’t Gwen’s fault—Jesse
claimed her technique looked good—but the starlight seemed to supercharge him, as it were. If Gwen didn’t spool him in slowly, he’d fall like a meteorite. Sarah still scratched her horns over the phenomena.

He closed his eyes, picturing the dreamscape until the ficus leaves brushed his face. The first time Gwen had returned him to his body, he’d watched the earth’s brilliance fade the stars, but the incoming collision sickened him, his mind finally declaring it all insanity. Keeping his eyes closed until he slipped into Gwen’s dreamscape halted the sensation.

He opened his eyes as Gwen hauled him closer. Still heightened by starenergy, he witnessed her take shape through a silver haze. She appeared defined by pale fire, and her anchor magic caused an loamy, smoky scent to wick off her skin.

He summersaulted from the stars and hit the dreamscape, stumbling into Gwen’s arms, laughing and out of breath.

He hugged her. *Most successful landing yet.*

*You aren’t back in your body.* She wriggled from his grasp. *Holy hell, you’re hot!*

He winked. *I know.*

*Oh god.* She rolled her eyes. *You’re burning up. Can’t you feel it?* Silver outlined his hands and spread in cold fire along his arms. *Well. This is new.*

Gwen peered into his face. *Your eyes—they’re so bright.* She hovered her hand over the flames, then jerked back. *Do you think it’s because of your kind?*

*Perhaps.* He walked to the nearest ficus tree and pressed his hands into the smooth bark. He poured out the overflowing energy, hoping it would channel into Gwen. He sighed as the power gained from bathing in starlight ebbed through his palms.

The tether still uniting them flashed with fire.
Whoa, what are you doing?

The tree quivered, and petals rained, catching on his coat. White flowers with yellow starlike centers bloomed in the boughs.

He stepped away, shaking his hands. The silver fire faded, though the starlight still caused a pleasant buzzing along his skin.

She gathered a handful of petals. You don’t just take.

Sometimes, I can give.

Gwen flinched, then grinned. Ace is getting impatient.

He gripped her shoulders, resting his forehead against hers. She shoved him into his body.

He woke as if from a nightmare—scorching. Oh god, he was burning! He rolled over, pressing his face into the snow. He felt so heavy, as if metal encased each limb. No wonder Sarah warned of starsickness. Lighting the Circle marked the longest he’d spent in the stars, and his body felt like deadwood compared to his spirit submerged in light. Another reason one could not walk the stars alone—because what fool would leave?

Gwen touched his back. “You okay?”

“Merely feeling sluggish.”

She closed her eyes, grinning. “It’s still there. The tree.”

He push-upted into a crouch. Hmm, he’d have to mention that to Jesse. If the dreamscape was so malleable, he should be more careful so as not to mar Gwen’s space. It belonged more to her, and already his ficus trees left his shadow.

Ace offered him a hand and pulled him upright. “Pretty cool.” She clapped him on the back, the started kicking snow over the fire. “But we got problems.”
Jack stood at the edge of the hilltop, his tail raised and his hackles ruffhed in warning, fear. Erhent joined him, and Jack pointed beyond the spotlights shining over the construction equipment. The lights created a thin barrier to the Park Protectors’ camp, and behind, a fleet of vehicles had arrived, including a dozen Yellowstone winter tour buses outfitted with tread wheels.

“They’re going to raid the camp,” Erhent said.

Jack’s ears flattened.

“We have to—”

“I already signaled the lookouts. They will have reported to Mercury by now. I imagine the Park Protectors have seen it on their drones, too.”

Gwen stepped beside him, shivering. He shrugged out of his coat and draped it over her shoulders. Two armored vehicles, their lights off, joined the police officers.

“Oh, no,” she said.

Ace called, “Getting singled.” A beat. “They want us to return to camp.”

“Shouldn’t we go down and help?” Gwen asked. “We’re closer here.”

Jack joined Ace at the edge of the peak. He howled, ending in a series of yips. A minute later, Jesse’s deep, rhythmic howl responded. Erhent knew little of the canine languages, but the way Jack’s tail twitched, the curl of his lip—he wasn’t happy.

“We are to return,” he said. “Mercury acknowledges the problem.”

Ace adjusted her sword strap. “I don’t like the sound of that.”

Jack’s ears swiveled, and he started sliding down the incline. “Perhaps forces have already been sent.”
Gwen clasped Erhent’s hand, and a warmth spread through him. Touch, how so many wilders expressed their feelings and so easily denied him. Not since meeting Jack had he been surrounded by others unafraid to touch him.

“Shouldn’t we help from the stars?” she asked.

He eased her down the steepest section even though his body felt detached, his feet heavy as if wading through muck. “I don’t know. Perhaps Jesse and Sarah have gone up.”

“I didn’t see Sarah.”

They returned to the dogsleds and reached camp in a few minutes. While he sensed more guards had been added to the rotation and the wards strengthened since they left two hours ago, the celebration continued—food, drink, dancing, rutting. Yet, beneath the energy and peace of the Solstice spell, a new tension stretched. The wilders sensed something amiss, even as they howled and stomped over the return of a newly cast Starcatcher. As the dancing and courtship and feasting continued, a frenzy pawed at each step. The fourth night often turned darkest.

Mercury reclined in his boorish chair. Jesse and Sarah sat on his left. Jesse’s ears pinned, and her claws gouged the table, and the tilt of Sarah’s horns promised violence. From the way she glared at her father, she made it clear toward whom her horns pointed.

Sirk and two other wulvers hovered near Mercury as if hoping the tension would snap.

Ace stalked through the partiers, who cleared a path with a wilder’s sense of knowing not to cross her. From the swing of her arms and her stride, she steeled herself to confront Mercury.
Jack called, but she didn’t stop. Gwen asked Erhent what was happening, why everyone was still celebrating, but he chased after Ace, Jack beside him.

Before Erhent or Jack could snatch her, she yelled, “I hope that police army is about to fall into a fucking pit if you are just sitting on your ass!”

Erhent flinched and stopped, Gwen colliding into his back. Jack gripped Ace’s shoulder and angled between her and Mercury, muttering something to the effect of “shut it.” She shouldered past him and crossed her arms, standing opposite Mercury.

Erhent sent a silent prayer to the stars, begging Ace wouldn’t try to drag Mercury over the table.

Mercury pick his too-sharp teeth with a knife. “What did you say?”

Ace pointed toward the Park Protectors’ camp. “Didn’t you get our signal? They are about to be raided. We need to help.”

Mercury leaned in his chair, balancing on the hind legs. “That’s not your decision.”

Erhent hunched his shoulders and lowered his head. Enough wilders paused, ears swiveling in their direction, that this moment had become a struggle for dominance, the kind that ended in bloodshed or shame. Except a damn human like Ace didn’t know that.

“Like hell,” she said. “Isn’t that why we are all here?” She slapped her hands on the table. “To stop those machines from gutting this place? Why aren’t you doing your fucking job? You’re the leader!”

Mercury stood and grinned.

Oh, stars, not tonight, Ace. Erhent reached for her. “Move—”

Jack lunged to shield her, but one of the wulvers threw him down.
Mercury flashed onto the table and leapt, tackling Ace even as she stepped aside. While he could pass as humankind, that jump proved he was pure wilder. He dragged her to the mud, fangs bared.

She shrieked and beat at him, but he didn’t move, as if he were latched onto her. His fingernails gouged her arms, and his face was buried in the curve of her neck.

Gwen shouted and ran forward, but Erhent caught her around the waist.

“Let me go!”

With howl, Ace twisted her hips and flipped Mercury. She pinned him by the neck and swung, but he caught her arm. He sunk his teeth into her skin.

Ace pounded at his face while he tore at her forearm. Mercury bashed the side of her head, knocking her over. He punched her again, and she coughed blood, then he stood, leaning heavily on his strong leg. Ace’s blood dripped from his mouth. “Challenge me again, and I’ll tear out your throat.”

He stepped over her body.

She clutched her neck, scrambling backward. Qasim went to her and lifted her upright.

Mercury sucked the blood off his lips and spat. A circle of silence spiraled from him, and he scanned the crowd, his stormy eyes flashing. “The Kurultai have decided the land is lost. It holds no value to wilders if it is being drilled or populated by humankind and their trash. Camps or drilling—the land is lost either way. One the humankind are routed, we leave.”

Jesse growled as she stood, her tail curling and doubling in size. Without looking, Mercury raised his fist, and Jesse’s mouth shut with a click of fangs.
Jack stepped in front Ace and Qasim, his palms up in a beseeching manner that made Erhent want to look away. His tail tucked tight between his legs. Mud splattered his side from the wulver throwing him. The great Hunter didn’t deserve such treatment.

“Please,” he said, “let us aid them from the stars. Surely, the wilders already in the camp will need assistance.”

Sarah stalked around the table and stood in front of her father. “No, they won’t, will they?”

Mercury smiled.

“Because they are already here,” Sarah said. “Celebrating, like the rest of us.”

Gwen shoved away from Erhent, glaring at him. “Those people are fighting for the same things we are.”

Mercury bared his teeth, and Erhent smelled her fear. She’d be angry at him for failing Ace, but she didn’t understand—neither of them did. Even if unintended, Ace had challenged Mercury in front of not only the camp but visitors, and he’d knocked her down, as would have most Kurultai leaders.

He glanced at Ace as she shoved off Qasim with a grunt. Blood oozed between her fingers where she clutched her throat, and her bitten forearm pressed against her gut. She hunched her shoulders and kept her head down, but she tracked Mercury, her breath ragged.

Mercury wiped the corners of his mouth and flicked blood off his fingers. “A girl barely from the nest does not know what we fight for.” He stalked to his chair. “We only wait for the humankind to give up. Then we leave. It has been decided.”
Sarah faced her father across the table, just like Ace. “No, it hasn’t. If they fight, I’m fighting, too.” She dipped her head, the firelight glinting off her horns. Sarah and Jesse’s four guards came from the shadows—Erhent hadn’t even realized they were waiting.

Sarah called her guards by name. “Go to the camp. Jack, Ace, Qasim—you, too.”

Jack hesitated, locking eyes with Erhent, his ears twitching. Be careful, watch your back.

Mercury snarled and sputtered. “You may be the starwalker, but I am the leader, daughter. You follow my orders.”

Sarah snarled back, matching his tone. She squared off, the table between them, her horns to his teeth—daughter to father. “Not tonight.”

Mercury wordlessly bellowed, and Erhent would’ve lowered to his knees if it weren’t for Gwen beside him.

Sarah swung onto the table and pressed her horns close, grazing his forehead. “It’s my job to help all kinds. Tonight, it’s the Protectors.” She rolled her neck, her horns tossing, forcing him to lean into his chair. “Try to bite me, daddy. I dare you.”

Jesse flexed her shoulders, her hackles rising, and she growled so deep in her chest her body shook.

Mercury slumped in his chair and flicked his hand.

The celebration, frozen at fresh blood, remained silent as Jesse and Sarah stalked through the crowd, he and Gwen hurrying to stay close.

Sarah glanced over her shoulder and grinned, her face mimicking her father’s for a moment. “Ready for round two?”
CHAPTER 34.

Ehrent grasped Gwen’s hand. He didn’t pause in the dreamscape but propelled into the stars. Yes, time was short, but he also sensed the tension snapping between him and Gwen. If he looked her in the eye, the accusation would have been clear: Why hadn’t he helped Ace?

Sarah already waited, her horns pulsing red.

He swung to her side. Ready? They’d planned a series of lightning strikes around the camp, hoping it would frighten the police militia and possibly allow the protectors more time to organize a resistance. The guards who could pass would offer frontline support while the others would hide in the woods, making sure the Dark Stars didn’t send grizzlies again.

Except now, Sarah pointed a static-sparking hand toward a cluster of tethers. Dark Stars.

What spell?

They’re just weaving. I can’t tell from here. She slipped her tether off her foot and wrapped it around a starbeam. Stay here so I can find my way back.

Sarah!

She’d drilled one rule into his head: Never slip the tether. An untethered starwalker often became lost in the starlight and couldn’t connect with their anchor. Or worse, simply climbed deeper and deeper into the dark.

She kicked off a starbeam. I will find my way back to you. Just stay here.

She swam through starlight, her aurora fading among the glittering lines spearing toward earth. Only the yellow-red curve of her horns helped him track her progress as she
swung toward the tethered starwalkers. When it came to battle magic, the tether was a starwalker’s downfall. If enemies knew where to look, they could follow the tether to a starwalker’s location and spell. Just like Sarah. The Dark Stars preferred to destroy Starcatchers on the ground, since throwing a punch made of—whatever he was—caused little damage. A starwalker could only disrupt the magic-making.

He crouched on a starbeam, peering into the forest of light. Sarah neared the weaving starwalkers. Instead of using stars, they appeared to center their design around Mar’s red light, each starwalker becoming a point of power while another walker wove his tether among them, creating the pattern.

He glanced aside, following his tether twisting toward earth. Beautiful, gorgeous, the only hope in this star-dark until one species sucked it dry. He had no right to hate. It could have been his kind, would have been his kind, if the stories of how Soul-Eaters once flooded the world were true. Maybe the stars ordained this destruction. Perhaps they desired to rule again—for only star-dark, un-dark.

He searched for Sarah’s sparking horns. Gods, she was close to the weaving, nearing from above. Please, Sarah.

She lunged forward and wrapped around the red light spearing from Mars. She pulsed, her buttercup and blood aurora outshining the planet’s light for just a moment, only long enough to disrupt the starwalkers’ work.

She swung toward Erhent, diving and leaping between starbeams so fast he almost lost her.

The weaver of the pattern slipped his tether and shot toward her.
He closed the gap in a few bounds, as if each starbeam he touched gave him speed.

They seemed to gutter while he brightened.

Sarah yelled, though Erhent only heard the piercing keen of her fear.

He wrapped his tether twice around a starbeam to mark his location, then climbed. A tether only became physical between a starwalker and anchor. Erhent could not bring the tether to Sarah, but he could swing her closer.

The Dark Star closed the distance more quickly than Erhent. He left a path of darkness as the starbeams sputtered on their slow stretch to earth.

Sarah reached as she kicked off starbeams. Her words staticed into his head. *Swing me to my tether, Erhent! Hurry! Help me!*

Erhent shoved toward Sarah.

The other starwalker kicked with such strength the light blinked. He fell on top of Sarah, dragging her from Erhent’s fingertips.

The starwalker gathered her into his light, pulsing.

Sarah screamed. She reached for Erhent as the starwalker’s light grew, outshining her.

He hesitated—this couldn’t be happening—and she was gone.

Silence filled his thoughts.

*Sarah!*

The starwalker shimmered, and his light solidified. For a flash, the face shone clear: a man with long, ice-blue hair floating free. Fear lightninged through Erhent. He knew that face, saw it mirrored in his own—a Soul-Eater. Yet this face caused even more ancient, primordial terror, even for Erhent.
Erhent wrapped the tether around his ankle. He couldn’t out pace this starwalker, only go down. He jerked hard enough to signal his panic to Gwen, his need to come home. Then he dove. He couldn’t use the tether to drag him faster since he’d stupidly wrapped it around a starbeam to mark Sarah’s tether. Oh, Sarah, oh gods, Sarah—

Icy fingers dug into his leg.

He screamed as he felt his lifeforce flow into the starwalker’s hand. While he’d been fed upon all his life, this pain froze and shattered him. His light flickered.

The starwalker dragged him closer, blinding him until he wanted to tear out his eyes to stop the searing pain in his skull. He screamed for Gwen.

The tether pulled at his ankle, but the starwalker held him trapped in his light.

The face materialized again, floating in the sweeping ice-blond hair. Like Erhent, the walker possessed a Soul-Eater’s predatory angles, but also something older. His sheer size, probably seven feet tall in the flesh, overwhelmed Erhent’s brightness.

The walker punched the nearest starbeam so it cracked like glass. He slammed Erhent’s face into the shards.

Who are you? The voice ruptured his thoughts. He tried to curl inside himself.

The tether jerked his ankle hard enough to cut.

Gwen, please! Please!

Claws dug between his shoulders, grinding his face into the shards of starlight. What abomination are you?

He gripped the broken starbeam. Instinct told him to feed on the energy pulsing through the light.

So he did.
Flaming ice as old as galaxies overwhelmed him until he knew what a god must feel. He held creation in his hands—and it burned. He shoved off the starbeam and kicked free of the starwalker.

The tether grew hot. A tremendous jerk. The starbeam he had wrapped his tether around shattered, spraying energy like sparks.

A chunk of light crashed into the starwalker, knocking him into deeper space.

The tether went taut. Erhent fell.
CHAPTER 35.

Rage washed over Ace, and she let it burn. Her mother told her not to hold onto anger so tightly, but it kept her alive like a campfire in the cold. So she fed it.

Jack tried to talk when they reached the Park Protectors’ camp, but she stalked off. Right now, she might throw a punch if she saw another wilder. She didn’t need them in order to lend a hand.

She clutched her coat collar to staunch the bleeding and avoid being asked every ten seconds if she was all right. No, she fucking wasn’t.

From snatches of conversation and folks frantically collapsing tents, the decision had already been made for nonarrestables to retreat to Gardiner, Montana and Cody, Wyoming. Vehicles lined the only road out of Yellowstone, and protestors shared cars and stuffed RVs.

Excitement and dread clashed. The privileged people acted ready to resist and fight, but everyone else knew what was coming, held onto the stories and histories the way their people told it—of Standing Rock, Plan Columbia, older histories of the Ogoni Nine, of Guatemala.

She hurried to her old campsite, expecting it to be empty. She’d dropped by once before so her anarchist friends would know she hadn’t just disappeared. They thought she joined a red power group, and she didn’t say anything to change their minds.

She swallowed, the pain in her throat making her eyes water. Maybe that’s what she should have done. These wilders didn’t care about that harmony bullshit, just that they got the land back, as if they had more of a claim to it.
She ripped open the flap to their squad tent, startling as her friend Beth swore. Beth jumped up from a loading a plastic sled, flicking a flashlight in Ace’s face.

“Holy shit!”

She dropped the light and hugged Ace in the only way Beth knew how, swallowing her in a puffy winter coat. Ace grunted as the zipper sawed into her bloody forearm.

“Where have you been?” Beth released her. “And—wait, you’re bleeding.”

“Yep.” Ace dug the first aid kit from under a cot. “Don’t happen to have a scarf or bandana, do you?”

“Of course, yeah.”

Ace hunched on the cot and popped open the kit. “Where are Deshawn and Phelix?”

She used her teeth to tear open an alcohol swab. She hissed as she wiped the ragged marks crescenting her skin. Damn it, she should have seen it coming. The atmosphere, the snap in the air, the partying.

She dabbed at her neck. The sting made her shiver, and for a moment, she couldn’t breathe, his weight on her chest.

Beth pressed a purple handkerchief into her hand. “Shit, did something bite you?”

Ace wrapped gauze around her throat before tying the bandana like a bandit.

“Maybe.”

“You need help.”

Ace split a grin. “So what else is new?” She nodded at the sled. “What’s going on?”

Beth hauled two gas cans and a jug of de-icer to the sled. “Nonarrestables are supposed to evac now, but cars keep dying. We don’t know if it’s the cold or what. Plus,
AquaCore security blocked the north gate, and they’re on snowmobiles, writing down license plates.”

Ace finished wrapping her forearm. “Are the radios working? You have to tell everyone to stay away from the AquaCore guys.”

Beth unclipped a yellow unit from her belt and tossed it. “Tell ’em yourself.” She spread a tarp over the sled and corded it down.

Ace held the button. “Hey, Deshawn, you there?”

Static crackled, and she almost sent again, but a voice blurred over the speaker. “Is this Ace?”

Beth motioned for her to hold the tent flap as she dragged the sled outside. Ace followed her.

“Yeah, yeah. Listen, the AquaCore security aren’t your regular bros with tasers. Don’t let them—”

“You’re telling me! They’re killing the cars by touching them. Just touch the hood and bam, engine dies.”

“Shit!” Ace’s throat ached, and she touched the handkerchief. “Just stay back, okay? I’m coming with Beth.”

Beth finished tying the sled to their snowmobile. “What’s up?” She revved the engine, and Ace swung on behind her.

“I’m about to blow your fucking mind.” Her friends could roll with almost any belief system, but they’d think she’d lost it when she described the wilders. At least she had the marks to prove it.

Pain twitched along her spine, and she winced, looking up.
A bright spot streaked across the sky. Something in her gut identified the light as Erhent—and that he was in trouble. Which meant Gwen was in trouble, and Ace had a lot less confidence in Gwen’s ability to handle trouble.
CHAPTER 36.

Jack snatched a scarf off a woodpile and wrapped it around his head and face as he ran. A slit showed his eyes, but his sense of smell and hearing dulled, almost to the level of the humankind he imitated.

He’d already assigned the five wilders left in camp, sending those who could pass to assist the children, elderly, and wounded. Those that couldn’t pass lingered in the woods, making sure no wild animals attacked the humankind. Qasim joined them, listening for Dark Star or police reinforcements through the ground. Jack’s status as the famous Hunter galvanized them—and the sense it was the beginning of the end for the protest camp. He recognized it the moment he’d hopped the makeshift fence.

He planned to help organize the children and elderly, but when he entered the camp, he witnessed too many humankind in a total panic, some even catatonic. While only a dozen of the humankind seemed impacted, it added to the general fear and hopelessness. He’d witnessed these demoralization tactics before—when soulkind hunted. Terrorize, split the herd, then feast.

He ran to the frontlines. A tipped over RV and a school bus missing the roof blockaded the road, with trash barriers and cement blocks barricading the ground on either side. Spotlights and helicopter lights created artificial daylight. Beyond, police vehicles parked along the road while National Guard bearcats and Humvees idled on the pavement. Behind the military vehicles, four bulldozers, wheels as tall as him, and two backhoes rumbled, waiting to clear the camp.
Even so, the humankind stood, arms linked, protective masks and scarves hiding their faces. Other humans passed between a medic truck and a supplies truck, bringing water bottles, milk washes, blankets.

A canister spewing yellow smoke landed at his feet. He scooped it up and hurled it aside, beyond the humankind. His eyes watered, and he coughed until he couldn’t breathe and was bent over, gasping. A humankind pressed a water bottle into his hand, and he drank. His nose must’ve started to bleed because the T-shirt mask stuck to his face.

He wiped his eyes on his shoulder, fumbling through the crowd, searching the shadows, watching for someone not focused on the protest, someone like him.

A man dressed in black with an upside-down American flag posted to his jacket walked along the row of linked protestors, cheering them on, gripping their shoulders. Another EMT passed out scraps of cloth to tie over faces.

A loudspeaker squealed, and Jack winced.

“We will begin using less-than-deadly force if you do not disperse!”

Before Jack could register the English words, the pop-pop of a rubber bullet gun made him duck, and people started screaming at the line’s far end. The humankind broke away, some carrying others.

An explosion made his ears ring and fractured another section of the line.

He crouched behind the humankind, trying to focus through his gumming eyes and the glaring lights. He wasn’t the right wilder for this job. He needed Erhent, or better yet, Ace, but he knew soulkind tactics.

He lifted the mask and spat. Saliva kept flooding his mouth from the teargas.

“Do you need help, friend?”
A hand touched his shoulder, and he felt it. The soulkind sucking at his lifeforce. Not fast enough to burn his clothes, his skin, but to sap his strength. He drew a knife.

A boom beat over the crowd. Someone shrieked.

He lunged at the soulkind, knocking him into the shadows of a charred RV. The pain in his shoulder turned white-hot as the soulkind defended himself, but even as Jack’s body locked, his insides shriveling, he fell on the knife’s handle, driving it into the soulkind’s heart. The searing touch lessoned, then ended.

He gasped and rolled over. Blood soaked his shirt, but he hoped the humankind would assume a rubber bullet had bled him.

He glanced around, then dragged a collapsed tent over the body. He shook himself and inhaled, though his lungs constricted, and he coughed. If soulkind hunted with the police and military, there’d be more than one.

He scanned the protestors, focusing on areas not easily disrupted by teargas canisters or rubber bullets.

Wherever the man with the upside-down flag touched the line, it broke apart a few minutes later.

Jack ran, his knife hidden inside his coat. “Hey! Hey, you!”

The man looked back, then sprinted toward the cement barriers and the police on the other side.

Jack lunged and caught his leg. The man crashed into a cement block but yowled like grinding glass, a soulkind’s call. A quick stab to the inside of the soulkind’s thigh and Jack rolled away as blood spurted from the femoral vein.

“Disperse! Get back!”
Humankinds in black tactical gear swarmed the barriers as Jack scrambled to run. A pop corresponded with pain exploding between his shoulders, and he tripped, falling on his hands and knees.

A piece of metal glanced off his head. He only caught the glint of it before the explosion.
CHAPTER 37.

The tether carried Erhent’s pain and screams. Gwen heaved, but the tether held as if caught. She cried for Jack, Ace, and Qasim to help, only then remembering they weren’t there.

Jesse shrieked and howled. A moment later, she raced into the night, leaving the yurt door banging open.

Gwen hauled on the tether as Erhent’s pain radiated through the silver thread. Light strobed behind her eyes, a migraine beating.

Something snapped, and in the dreamscape, a star blinked out, then returned. The tether felt loose in her hands, so she jerked it taut.

Erhent crashed through the dreamscape into his body.

When she opened her eyes, the lids were sticky with blood. She wiped her face with heavy hands. God, her palms burned. She held them close to her face—rope burns cut her flesh. She remembered Erhent falling into the dreamscape, bursting with starlight. She remembered how she couldn’t slow him down. She remembered Erhent screaming until his weight slammed against her like the first time Jesse and Sarah helped them cast and return, as if they were two magnets coming together.

Erhent still screamed.

“¡Quema! ¡Quema!”

He writhed on the yurt floor. The rugs around him smoked and singed. Heat radiated from his mangled body. His right cheek glowed with white light, and the skin around the
pulsating wound blackened. The cloth charred off his leg, and light burst from claw marks on his skin.

    She touched his chest. “Erhent.”

    He snatched her hand.

    Power licked her palm. A pure and painless power that could have emptied her as easily as pouring out a glass.

    She jerked back, but his grip tightened. “Erhent!”

    His eyes snapped open. Blood vessels had burst and reddened the glow. He went still as his gaze shifted over her shoulder.

    Her skin crawled, and she swallowed hard. Mercury stood at the threshold, and two wulvers snarled behind him. Mercury stared to the right.

    Gwen hadn’t looked for Sarah’s body until then. She slumped on the table just as Jesse had left her. Except her shoulders didn’t rise and fall.

    Mercury limped toward the body. He caressed one horn, gently turning Sarah’s head. Her eyes were open. Such pain and terror twisted her face that Gwen whimpered and looked away.

    Erhent gasped for breath. He clutched Gwen’s arm, but his hands burned. “Water, water.”

    As if Erhent’s voice snapped Mercury from his grief, he turned on them, drawing his sword from his cane in a sweeping arc. The point dug into Erhent’s throat.

    “I suppose I deserve it.” His usually sharp voice grew husky. “I brought the wolf into my home. Why should I be surprised when it kills my daughter?”
Gwen couldn’t take her eyes off the sword. Just a flick of Mercury’s wrist, and Erhent would be dead. “It wasn’t him.”

He leaned into the blade so Erhent had to squirm backward, dragging himself with one arm. “Murderer. Tell me who you work for and I won’t give you the death a Soul-Eater deserves.”

Erhent tilted his head as the point scored his throat. “I tried—to save—Sarah—” His words evaporated into a groan, and the bloody shreds of his right cheek throbbed with what looked like starlight.

“You don’t have the right to speak her name!” He raised the blade.

Gwen scrambled onto her hands and knees, placing her body over Erhent’s. The flat of the blade cracked against her spine.

She collapsed on top of Erhent, pain surging up and down her back. She couldn’t breathe. Erhent burned like embers beneath her. Her ears rang, but she could still hear him.

“Please,” he said. “Leave. Please leave.”

One of the wulvers lifted her. She wanted to scream, kick, bite, but she still couldn’t breathe.

Mercury placed the sword at Erhent’s heart. “Two attacks, and you are left alive, as if they were under orders to leave you be. My daughter dies in the stars while you watch! Which clan, Soul-Eater? Who owns you?”

Erhent writhed, his wounds pulsing with light. He tried to speak, but only a mangled cry came out.

Gwen lunged against the wulver’s arms. “Erhent!”
A killing silence filled the yurt. Mercury bent over and hissed in Erhent’s face. “I need the information you carry, so it appears you will see the inside of the infirmary after all.” He kicked Erhent, turning him onto his stomach.

“Stop it!” Gwen elbowed the wulver, but his massive paw-hand just gripped the back of her neck, nearly lifting her off the ground.

Mercury shackled Erhent’s hands so his palms pressed together behind his back. He swept out of the yurt, yelling for the wulvers to bring him.

The second one took the chain dangling from the manacles and dragged Erhent toward the door.

Gwen twisted. “Stop! Stop it! If you’re afraid to touch him, I’ll carry him!”

The wulver holding her—Lucky, if she remembered—let go and nodded at the other one, who dropped the chain.

Gwen crouched over Erhent. “I’m here, I’m here.” His eyes were closed, and smoke wafted from his glowing wounds.

She prayed the stars would give her strength as she swung him into a fireman’s carry. His body burned so hot, she gasped. Sweat slicked her skin. She took a halting step forward, then another. At Jack’s insistence, she’d practiced carrying Erhent, but normally couldn’t manage more than a few yards.

She was his partner—no way in hell were they going to drag him.

Except she couldn’t stop whatever came next. Mercury wanted to kill him, and now he had a reason. This time, she wasn’t powerless like during the flood. If Mercury hurt Erhent, she’d tear his eyes out.
Gwen hauled Erhent through the strange combination of celebration and battle preparation. Most wilders still ate, drank, and danced while some shoved through the crowds, slinging on weapons or padded armor. The more drunken wilders cheered, hollering in different languages. The bloodlust came clear in their growls. Some released the tension by fighting, their bodies rolling in the snow, blood dripping from split lips and claw marks.

Erhent writhed, and she stopped, almost losing her grip. Sweat dripped into her eyes. “Hold still. Just a little longer.”

At the wulvers’ prodding, she stumbled toward the infirmary.

The bowers were empty, but dryads gathered supplies, their barklike faces stern and the party atmosphere shed.

She struggled toward the nearest open bower stemming from an oak tree. Its roots tangled and flattened into a bed covered with moss. She dropped Erhent harder than she wanted, and he almost rolled off. She dragged him into the bed’s center.

His skin glowed along his face and leg, as if shining with some internal fire. His gaze tripped around the room as if he were somewhere else.

She knelt beside him. “I won’t let anyone hurt you. I promise.” She touched his face, the side leaking light, but his skin burned her fingers.

Arms wrapped around her from behind, the skin bristly. “Leave,” growled the wulver named Lucky. “Before Mercury comes back. It won’t be pretty.”

She kicked and squirmed. “Put me down!”

A dryad marched toward Erhent, flanked by two cougarkind. She nodded. “Take him outside. Another healer will deal with him.” The cougarkind growled, as if debating who would pick him up.
Lucky tried to speak, but Gwen bit his arm. He snarled and dropped her.

She stomped over to the dryad. “He saved your fucking lives!”

The branches growing from the dryad’s shoulder blades trembled and spread like wings. “Save him? Save the beast that kills my people for sport? Do you know what it’s like to be fed on by someone like him?” Her voice bellowed and cracked like a tree in a storm.

“Do you know what it feels like as they kill the forest you guard for sport?”

“That’s not Erhent!” Tears and snot dribbled down her face. Her voice broke. “He isn’t like that!”

A small circle of dryads gathered, their branches and leaves quivering. Some spit, others hissed.

“Oh, but he was.” The dryad faced him, her treelike shadow falling over his shivering body.

The dryad snarled to the wulvers and cougarkind. “Take it outside! Let it lie there like it has let so many of my people lie. Mercury can find someone else to keep it alive.”

The dryad placed a hand on the bower, and long roots shoved Erhent out of the bed.

A whispering noise parted the dryads’ branches, and some of the circle dispersed, making busy preparing herbs.

A dryad taller than the others hobbled toward Gwen. She’d seen this dryad come in with the procession from a forest deep in Yellowstone. Erhent had called her a Mothertree, a forest leader. Really, she wasn’t taller than Gwen, but the branches spreading from her shoulders made her appear six feet tall and caused her to stoop. She leaned on a budding rowan branch, and a young male dryad accompanied her. Silver branches grew from the tops of his shoulders rather than curving from his back.
Gwen knelt in front of Erhent, ready to press her body over his, to hold him like he’d held her through the dreamscape version of her flood. If the younger dryads hated him so much, what would this leader of their kind say? What if she ordered him killed right there? Or hurt him? If Gwen could just keep him safe until Jack returned, maybe he could stop Mercury.

A sob shook Gwen, but she grit her teeth. “Don’t touch him.”

The dryad stopped. The others stepped aside, quaking their leaves. The dryad passed her staff to the young attendant and spread her arms. “I am a healer, young one. I promise to do no harm.”

A sob shook her. “Please, save him.”

The dryad hobbled to the bed sprouting from an oak tree. She scooped up Erhent as if he were a child and set him in the bed. The branches growing from her shoulders groaned, but she remained steady.

As if shaping clay, she pulled one of the gnarled roots and formed it into a bench seat beside Erhent’s head. She leaned over him and whispered something, though the hush-tremble of her leaves obscured the words. Erhent quieted, his breath evening. She raised her head and met Gwen’s gaze. “I will deal with the ignorance of saplings later. You are also wounded. My son will see to you.”

Gwen gripped the bower. “I’m not leaving.”

The young male who had walked in with the dryad crouched before her and held out a hand, his fingers extra long and tinted green. “We will sit right here.” He touched the wall, and just as the older dryad had molded a bench, he pulled a tall chair from the living wood.
He turned it so the seat faced Erhent, then helped her sit, but she slid off again, almost tripping herself. “Wait, I have to find Jack and the others. I have to—”

He rested a gentle hand on her shoulder, pressing her toward the chair. “I believe you have what your kind calls a concussion. I need to make sure you aren’t bleeding in your skull.”

She almost lost her balance as she tried to sit and hissed as her spine brushed the backrest. The young male supported her. “What pains you? Your back, also?”

She touched her vertebrae and grimaced. “Mercury was going to kill Erhent. I had to do something.” The memory repeated—her scramble to shield him, the sword’s glint.

The male ran a light hand over her spine. “I am Hlfaveth, and you may call my Mothertree by Birch. You have told me the name of your friend, but I do not know yours.”

She stammered her name, trying to focus on Erhent through Hlfaveth’s shoulder foliage. The older dryad felt the cracks in Erhent’s face where the bright light emanated. He pulled away, but she caught his shoulders, whispering again before turning to the wulver, Lucky. She spoke sharply, demanding Lucky remove the shackles. When he hesitated, Birch broke them like snapping a twig.

Hlfaveth’s examination was quick, and he told her to rest and drink a tea concoction he brought her. It soothed the nausea gripping her stomach and warmed her. He assisted Birch, checking in on Gwen every fifteen minutes or so. Birch seemed to be picking shards of light from Erhent’s face and later his leg. She placed them in a jar.

After she’d finished with his face, Hlfaveth bandaged it. Whatever they’d done soothed Erhent, and he laid still.
As they worked, the wounded began to enter the infirmary, most to simply be bandaged and return to whatever was happening. She overheard one elf dressed in jeans and a puffy jacket request a solution to help with teargas. Other wilders that could pass as humankind came in with broken bones from rubber bullets. Another word floated around the room, carried in the dryads’ whispering branches.

*Soul-Eaters.*

Every time the mossy curtain parted, Gwen twisted toward the door hoping it would be Jack, Ace, or Qasim. She told herself they hadn’t arrived at camp yet because the protectors needed them. If only they knew how badly she needed them. She stared at the mossy curtain, wishing and imagining, when Hlfaveth tapped her.

“He’s calling for you.”

He helped her off the chair and tugged on the bower so one of the roots formed a bench.

Sweat shined his brown skin, no longer blueish-gray with starlight. His eyes half-opened, and he smiled as she sat. Gwen took his hand.

Across from her, Birch plucked another pulsing shard from Erhent’s leg. She dropped it in the glass bottle, already glowing and icy. “That’s the last of it. He had starlight beneath this skin.”

“What?”

She corked the bottle. “He’s a starwalker. It happens from time to time, but usually it is like removing a splinter. I have never seen a case like this.” The branches growing from her shoulder blades creaked, and the leaves stirred. “He was in great pain, more than another kind might feel due to his genetic . . . proclivities.”
“Will he be all right?”

She nodded as she applied a salve. “Oh yes. Rest is what he needs.”

Hlfaveth passed her a roll of leafy-looking bandages. “It would have killed him.” His branches shook. “If these shallow-rooted saplings had left him in the snow, he would not be alive now.”

Birch hushed him, though Gwen wasn’t sure if it were her leaves making the sound or not. “That is our trouble. You both need rest.”

Gwen squeezed Erhent’s hand, then stood. “I need to find my friends. They should have come back by now.” Her voice shook, and she swallowed hard.

Birch hobbled around the bower to stand beside Gwen. She placed her hands on Gwen’s shoulders and inclined her head.

“I can’t say thank you enough,” Gwen whispered, a sob tripping her words. “I-I can’t lose him.”

The branches growing from Birch brushed her head. “He would be a shadow without you. As would you, as all partners should be.” She pressed the glass jar of starlight into her hand. “Keep this safe until he wakes. He will need it.” She tugged at Erhent’s bower again, and it widened to the size of a double bed. “Now rest, starkind. Hlfaveth will attend you and will wake you if there is news of your guard.”

Gwen tucked the vial into her breast pocket, then climbed into the wooden bed. The moss and leaf padding made it surprisingly comfortable, and the wood molded beneath her.

“But Mercury. He thinks Erhent killed—killed Sarah. He didn’t.”

Birch rested a knotted hand on Gwen’s forehead. “Sleep.”
Sleep came so quickly, Gwen wondered later if Birch worked some magic or if her body had been that close to collapse.
CHAPTER 38.

Gwen woke into a nightmare. Erhent gripped her hand until it ached.

Mercury had returned. His right arm was shorn at the shoulder, and a blood-sopped bandage capped the severed flesh. His wulver guards prowled behind him—Sirk and Lucky.

Mercury pressed the tip of his sword beneath Erhent’s throat, a trickle of blood staining his neck.

Gwen slowly sat. Sirk snarled and motioned for her to stay down.

Mercury leaned close enough his blood dripped on Erhent. “What did they promise you? That you’d no longer be a runt? An honored position in a clan?”

Erhent tilted his chin and spoke through grit teeth. “I tried to help Sarah. She slipped the tether.”

“Yet you survived.”

Gwen shifted, gathering her legs beneath her, but the movement made her dizzy. “I pulled him down. Ask Jesse if you want proof.”

Mercury raised the blade so the tip rested beneath Erhent’s eye.

Erhent stilled. Gwen couldn’t tear her gaze from the steel.

“You’ll soon learn what insanity comes when a Starcatcher is broken. Jesse is gone.”

Gwen took a shaky breath as she braced to move, block the blow, lunge at Mercury—anything. She couldn’t let this madman take Erhent. Not when she could still fight.

Erhent bared his teeth. “You’ve wanted an excuse to kill me since I set foot here. So take it.”
Gwen shoved Erhent down and wrapped her hand around the blade, forcing it aside as blood welled between her fingers.

A shrieking howl made Mercury draw back his blade. Dryads carried a body to the nearest bed. The wilder scrabbled at nothing as if trying to swim.

Gwen froze. “Jack.” No, no—she needed him to rescue Erhent, not be dying. “Jack!” Blood soaked half his body, and his face looked misshapen, missing.

Erhent leaned forward so the blade’s tip caught at his chest. “Let me heal him. Please. Then you can do whatever you want—kill me, torture me, I don’t care. Just let me go to him—I beg you, let me save him.”

Jack screamed, writhing. His voice turned to a gurgling howl.

Qasim limped into the infirmary. Blood spattered his bare chest, staining the rock plates. He carried Jack’s sword.

Gwen angled herself between Erhent and Mercury, gripping Erhent’s shoulder. She pushed him, but he’d tapped into some well of strength.

Mercury leaned closer, his lips twitching. “I’d rather he died.”

Erhent raised his hand.

His glove fell off like ashes.

The infirmary silenced except for Jack’s whimpering.

Erhent’s fingers flexed inches from Mercury’s neck. The wulvers leaned forward as if ready to spring but made no other move.

Erhent trembled. He slowly raised his other arm, nudging Gwen behind him and creating a barrier between her and the guards. “Let me heal Jack.”

Qasim padded behind Mercury.
Mercury hissed. “Try it, runt. Do it.”

Erhent wavered, and Mercury’s sword flicked—

Qasim caught the blow on his rocky forearm and struck the blade with a spiked fist, shattering it.

The next few seconds blurred as everyone moved at once with wilder speed, but Gwen felt stuck in a moment, the ghost of Erhent’s hand over heart, where she’d kept the vial of starlight. She floated in an unnatural warmth, a stupor remembered from the first night she met him. Instead of a fog of feelings, words drifted into her head with the sensation of his touch, as if Erhent were communicating in the dreamscape.

*I’m sorry for leaving you alone.*

The message snapped her into the moment. Erhent had taken the vial of starlight and stood over Jack. He clapped his naked hands together, crushing the glass, and a nova of light blinked over him before he—absorbed it.

The light pulsed, obliterating him until he was an outline of energy. For a moment, he appeared as Gwen imagined he looked in the sky, one star among many.

He leaned over Jack, and the light faded, spooling into Jack’s body. Erhent sank to his knees, bracing against the wall, his hand cupping Jack’s face, which had been spouting blood only a moment earlier.

A final wink of starlight, and Erhent collapsed.

Qasim dove forward, pushing through the other wilders, but Mercury’s guards caught him and heaved him back. Gwen swung off the bed, but Lucky snatched her, gripping her arm hard enough his claws pierced her skin.
Mercury stepped toward Erhent’s prone form.

Erhent curled on his side and hid his face in his arms.

Gwen dove against the Lucky’s grip. “Erhent!” He’d given up. He was going to let Mercury kill him. “Get up! Erhent!” He was going to leave her alone. Please, stars, not again.

Mercury raised his hand, and Sirk tossed him a spear. He brushed the blade against the nape of Erhent’s neck, but Erhent only curled tighter.

Jack raised his head. The bloody half of his face looked hollow, missing his canine ear and eye. Beneath Erhent’s touch, the skin had reformed, the wounds had scabbed, and the bruising dulled to a sickly green.

Mercury lifted the spear. “I exercise Kurultai Law in accordance—”

Jack flashed off the bed and snatched the spear. He levered it from Mercury’s grasp.

“I challenge you for immediate control of the Druid Peak camp!”

Mercury bared his teeth, tongue flicking. “That doesn’t halt my decision—”

“Unless the decision is made from the place of a wound.” Jack tossed the spear against the wall, the clatter splitting the tension so Gwen could breathe again.

Jack touched Mercury’s shoulder. “You are wounded by grief, old friend.”

Mercury flinched from him. “You are wounded by love, Hunter.”

Jack half-smiled, the mess of blood and scabs controlling the other part of his face.

“Yes, and it will kill me someday.”

Mercury stalked toward the infirmary door, shouting orders to the wulvers—make the announcement, draw a circle, guard the Soul-Eater.

Lucky released Gwen, and she stumbled forward. Qasim caught her before she could collapse in a sobbing mess beside Erhent. He hissed for Gwen to wait.
Jack knelt beside Erhent’s fetal form. He caressed his face, then helped him sit, leaning him against the curved wall. Jack cupped his chin, just as Erhent had moments before. Their lips brushed, then Erhent leaned in, their kiss growing deep and hungry.

Gwen looked away, smiling. It felt like this little pocket of the world was collapsing, but maybe something new could be made from the wreckage.

Jack stood, swaying. “Where’s—where’s Ace?”

“Still at the Park Protectors’ camp,” Qasim said.

Jack nodded as he prowled toward the door. “Gwen, Qasim, stay with him.” His steps looked confident until he staggered and caught himself on the wall.

Qasim touched Gwen’s shoulder, then trotted to Jack and slung an arm around his waist. “You don’t need another bruise before you duel.”

They limped toward the door.

Gwen darted for Erhent. Blood soaked the bandages on his face, and he smelled hot and acrid, like pavement on a summer day.

She reached for him, but he twitched back. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m dying.”

“What?”

Sirk released a growling laugh. “Mercury need only have waited.”

Gwen stood, but Erhent hooked a hand over her arm. “Help me stand.”

Sirk crossed his furry arms, though Lucky’s ears flattened and he stooped.

“You’re not going anywhere,” Sirk said.

Erhent laughed—but it must have contained some of his language because it sounded
like the grinding squeal of bent metal. The noise reminded her of when they first tried to
strike, the sounds his ghosts made.

She hauled Erhent upright and pressed against his side. He leaned on her.

Erhent hissed, took a steadying breath. “Ask yourselves, wolfboys, what do I have to
lose? Mercury will kill me for my crimes. What worse could he do—torture me? He already
has.” He raised a hand, palm up, as if inviting them to take it. “I’d advise you not to test
whether I’m a good Soul-Eater or what Mercury says I am.”

Sirk and Lucky glanced at each other, their tails and ears carrying a conversation.

Lucky blanched first. They parted.

Gwen half-dragged Erhent toward the door. He grinned as they passed between the
hulking wilders.

“Tell Mercury whatever you like,” he said over his shoulder. “I’m sure he’ll believe
it.”

They staggered out of the infirmary into the Wyoming winter. Gwen shivered, but
Erhent burned so hot that sweat dampened her side.

Erhent stood, swaying, then sagged against Gwen. “Once I feed, nothing will touch
us.” He rested his head against hers for a moment. “Help me. Into the trees.”

They stumbled in the shin-deep snow. Once they’d waded past the first row of trees,
Erhent stopped. He half-stepped, half-fell toward a thick pine, the trunk wide enough Gwen
couldn’t have fit her arms around it.

He traced the bark’s crevices. “Gwen, I want you to watch. I want you to know why
they are afraid of me.”
Missing Erhent’s warmth, she shivered and hugged herself. The ground tipped, and she widened her stance, focusing on Erhent. “I’ve—I’ve seen you feed before.”

He pressed both palms against the trunk. “Not like this.”

The tree shuddered and disintegrated from top to roots, dusting the snow. When she’d watched him feed in New Jersey, it’d taken maybe thirty seconds to destroy a sapling. This tree, at least a hundred years old—it vanished in a ten-count.

He stepped through the nothingness once occupied by the trunk. The wrongness of the emptiness twisted her brain, and Gwen trembled.

He braced against the next tree, an aspen, and it shivered to nothing. After the fifth tree, he didn’t stop to flatten his palms on the trunk, he just walked, his arms outstretched, whatever he touched vanishing.

He carved a path through the woods for a hundred feet, then stopped. He ripped the bandage off his face, then shook out his leg. “Do you see, Gwen?” He didn’t turn around, but she sensed the weakness and exhaustion had been stripped with the bandage. He straightened his shoulders. “And I am the runt of my kind. We could destroy the world if we chose—we nearly did, once.”

She walked in his footsteps until she stood behind him. Still, he didn’t turn. “Yes, Erhent, I see.” She wrapped her arms around his waist as if he were a tree and hid her face in the hollow between his shoulders. Warmth suffused him, and he smelled like fresh, sweet wood still green with sap. “I see a wilder who would die for those he loves. I see a wilder who inspires love in his friends.”

He tried to twitch away. “Gwen—”
“I see a wilder with magic and starlight in his hands. I see a wilder who wants to save the world.”

Erhent twisted in her arms and hugged her, crushing her against him.

Tears burned, and she pressed her face into his neck. She hadn’t said I love you since her mothers’ funeral. It’d become a charm—if she didn’t say, if she didn’t think it, maybe nothing bad would happen. The bad had come anyway, and now she wished she had said it more. “I love you, okay? We wouldn’t be here without you.”

He smoothed her hair. “Or you.” He pulled back, holding her shoulders. “May I give you something?”

She sniffed and nodded.

He rested his forehead against hers, and warmth flooded her. The throbbing in her skull faded to a dull pressure while the pain in her spine, the bruises, her aching muscles—all eased beneath his warmth.

She flashed to her dreamscape, and the ficus tree Erhent had made perpetually bloom rained petals around her.
Jack would lose to Mercury. He felt it in his trembling muscles, in his throbbing head, how the earth tilted below him, the ticking in his ears—no, his ear. Erhent held magic in his hands, but magic only fixed so much.

He braced against Qasim’s shoulder as drunk, rut-scented, bloody wilders formed a circle. Mercury stood across from him, markedly steadier on his feet.

He rubbed the raw flesh Erhent had half-healed. “It keeps turning.”

“What did you say?” Qasim asked.

“I can’t—the ground—it keeps moving.”

Qasim shifted in front of him. “Look at me.”

His eyes focused, and Qasim solidified. “I’m going to lose.”

Qasim gripped Jack’s shoulders. “You are fighting for love. You cannot lose.”

His knees shook, and he swayed, but Qasim steadied him. “I’m running on Erhent’s—on Erhent’s energy. On starlight.”

Mercury stalked in a circle. “You ready, Lunatic?”

Jack bared his teeth at his Hunter name. He embraced Qasim, more to steady himself than for comfort.

“You have to do this,” Qasim whispered.

He took a shuddering breath. “I shouldn’t ask this of you, but don’t let him kill—”

“I won’t.” Qasim bowed his forehead against Jack’s, the stone cool and calming.

“You are one of the greatest fighters to ever live. You will win.” He stepped to the edge of the circle.
Jack spread his stance, digging his toes into the icy mud. *You’re a Hunter. You’ve faced worse odds.* Like the time he’d been sick with fever from poisoned meat, and he’d thrown his hunting gear into a ravine as a promise to Erhent he’d left that part of his life behind. Only soulkind had set on them a few hours later, Jack sick and Erhent unsteady in his freedom. Still, they’d survived.

Mercury shed his sweater and shirt, revealing flesh scared as Jack’s from their days of hunting. Instead of chest fur, the one clue to his wildness spread over his skin—scales the color of fingernails.

Mercury limped forward, circling Jack. “I am finished giving you time to come to your senses.”

Jack turned, keeping Mercury in sight. A fight to the death, then. He hoped the first strike would prime his adrenaline, give him an edge.

Mercury lunged. Jack twisted right. So did Mercury—they collided and hit the frozen ground.

The earth and sky traded places. Jack’s stomach lurched.

Mercury crawled on top of him and slapped the wounded side of his face. He howled, the cry cut short as Mercury pressed a forearm into his throat.

Mercury snarled, grazing his fangs over Jack’s ear. “You are honestly this soft, Lunatic?”

The sky blurred, and Jack closed his eye. He stood in memory, in the back of the semi-truck, metal bars bisecting the trailer. A younger Erhent paced and twitched on one side, and he stood on the other, dressed in his Hunter gear, holding his sword. Behind him, through the open doors, six cars entered the dark parking lot. All Jack had to do was slip his
sword through the bars, and he could keep his trade, his makeshift clan, his reputation. Instead, he’d left the trailer and closed the doors so Erhent couldn’t watch what it meant for a Hunter to be outcast.

Jack smiled. He grappled Mercury and flipped him, scrambling away and stumbling to his feet. Except the world tilted and he lost his balance, falling backward.

Mercury lunged on all fours and crashed on top of him. They rolled, and Jack smashed his fist into Mercury’s ribs, while Mercury clawed at his empty eye. He snapped teeth at Mercury’s throat but ate air.

Mercury pinned him again and beat at his wounds, but Jack wrapped his legs around Mercury’s weak knee and dug his heel into the joint, bending bone.

He shoved Mercury off and rolled into a crouch, not daring to stand. On all fours, the world settled.

Mercury straightened, leaning more on his strong leg. “Is he worth it, Jack? I don’t want to fight you, brother.”

He coughed blood. His lungs hurt. Still, there’d been worse odds—yes, the trip to Guatemala to find Erhent’s mother. Captured, beaten, three days with no water. Yet they’d survived. Only this time, Erhent wasn’t at his side. Today, they’d separated by choice. It had become bigger than their love.

Jack half-closed his eye, focused on the breaths clearing his nose. His ear twitched, honing in on Mercury’s knee, grinding with every step.

His tail straightened, balancing him while fur rippled up his spine, over his skull.

Mercury lunged, but he twisted out of the way, straightening on two-legs.
Each time Mercury charged, Jack avoided, but he didn’t strike. If he shifted his momentum, changed his posture, he feared the ground would tilt. The crowd faded to a hum, like crickets. He was back in the old days, training with a younger Mercury during the Soul Wars, when soulkind seeped through the shadows.

Instinct told him he was hallucinating, the kind of world-warping that caused old wilders to walk into the woods during a snowstorm. *Careful, Jack. Stay tight, stay bright.*

Mercury ran again, a head-on charge, and Jack stepped left, turning away but as he shifted, a *crack* shuddered Mercury’s body, and his missing arm regrew fast as lightning.

His new fist broke Jack’s jaw.

He fell on his side in the churned mud. A celestial keening burst in his ear and jagged through his brain, raking the riverbed of his memories. Images bubbled behind his eye. The savannah grasses twisting in the wind, like fingers through fur. The foam kicked up by antelope crossing a river. Beetles scurrying over bones. The hitch of throats howling. Erhent singing. The corner of his smile.
Qasim knelt in Jack’s line of sight at the circle’s edge, bellowing to stand up.

Mercury kicked Jack over and pinned him, a knee on each shoulder. With a fistful of Jack’s hair, Mercury forced his head aside, baring his neck, his lifevein.

Qasim turned still as the stone armoring him. He believed in story, one of his downfalls according to his grandfather. Beings like him were older than stories; they even created the great ones. It was foolish to believe that love conquered all, that good won in fairness, that brightness always bested shadow.

*Get up, get up.*

Mercury lowered his bared teeth toward Jack’s throat.

Love was not strong enough to win this battle. But he could change the odds. He held the power to make stories. To stone, this moment meant nothing. No wars, countries, kinds held in the balance. If he looked into the geo-layers of deep time, these lives didn’t matter. The park didn’t matter. This one Starcatcher didn’t matter.

Qasim planted his fist into the mud.

His grandfather wanted him to learn when to use his heritage. Involving himself in the petty leadership squabbles of a Kurultai clan so far from Palestine would not be appropriate. Beings were makers of great stories. Jack and Erhent were nothing. Just like his old friends in Palestine had been nothing. *Think above time,* his grandfather said.

Qasim closed his eyes and felt the earth shift beneath his fist. The day of Jack’s death mattered little to the world, but it mattered to the little world growing around Qasim, an
environment of love and trust. Maybe this moment would cost him another decade in his stone prison, but if he lived above time, then what did it matter?

He shifted the mud so it lifted Jack, contorting his body to shake off Mercury. He flipped Jack on top of Mercury, then sucked Mercury into the dirt, trapping his hands.

For a second, Jack and Mercury stared at each other, their positions switched, then Mercury’s eyes widened. He howled, “You cheating Jackal—”

Jack pounded into his face, three blows. On the fourth, Mercury went limp. He exposed Mercury’s neck and bit enough to redden his mouth, smear his chin.

He staggered to his feet, and Qasim rushed into the ring, bracing him.

“I will not take his life.” He coughed, his body shuddering. “If you would remain loyal to Mercury, then leave with him.”

No wilder flinched.

“Now!”

The wulvers took his unconscious body, and a horsekind and two wolfkinds followed.

About a dozen, fewer than Qasim had expected.

“We—we need to help the protestors.” Jack tipped forward, his weight dragging him from Qasim’s grasp. He managed to ease Jack to the mud, shouting for medical treatment, first aid, something.

Jack smiled. “Oh child.” He touched Qasim’s chin. “We are wilders. We lick our own wounds.”
Druid Peak offered the best vantage point over the protest camp—at least, what remained. Dawn grayed the valley’s hills and silvered the river. The moon hung low, close and towing Gwen, her veins aching, as if urging her to do something. She still gasped from their run up the mountain, but she’d kept pace with Erhent, even if he helped, giving her bursts of energy through their interlocked fingers. Attempting to run like that would have been impossible a few months.

Only one road cut through Lamar Valley. At the south end, cops and National Guard blocked the pavement, so a line of vehicles clogged the road toward the north entrance. Headlights glinted off icy vehicles, but Gwen couldn’t see much more with her human eyes. Two helicopters circled the camp, spotlighting different cars or random people scrambling to find a ride.

They crouched on the edge of the peak, and Erhent described what he saw with his sharper vision. Humankind dashing up and down the line of vehicles, police marching forward, checking each car. White trucks with the AquaCore logo (an oil tower spewing teal water) parked at the gate, but instead of workers, shapes obscured by black tactical gear had swung from the truck beds.

Erhent squeezed her hand, his breath quickening. “The trucks—those are Soul-Eaters, I think. Listen.”

A sound like thunder rumbled through the valley. For a moment, she wasn’t shivering on Druid Peak beside Erhent, but sitting on her couch, watching the superstorm that would flood her home roll in, listening to the thunder and smiling at the lightning show. What a
storm, she’d thought. She’d stood on the porch with her mothers, counting the seconds between light and sound.

Erhent shifted slightly, his side bracing her. “A hunting cry.”

“More activists are going to disappear.”

“In the chaos,” Erhent said, “how could the police or the security forces be accused?”

She could see the headlines already: Activists vanish during Yellowstone raid. It would be so easy.

The first bulldozer crunched through camp, nudging past the burned-out RV blockade. Metal twisted and screeched, loud in the quiet dawn.

“What do we do? How do we help?”

He fixed his bright eyes on her for a moment too long. That look already said it, but he repeated in English. “This is your work, Gwen. Find them a safe route.”

She jerked to her feet. “How can magic do anything against that?” She pointed to the backhoe and bulldozer, to the bearcats and SWAT vehicles.

He straightened. “I don’t know if it can.”

“Then why are we a Starcatcher?”

He passed a hand over his cheek, touching the star-mangled scars. For a moment, he appeared the youngest she’d witnessed—no older than her. Maybe in this moment, they were equal, just two more bodies before a cosmic bulldozer.

She closed her eyes, searching for the prickle of starlight on her skin. Those people could be her mothers, could be Ace. She looked skyward, then to the headlights turning the road into another Milky Way.

Erhent clasped her hand. “I’m sorry.”
She sniffed, the air like ice in her chest. “We should at least cast a blessing and some sort of helping spell—wait.” She grinned. “We’re thinking too small. We’re thinking like humans.”

“I’m not sure I can think like a human.”

She nudged him. “You aren’t controlled by distance when you are in the stars.”

“Well, that’s not exactly true—”

“You can strike anywhere in the park, easy. If they are attacking our camp, let’s attack theirs.”

He grinned. “Call back the dogs.”

“As Ace would say, we gotta fuck with them.”

“We could send fire, a lightning bolt—”

“No,” Gwen said, “that would get back to the Park Protectors. They’d call it eco-terrorism. We need something that can’t be traced.” Wind gusted, and Gwen leaned against Erhent for warmth. “Jesse and—and Sarah said soulkind made the Terror Trees to stop the wilders from raiding the AquaCore camps. Think the Trees will listen to you?”

He hid his hands in his pockets. “No. I’m a runt to my kind. Worthless.”

“You’re not a runt.”

“Among my kind, that’s what I am.”

She tugged on his coat, copying Jack. “Good thing you’re stuck with two humankinds, a Being, and a jackalkind these days.”

“It won’t work, Gwen.”

She stepped in front of him and channeled Jesse’s authority as an anchor—poor Jesse.

“This is my decision. Those are my kind down there. I think this will work.” She could
already picture the map, what lines it would follow, how the Terror Tree grove would move, following her footprints she’d trudged across the meadows and groves with Qasim and Ace.

Another thunderous soulkind cry made him flinch. “My kind are there, as well. Perhaps we are right for this moment.” He offered his hands. “Fine, Anchor. I will try.”

#

Even as the sun rose over Yellowstone, the dreamscape remained dark, lit by the orange and red glow of nebulae. In the dreamscape, Erhent winked above her, the brightest star in the night sky.

Erhent trailed the tether through the constellations, mirroring the path Gwen, Ace, and Qasim cut into the snow after escaping the Terror Trees. Her footprints might still be there, frozen until the next blizzard. Regardless, she imagined their track glistening in the dawn, then eaten up by shifting Terror Trees.

She gave herself over to the dreamscape. She watched Erhent cast until the dreamscape felt solid, real. Until she no longer felt the cold, just the draw of starlight. Hopefully, they were safe on Druid Peak, where they curled in the snow, her chest to his back for warm.

She turned from the skeleton of her flooded house, then paused. She trotted to the front door, naked without the porch or an actual door. The nebulous light shone into the roofless frame. Just like when she and Erhent first struck successfully, two axes rested in the umbrella stand. She hefted both—one for Mom and one for Mama.
She rapped her knuckles once on the doorframe, just as her mothers had done before a long trip, and left her home behind.

The ficus trees twined together in spiraling ramparts of wood, and their roots flowed like rivulets. Humid silence spread through the trees, and Gwen quieted her steps like Mercury taught her. Some instinct urged her deeper, that if this magic were to work, it wouldn’t be made in the ruins of her home, of her old life.

She hadn’t told Erhent her plan because he would never have gone into the stars. The ficus trees shouldn’t be in her head. They represented some part of Erhent just as her home represented her. But if the trees were in her head, then they had to come from her—right? Maybe the part of her soul created to bond with Erhent manifested the trees.

The tether unspooled from her wrist like a kite string. The canopy blocked Erhent, and only the tether’s sway promised he still worked lines into the stars.

The forest channeled her toward two ficus trees forming a gateway. Their roots spread like walls, high as Gwen’s waist. The trunks corkscrewed into the stars, the limbs linking and blocking the sky. Darkness stretched beyond the gate, and instinct said she’d reached it, whatever it was.

She tucked her twin axes under one arm as she scrambled over the roots and entered the darkness.

The tether produced the only light, a glinting line cutting skyward and glowing through the veins in her arm. She felt her steps forward, mindful of twisting her bad ankle.

A shape began to form—a lighter blackness silhouetted against the shadows. A Terror Tree, old and squat, with thick, white roots piping into the ground. Bark peeled off the trunk in long coils.
Erhent gently pulled on the tether, signaling his readiness to cast. She returned the gesture, asking for more time.

With an axe raised in each hand, she approached the tree. Was it real? Was it her subconscious projecting something? She’d felt pain in the dreamscape before. She and Erhent had both bled when returning from it. Nothing lasting, but she’d left her dreamscape—perhaps even transitioned elsewhere. The rules might have changed as well.

The ficus canopy blocked the stars, so only her tether with Erhent kept her rooted.

She eased closer, one axe cocked over her shoulder, the other loose at her side. The Terror Tree made no noise, no shift—a pale shadow in the primordial ficus forest. From the girth, it was hundreds of years old.

Another step, her body tightening, waiting for the first fear.

*Gwen, where are you off to?*

She whipped around, raising the axes. Her English teacher stood behind her. Chris, with his black skinny jeans and plain T-shirt, a denim jacket—dressed like the last time she saw him, when Erhent scared him off.

Her arms shook, the axes suddenly too heavy.

Chris looked around, even followed the line of the tether, craning his neck. *Is this why you’ve missed two months of my class?*

She glanced between him and the Terror Tree. Erhent teased the tether and she asked again for more time. As fears went, this wasn’t too bad, so why couldn’t she move?

Chris stepped beside her. *You’re ruining your shot at college to, what, play pretend in the woods?*
She turned on him, and for a moment, she no longer stood in her dreamscape, she wasn’t a Starcatcher, Erhent didn’t exist. The gym and rows of cots surrounded her. *Grades, Chris? You want to talk about fucking grades?*

He grinned and spread his hands. *Stop playing pretend. There’s nothing you can do except stay in school, keep your grades up. Good SAT scores can earn you wonders.*

The tether jerked so hard her right arm swung. The silver glow illuminated the line unraveling from her veins, glinted off the axe heads. Erhent needed her. If she listened to Chris, she’d miss her chance to perhaps make things a little bit easier for the Park Protectors.

She hefted the axes and settled one over each shoulder, the weight like her mothers’ hands, encouraging her. They’d prepared her to be a Starcatcher, even if they never knew what she’d become. She growled, letting it thrum through her chest, vibrate in her throat. Her lips parted, bearing her teeth.

Chris pointed up the tether. *Is this because of him? Whatever he promised you will only end badly.* He stalked forward. *He’s hurt you already, hasn’t he?*

She retreated, shifting one axe to protect her chest. *Go away, Chris!*

He stopped, his mouth turning down. *Gwen, I know you’re angry. Please, just come with me. I won’t take you to the school. We’ll talk about all this, talk about what you want. I know it feels hopeless. I feel it, too.* He reached for her.

She dodged, but her foot caught in the Terror Tree’s roots, and she fell, pain spiking through her ankle. One axe slipped from her hand, but she clutched the second, shielding herself.

Chris crouched over her, and the Terror Tree groaned. *Zeke asks about you every day.*

She pressed into the trunk, trying to jerk her foot free, but the pain made her gasp.
He offered a hand. *I can take you to him. He’d be so happy to see you.*

He’d come close enough to chop him, but her instinct said that wasn’t the right move. The Terror Trees manifested fear, but she wasn’t afraid of Chris. If anything, she felt the opposite—she’d love to tell him everything turned out okay. Well, close enough to okay.

Roots constricted around her ankle, and she grit her teeth, wringing the axe handle. Her pulse raced, and it took a few deep breaths before she could focus on something other than thrashing her ankle free. The real Chris, he’d be happy for her. He wanted her to find her way out of that flooded town.

She set aside the axe and leaned forward as much as her trapped foot allowed. *Chris, I never said thank you.* She bowed her forehead against Chris’ and placed her hands on his shoulders. *Thank you for being such a good teacher. Thank you for trying so hard to take care of us—*

He vanished.

Gwen sighed and sagged against the trunk. Now to free her ankle and finish—

The Terror Tree creaked. Roots slithered over her legs and around her waist.

Gwen screamed and scrabbled for her axes, but the roots dragged them under the dirt.

Bark swirled, parting and biting at her skin like lips and teeth.

The tether jolted as Erhent sensed her panic.

The Terror Tree slurped at her as the trunk split. Roots swelled over her, washing her into the mouth dripping with black sap.

Gwen kicked and scratched, her screams forming words: *No, no, no!*
Roots squeezed her chest until she couldn’t breathe. The sap covered her face, stuck in her nose and smeared her teeth, making her wretch. It burned her skin as splinters shredded her clothes.

She twisted her wrist, gripping the tether as the trunk began to seal, drowning her.

Pain seared through her ankle. Not again, not again—no otterwoman to save her this time.

The tether glowed along her veins, thrummed in her fingers. Buzzing with power. Erhent was about to release the magic.

Wait! She jerked twice.

The split in the trunk grew smaller, two waves coming together. Tap roots washed over her neck, trickled between her lips.

They needed to control the Terror Trees, bend them to Gwen’s map cast by Erhent in the stars. What better place to take control than from the inside.

She gagged as sap leaked down her throat. The wood swallowed her, hitching and rolling as it sucked her deeper into its heartwood. Her fear screamed through her. She was drowning. Her muscles twitched and spasmed, trying to slip free.

Tears streamed down her face as the trunk closed over her with a hiss.

Now!

Her arm twitched, only giving the faintest pull.

The tether flamed like a shooting star.
CHAPTER 42.

Gwen didn’t remember hauling Erhent down to the dreamscape, only him carrying her through the primordial forest, cradling her beneath their blooming ficus tree, cleaning the sap and splinters from her mouth and nose. Holding her to his chest, his forehead brushing hers.

*Take us home.*

The dreamscape fading, the shudder of Erhent’s body as his soul returned.

Gwen rolled away from him and scrabbled in the snow. She clawed at her face, her neck, searching for the sticky sap or splinters trying to tear her apart.

Erhent gripped her wrists. “Gwen! Stop! You’re hurting yourself!”

Something trickled down her cheek, and she wrenched a hand free, slapping her palm to the wetness—blood, not the black sap. She’d scratched herself.

She tried to slow her breathing but couldn’t stop gasping. “It wasn’t real?” Her stomach churned, and she turned away, a fist pressed to her lips.

Erhent rubbed her back, murmuring it was all right. His rhythmic touch eased her breathing.

She wiped a hand down her face. Her sweat froze in her hair. “Jesse—she never said anything like that could happen in the dreamscape.”

“You shouldn’t have entered the trees. They shouldn’t be there.”

She brushed off the snow. “I think I needed to.” She shook herself. “What now?”
He rose with an easy grace even though he still favored his leg wounded in the stars. His bright eyes flicked toward the Park Protectors’ camp. “We don’t know if we’ve changed anything. The past hour might have been wasted.”

Star magic was a slow magic. They knew how to cast a storm and some lightning bolts, but only in theory. Making an original spell on the spot meant to manipulate the will of sentient trees—Jesse and Sarah hadn’t even begun to cover those lessons.

He helped her stand, and she hissed as pain seared through her ankle.

He steadied her. “What’s wrong?”

“I twisted my ankle in the dreamscape.” Well, not exactly a lie. She would tell him the whole story later, but for the moment, she wanted to forget.

He crouched and rolled up her pant leg, then grimaced. “I can ease the pain for now.”

She gripped his shoulder for balance. “Do it.”

He pressed his hands to her skin, like when he had healed Jack. Bone popped, and Gwen grit her teeth until only a throbbing warmth remained.

“Better?” he asked.

She tested her weight. Her foot felt tingly, the ankle numb, but it didn’t hurt. She nodded. “We should go to Jack. See if there’s anything we can do.”

Erhent looked at his chapped hands. “We don’t know if Jack is the leader.”

“He is. He was fighting for you. No way could he lose.”

Erhent let out along breath. “Mercury was fighting to revenge his daughter. Love matched against love.”

As they walked down the peak, Gwen offered to enter camp first and signal if everything was fine, but Erhent only gripped her hand. “Never let go of your partner.”
They stood at the tree line, dawn slanting into the clearing. It seemed strangely quiet after four days of straight celebration—peaceful, even. The fires had burned to embers, the smoke hazy in the sun. Wilders huddled at the long tables, clustered into groups.

For a second, Gwen returned to her first time entering camp, how it’d all been such a shock. Now, it had started to feel like home. Her feet knew the trails, the wood smoke smelled like safety, she could decipher the guard calls and whistles. She may not belong here like Jesse and Sarah, but it meant more than the high school gym.

Beside her, Erhent squeezed her hand until it hurt. She wanted to make promises, but their emptiness would be insulting. It’d only take one wulver to haul her away—if Jack had lost. Since nothing had attacked Erhent yet, she hoped that meant the camp had a new leader.

They continued to hold hands as they stepped from the trees. Erhent flinched in the sunlight, as if he felt exposed. The wilders sitting at the table stared, a mixture of familiar faces and outlying visitors. Only one wulver, though—Lucky. Gwen squashed her excitement. If Mercury had won, the wulvers would be prowling, waiting to take a bite out of Erhent.

As they passed the table, Erhent’s head high and staring at the infirmary, Lucky stood. He half-bowed.

“Starcatcher.”

Erhent nodded to him, and Gwen grinned. Mercury had lost. They kept walking, and as they passed the seated wilders, some stood and used their title. Out of the fifty wilders they passed, maybe ten acknowledged them, but it felt like a litany.

The coyotekind Char crouched, leaning against the living wooden wall of the infirmary. He straightened and placed a furry hand on the curtain, holding it shut.
Erhent swallowed hard. “Is he—”

“He is.” Char bared his blackened teeth. “He could do a lot of good for this place, Erhent, but not with you poisoning his name.”

Erhent looked down and tried to shoulder into the infirmary, but Char gripped his arm.

“Think about it,” Char growled. “If you are here for the cause and not your own selfish survival, then consider if you might be more useful away—”

Gwen shoved in front of Char. “Back off.” She showed her teeth.

With his ears, he stood a foot taller than her, but he settled into his crouch, his tail wrapped around his ankles. “As you say, Anchor.” The title sounded childish, and his mouth twisted into a sneer as Gwen parted the curtain.

A peaceful stillness replaced the earlier shrieking and panic. A few dryads worked in the back where the herbs hung from branches or grew grafted into the living wood. Only one bower held an occupant. Birch, Hlfaveth, and Qasim sat at Jack’s bedside, while the makeshift guard of coyotekind and foxkind formed a loose circle, but they parted for Erhent and Gwen. Some whispered, “Starcatcher.”

Qasim trotted over, his stone plates grinding. “Thank the stars. Are you all right?”

Erhent brushed past him and dropped to his knees, gripping the bedside. Jack curled on the bower, his arms wrapped around his wounded head.

“Yeah, we’re good,” Gwen said.

He rubbed at the stone armoring his shoulder. “I was worried. I didn’t know if I should come look for you or stay with him.”
Birch rested a hand on Erhent’s head. “He only needs rest, Starcatcher. You saved him, but he spent himself doubly afterward.”

“Because he still had to protect me.” He touched Jack’s arm. “I’m so sorry—”

Hlfaveth’s shoulder branches quivered, rustling as if a storm wind blew. “It may have been for your sake, but rot had weakened the trunk of this place. Jack knew it and did what others were not brave enough to do.” His branches swayed toward the coyotekind and foxkind, as if giving them an accusing look.

Gwen sat cross-legged beside Erhent, her face level with Jack’s. He looked peaceful—his breathing even and his face relaxed. A poultice covered the mangled side, hiding the emptiness of his missing ear and eye.

Erhent rubbed his thumb over Jack’s bicep. “There’s more to do, but the camp won’t listen to me. The protestors need help. There are Soul-Eaters down there. We did what we could from the stars, but—” He shook his head.

“How do you know?” Birch asked.

Erhent stood and offered Gwen a hand, pulling her upright. “Know what?”

“That the camp won’t listen to their Starcatcher?” Hlfaveth said. “It’s your right to make requests.”

Erhent met Gwen’s gaze, and it was almost as if they were in the dreamscape and she could hear his thoughts. *I’m a runt. This isn’t my place.*

Flood trash and a runt—this was totally going to work.
Adrenaline made Gwen’s steps unsteady as they walked to the central fire, a few fingers of flame still reaching into the morning. Wilders picking over the celebration’s bones turned from their tables. Some exited their dens and holes, gathering closer. Jack’s makeshift guard huddled at the infirmary entrance, their ears pricked.

Qasim muttered for them to wait a moment, then he knelt, sticking his hands in the ground as easily as if it were water. He dragged a boulder to the surface, then knocked steps into the rock.

“Thank you,” Erhent said.

Qasim clasped his arm.

He climbed onto the four-foot boulder and aided Gwen as she scrambled up.

The wilders gathered closer, and Gwen took Erhent’s hand, giving it a quick squeeze. Below them, Qasim stood with his legs planted wide and his arms crossed. He rolled his neck so his obsidian crown flashed.

Erhent tried to speak, swallowed, then cleared his throat. “You—you have no reason to follow us.” He scanned the crowd. “Yet by some twist of the stars, we find ourselves bound by the same promises, the same system. You have no reason to follow us, a humankind and a Soul-soulkind, other than we are a Starcatcher, and when the camp leader is—absent, the Starcatcher is the next authority. By that authority, we have a request. While the Park Protectors’ camp is destroyed, Gwen and I have cast a spell to distract the Dark Stars’ forces.”
If it worked. She took a deep breath and really looked at the crowd for the first time—all of them her elders, some by hundreds of years, and she was going to ask them to risk their lives.

“While the battle might be lost, we can assist the protestors while they retreat and help them leave the park unharmed. We can keep their spirits high.”

The wilders grumbled, tension whipping.

Gwen closed her eyes and flashed into the dreamscape where the stars burned even in the daylight. The ghost of Erhent’s hand followed her, the weight comforting like the haft of an axe.

She opened her eyes. “We know the price of what we ask—to help humans in broad daylight when the police and National Guard and stars know what else wants to stop us. But that’s what they all want—and I do mean they. The Dark Stars, the human policymakers, the human corporations—they want us to think the price is too high. They want us to lose hope.”

She paused and searched the crowd. Please, please just one friendly face. If only Jesse and Sarah—she blinked and cleared the thickness from her throat. “I lived without hope for a little while. I felt small and helpless. Like I was trapped in a current, and no matter how hard I swam, I couldn’t go in a different direction. That’s how they want the humankind to feel. That it’s all inevitable. Because the Park Protectors tried to change something, tried to be a symbol of hope—the Dark Stars and the human governments had to shut it down, brutally. When the grizzly bears weren’t enough, they turned to this—concussion grenades and midnight raids.”
She squeezed Erhent’s hand, and he slid in. “The camp is destroyed. We can’t change that. But we can protect their retreat and give them something more—magic.” His eyes flashed with their uncanny brightness.

“We can give them a legend,” Gwen said. “A story to surpass the violence and the attacks. A story to give them hope.” Like the story she’d clung to after the flood—of an otterwoman who told her *look to the stars*.

Erhent jumped off the rock, his coat snapping. Gwen dropped beside him, landing in a crouch.

“This is a request,” he said. “The Kurultai won’t like it, but the Druid Peak camp was charged with assisting the Park Protectors. That’s what we are going to do.”

He strode toward the main path out of camp. Gwen fell into step behind him. She wanted to look over her shoulder but stared straight ahead.

Daði and Daðey trotted up on either side. Daði unfolded their wings, slanting the right wing toward Erhent. “Let’s fly.”

Without breaking step, Erhent swung onto Daði’s bare back. He offered a hand to Gwen, and she climbed on behind him.

She wrapped her arms around his waist. “Back where we started.”

Daði’s wings snapped open. “Rising!”

He leaned forward and clasped Daði’s neck. The ground lurched, and Daði leapt, gliding over the trees. Gwen risked a glance. A band of maybe twenty wilders ran below, led by Qasim on Daðey.

She rested her chin on Erhent’s shoulder and spoke into his ear. “They’re following, Erhent. They’re following you.”
He tilted his head, brushing her hair. “Us, Gwen. They are following a Starcatcher.”
When a looming shadow swung over the snow, Ace and Beth dove behind a burned-out car. Ace cursed for not hearing the helicopter, but when she looked, Daði glided low enough for Erhent to drop, his black coat fluttering. Ace’s face crinkled, but she squeezed the bridge of her nose until the emotion passed. It wasn’t over yet.

She vaulted over the car. “About damn fucking time!”

Erhent swung around, then grinned. “You’re alive!”

She hugged him, slapping him on the back. “Good to see you, too. Where’s Gwen?”

“We cleared the gate. She’s keeping traffic moving.”

Ace glared. “You left her alone—”

“Qasim is with her.” He nodded down the line of cars. “Why aren’t they moving?”

Beth sauntered from behind the car, twirling a tire iron. “Nice ride, flyboy.”

Erhent tilted his head and quirked an eyebrow at Ace.

She hooked arms with Beth. “I didn’t know if you folks were gonna show.”

The radio attached to Beth’s belt crackled, and Deshawn asked for progress on the engines.

Erhent raised a hand and wiggled his fingers. “I can help with that.” He scanned the trees. “The other Soul-Eaters?”

She climbed from the snow onto the road. “They took off about an hour ago. Same with the National Guard.” A protestor half-opened a car door, but Ace threw her shoulder into. “Stay in the fucking car!” She shook her head at Erhent. “Stupid rich boys.”
A camera flash came through the window. Ace snatched the tire iron from Beth and cracked the glass.

Erhent touched her shoulder. “Are you all right?”

No, she was not. Nothing was all right. She’d opened cars to find them empty, just dust and stale fear. She’d followed footprints into the woods just to see them stop. “Let’s get this over with.” She stepped in front of the car with the now broken window and motioned for the driver to pop the hood. When he just stared at her, she yelled for him to do it before she broke the windshield, too.

Erhent poked the battery, and the engine sparked.

“Nice. Now just three hundred more.”

They worked down the line while her crew worked forward. Twice, she heard gunshots and ducked into a crouch, but Erhent simply told her to keep moving. Who knew how much time they had left.

Deshawn and Phelix waited for them at an RV they couldn’t manage to start. Erhent jogged up just as Ace called hello. Phelix whipped around, saw Erhent, and hurled a wrench. Erhent dodged, then held up his hands.

Ace stepped in front of Erhent. “Cool it, I told you he looked like them!” She elbowed him. “You okay?”

He nodded as he brushed past her, circling the RV. A little boy pulled down a window and leaned half-way out, waving. “Tío!”

Erhent reached up and took the little boy’s hand. “¿Dónde está tu padre, Ángel?”

Ángel squeezed aside, and a man peered out. “Eduardo, thank god. What’s going on?”
“Stay in the RV.” He backed toward the engine. “I promise, Javier, it—it will be fine. I won’t let anything happen.”

Deshawn and Phelix stepped away from the engine as Erhent approached. He dug into the metal guts, and the RV roared, sputtering black smoke. The passengers cheered.

“Shiiit.” Deshawn shook his head. “You said he was magic.”

Phelix held out their hand. “Sorry about earlier, mate.”

Erhent accepted. “Any others who look like me, promise you’ll hit them.”

“Deal.”

He wiped his dirty hands on his coat as they walked to the next dead car. “Ace, how much did you tell them?” He waved as they passed the open RV window, Ángel still cheering.

She matched his pace. “Enough to get in trouble.”

They came to a set of footprints and a line of empty cars a few minutes later. As she registered the empty vehicles, Erhent snatched her collar and threw her behind him. She stumbled into the snow as he yelled for Beth, Deshawn, and Phelix to get back.

“God, Erhent.” She brushed off her coat. “Don’t worry, they’re gone. We’ve—we’ve only found bodies.”

He raised a hand and padded along the trail in that totally silent wilder way. She crunched over the snow, her jaw tensing at every noise. Erhent glared at her and bared his teeth, but she just shook her head. Gwen and Jack would kill her if she let him go alone.

They crept into the tree line. Erhent flexed his bare fingers.

Just out of sight of the road, the boot prints led to a group of protestors kneeling before a long, shallow hole. Behind the protestors stood four figures wearing tactical gear
with the Dark Stars’ insignia, a circle with a line through the center. The tallest, some sort of
half-animal judging from the legs’ curve, growled in a wilder language to a human figure
standing apart. He wore the same gear, but a turquoise band ringed his arm. All five carried
automatic rifles.

Erhent touched Ace’s shoulder and mouthed *Soul-Eater*.

The Soul-Eater thumbed a smartphone, then held it to his ear. After a few moments,
he shoved it into his pocket with a hiss. “I don’t know what’s going on back there. Just do it.”

Erhent hesitated then motioned for Ace to wait. He shoved through the frozen
undergrowth. “Stop!”

The Soul-Eater whipped around. “Well, well, the runt quit hiding in the stars. Noah’s
going to tearing you apart when he arrives.”

Erhent raised his hand.

The Dark Stars shifted, glancing among themselves, then at the Soul-Eater. When
Erhent took another step forward, one wilder sprinted off. Then a second.

The Soul-Eater shook his head. “For godssake! He’s a runt, can’t you see that?”

His hand outstretched, Erhent edged closer, angling between the Soul-Eater and the
two remaining wilders. “They know what I did in the stars scared you. Sent you running back
to your hole. They know when they’ve lost.”

The Soul-Eater stood a foot taller than Erhent with maybe an extra fifty pounds of
muscle. Ace shifted her weight to keep her legs warm. He’d need help. Even a distraction
would be enough. From the glow in Erhent’s eyes, he was ready to kill.
Something poked her side, and she nearly yelped. Deshawn crouched beside her, tying back his dreads. Shit, she thought her hearing had gotten better after hanging with the wilders.

He grinned and whispered, “Appalachian upbringing.”

Erhent planted his feet and glared at the wilders. “Run.” The pitch of his voice dropped, and his shoulders trembled with the effort. “Now!”

The remaining wilders sprinted into the trees. The Soul-Eater shook his head. “Looks like I’ll be hunting on my way back. After I have some fun with you. You’re awfully pretty for a runt.”

Erhent lowered his hand. “You’re outnumbered.”

Deshawn stalked forward, standing with Erhent, while Ace flanked the Soul-Eater, twirling her tire iron and forcing him to shift his footing, which put his back to the ten protestors.

A woman stood. They hadn’t even bothered to tie their hands. Ace grinned at her, and the woman smiled back, even though she’d been crying. The rest struggled to their feet, leaning on each other. Ace recognized some of their faces from around camp—community leaders, organizers, troublemakers, mostly young people her age. If she and Erhent hadn’t come, the Dark Stars would have started to erase another generation of activists, just like the CIA in the 1980s.

She licked her teeth and nodded at the Soul-Eater. “Way out numbered.”

He snarled at Erhent, something that sounded like language written in fire. A shudder went through Ace, but she slapped the tire iron against her palm.

Erhent lunged forward, roaring. The Soul-Eater ran.
He let out a breath, his shoulders dipping. He doubled-over, his hands on his knees.

Deshawn brushed past him. “C’mon, folks, let’s get you into some safe, warm cars.”

Ace gripped a fistful of Erhent’s coat. “That was badass.”

He choked out a laugh. “Then why do I feel like I am going to be sick?”

“As someone who is consistently badass, trust me, it doesn’t feel as cool as it looks.”

When they exited the woods, the other wilders had shown themselves. The strongest lifted cars while smaller wilders changed slashed tires with inhuman quickness. Damn, now that was a pit crew.

A centaur galloped up the line, carrying three protestors who needed rides. Char and Lucky patrolled the road, spears slung over their shoulders, snarling at anyone who tried to get out of their vehicle. A dryad hauled an herbal kit over her shoulder, handing out paper cups of a steaming liquid. Judging from the relaxed faces afterward, it contained some sort of sedative.

A helicopter zoomed overhead, skimming low enough even the wilders crouched. Daði winged after it, slipping underneath and bucking at the runners. It banked right and winged toward the man camp at the edge of Yellowstone.

Wilders and protestors howled and raised their fists.

She nudged Erhent. “You finally got to be the cool kid?”

Erhent opened his mouth, but a vibration kicked through the pavement, rattling the cars and canyoning the snow. Ace dropped into a crouch even though an earthquake in Yellowstone seemed ridiculous.
Before the ground stilled, Erhent sprinted toward the gate, Ace following him a second later. Whatever inhuman grace came with being a soulkind, he used it because he ate the ground, running like the predator he was.
CHAPTER 45.

Gwen let the small victory loom large and fill her with hope. Their spell to guide the Terror Trees into the fracking camp must’ve worked because the National Guard bearcats were gone.

Daði had flown straight to the entrance where unmarked cars blocked the gate. They’d dove and crushed an SUV, which sent the men in tactical gear scurrying for another vehicle. They’d burned rubber out of the park.

Erhent went to find Ace while Qasim shouldered away the wreckage, and Gwen became a glorified parking attendant, waving on vehicles. If someone stopped, she channeled her inner Ace and told them to stay in the fucking car and get the fuck out of the park while they had a chance.

Most just rolled down their windows and yelled, “Thank you!”

The first hour went fast, her excitement keeping her warm. She kept glancing skyward, the horizon bright and winter-blue, hoping her mothers knew she was doing something with her ability. Even if they’d lost, even if ultimately this day was a route, she’d done more than sit on her ass and watch livestreams of protestors getting maced.

Qasim stood nearby, angling his broad shoulders to block the wind.

“Sorry you’re on babysitting duty,” Gwen said. “I know it’s boring.” After tonight, boring was totally fine. In fact, spending the next year in a boring place sounded awesome. Somewhere like Indiana.

“What do you mean? I’m your guard.”
A car slowed, and the driver cracked his door. Qasim hunched his shoulders and glared. The car sped up.

“Yeah, but I bet you could kick some serious ass with those spikes.”

He frowned. “I don’t want to hurt anyone.”

“Look, I’m fine here. You should go help.”

He stepped away, and she thought he’d agreed to leave, but he looked down the road, shading his eyes. She followed his gaze. Sunlight glinted off vehicles speeding toward the park.

Qasim nudged her. “Go find the others. I’ll hold them off.”

Three black Suburbans barreled over the road, forcing the escaping vehicles onto the shoulder. A few slipped into snowdrifts.

She pushed his hand away. “I’m not leaving you alone.”

Two Suburbans whipped around, coming nose to nose, and blocking the gate. As the third Suburban cruised closer, the front cars threw into reverse, and bumpers cracked. Some drivers backed off the road while larger SUVs and trucks tried to speed around the gate, their tires spinning out in the deep snow.

The third Suburban parked in the middle of the road.

Qasim gripped her shoulders. “Gwen, I can fight better if I’m not worrying about you. Go! Get Erhent!”

She nodded and backed off as Qasim faced the Suburban. Of course he was right. That’s what they all said—she wasn’t a fighter. Not yet, at least.

A man exited the passenger’s seat. Gwen had seen him on the news, the face of AquaCore. Noah something. He always looked tall on screen, but standing beside the
oversized SUV, his nearly seven-foot height seemed incredible. He performed a shallow bow.

“A walking Being so far from home. My Terror Trees are still yearning for another taste of you.”

Qasim hunched his shoulders and tilted his head so the obsidian spikes ringing his skull glittered. “Stay back.” He stamped his foot, and a low vibration trembled Gwen’s legs like a faint aftershock.

She glanced over her shoulder. Emergency lights blinked red. Drivers leaned out windows, and some filmed with smartphones or cameras. They’d come so close. Please, Erhent. She knew she should run, but the idea of leaving Qasim made her sick. Again, she was just a useless human in a fight bigger and older than her.

Noah took a step forward as Qasim retreated. She’d always considered the smooth and slick PR version of Noah to be human, but after living with the wilders, his otherness shone. In the Wyoming cold, he wore only a suit and that turquoise tie. Wind whipped his ice-chip hair. Before, she’d taken him as merely thin, but now, his angular face looked predatory, stirred her flight instinct like Erhent’s face once had.

More Soul-Eaters swarmed from the Suburbans, flanking Noah. Even compared to the large alphas, Noah seemed like something else, something older.

Qasim’s head swung back and forth as he took in the other Soul-Eaters. He crouched, his hands spread.

“Qasim, run!”

He didn’t look back. Noah caught her eye, though. “Ah, the little Starcatcher. Your partner must have survived since you aren’t trying to scratch out your own eyeballs.”
She took a step forward. Be a fighter. She could do it.

Noah’s face shifted from a pretty talking head to something feral, his eyes flashing bright like Erhent’s. He snapped his teeth at something behind her.

A hand dragged her backward and shoved her into a wulver’s furry arms. Mercury lurched past, dressed in his hunting gear. The metallic mask of a hissing lizard hid his face and made his voice raspy.

“Stay back, stupid girl. Unless you want Qasim killed.”

She twisted free of the wulver. “What the hell are you doing here?”

He glanced over his shoulder, his mask reflecting the dawn. “I save humans from Soul-Eaters.”

He motioned his followers forward, and Mercury’s dozen wulvers, wolfkind, and pantherkind squared off against Noah’s Soul-Eaters. Mercury placed himself in front of Qasim, hissing something with enough force that Qasim retreated, then jogged to Gwen’s side.

He crouched on the pavement and arched his spine. He grunted, stone grinding as he lowered his head so his crown touched the icy asphalt. Rock spewed, rupturing the snow as a new road made of stone circumvented the gate. The slate path rejoined the asphalt beyond the Suburbans.

Gwen placed her palms between his shoulders. “You can do it, Qasim. You got this.”

The rock smoothed and settled. The first car revved and lurched onto the new road, an RV speeding after it. The line shifted forward, skirting the gate and blockade.

Qasim gasped and leaned back on his heels. “Thank you.” He smiled at Gwen.

“Gwen!”
Erhent slid to a stop beside them and dropped to his knees, panting. “Are you all right?”

She nodded. “What’s happening?”

Erhent gripped her arm and pointed at Noah. “That’s who killed Sarah.”

Qasim stalked toward the face-off. “I’m going to help.”

Erhent hesitated, then glanced at her. “Stay back.”

He jogged after Qasim, slightly favoring his right leg. She bit her lip until tears came. To let Erhent stand beside Mercury alone, to face the thing that nearly killed him once. She should be there, but Mercury and Qasim were right—she’d get in the way.

The escaping vehicles whirred past, and exhaust fumes singed her lungs. She dug her fingernails into her palm, right where she’d sliced her hand on Mercury’s blade while trying to save Erhent. Blood welled between her fingers—just like when she’d cut herself open to prove her wildness on the first day. She still wasn’t strong enough.

An engine whined behind her, and Ace rode up on a snowmobile. She swung off before the snowmobile stopped gliding. “Ah, shit, Noah. Always thought there was something weird about him.”

Gwen’s hands shook. “Do you have a gun? Maybe we can—we can shoot him from here? We have to help or—they’ll die.”

“I got a better idea.” Ace stepped into the road, forcing a vehicle to slam on the brakes, the next car sliding on the icy pavement and crunching its bumper.

Ace wrenched open the driver’s side door. “I need your smartphone. Now!”
Erhent stood beside Mercury, his bare hands clenched. The lizard-masked Hunter leaned on a sword cane that matched his metallic hunting gear.

Noah rubbed the corners of his mouth. “Excellent, you left your girl as a snack. How considerate.”

Erhent crouched and hissed a warning. He should have forced Gwen to run, used the power in his hands if necessary. Even with Mercury, even if Erhent were a trained alpha—this Soul-Eater was too much. He stirred something old in Erhent’s gut. He belonged to another time when humankind didn’t call themselves dominate.

Qasim crouched like a runner, more stone spikes growing from his armored planes.

Mercury drew his sword and tossed aside the sheath.

Noah loped forward, and Erhent trembled beneath his ice-chip gaze. Noah might merely kill the others but not him. Not the abomination of his perfect race of predators.

Mercury lurched to meet him.

“Stop right there, fuckboy!”

Erhent flinched, whipping toward Ace’s voice. She stood on top of a snowmobile, her hands held out as she steadied a device—a smartphone.

Beside him, Qasim breathed, “Gwen.”

She’d circled behind them and stood to their left, also holding up a phone. Oh, no. Please, stars, he couldn’t watch Noah take Gwen.

Ace yelled, “I’m shooting live, with nine hundred viewers. What do you got, Gwen?”

“Five hundred! Wait, six hundred—six-fifty!”
Ace grinned, bearing her teeth. Erhent could smell the sour-sweet adrenaline wicking off her. “What do you think, Noah? Is that enough viewers to ruin your pretty boy CEO image? Put a wrench in your big plan for AquaCore?”

Noah bared his teeth but didn’t move. A low, Soul-Eater warning broke like glass in his throat. He spit.

“That’s what I thought,” Ace said. “Get back in your cars and leave. Or whatever happens next will go viral.”

Noah fixed his gaze on Erhent. The weight of his look nearly drove Erhent to his knees. Noah spoke in their shared language, though his words sounded archaic, deep and cold as a glacier cracking. He swore an oath on his soul that he would kill those two girls as slowly as only a soulkind could.

Erhent spoke in English so Mercury and Qasim could understand: “You will not touch them.” But Noah’s words froze his heart. A Soul-Eater so powerful had many ways to fulfill such a threat.

Noah half-smiled. “Until next time.” His Soul-Eaters closed around him as he turned his back. They climbed into their SUVs and whipped onto the road.

Erhent gasped and dropped to his knees. He gripped Qasim’s arm. “It’s a miracle.”

Mercury sheathed his sword with a click. “You so often seem to survive your own kind.”

Gwen dashed over and slid into him. “It worked, oh my god, it worked.”

He embraced her but watched Mercury over her shoulder. “That’s who killed Sarah.”
Mercury removed his mask and stared after the SUVs. “I smelled her on him.” He motioned to his wilders, and they stalked toward the woods. As he passed Ace, he dipped his head. She flipped him off.

Erhent sighed, burying his face in Gwen’s neck. “He’s gone.”

Ace collapsed in the snow next to them. “I can’t believe that worked.” Her breath turned to gasps. “I thought we were going to die. That was a total fucking bluff. I can’t believe he thought we had cell service. Oh my god.”

The final protestors revved through the gate, honking and shouting, their fists raised. Ace buried her face in her hands. “I can’t believe that fucking worked.”
CHAPTER 47.

Jack woke in Erhent’s arms, though he smelled Gwen and Ace also in bed. Dark silence absorbed half of him, and he took a few long, whistling breaths until he opened his single eye.

His ear flicked, collecting the others’ breathing. The quick hitch of Gwen’s lungs—as if she always dangled on the lip of a nightmare—the slow-steady breaths of Ace, the shallow groan of Erhent’s chest. And Qasim’s grinding stone at the edge of it all. He blinked away sleep and lifted his head, his neck popping.

Qasim perched on a stool, reading, but as if he felt the weight of Jack’s gaze, he smiled and closed the book.

Jack glanced at the bodies sprawled around him. He slept on Erhent’s lap as he leaned against the headboard with Gwen nestled on his other side. Ace had propped herself on a stack of animal skins at the footboard but slept with her head tipped forward. An emptiness spread through the infirmary, not due to lack of patients, but like a hollow forest after a fire.

“We’ve been taking turns,” Qasim whispered, “waiting for you to rise.”

“What happened?”

“Too much to tell right now. Most of the protestors were able to leave. The Kurultai are furious and have already sent someone to disband the Druid Peak camp.”

Jack huffed. “As I expected.”

Erhent shifted beneath him. Without waking fully, he slumped on his side, nuzzling his face into the curve of Jack’s neck, and wrapped around him like a cat.
Qasim grinned. “I am very glad to be part of a Starcatcher and guard with two so madly in love as you and Erhent.”

Erhent’s breathing changed, and Jack smelled his wakefulness like thawing sap. Had he heard Qasim? He leaned over Erhent’s face. He couldn’t help but grin. “I know you’re awake, domkop.”

Erhent tilted his head so his nose brushed Jack’s chin. “How do you feel? Can I help?”

“I’m fine,” he whispered. “The others?”

“The children are bruised, but alive.”

Jack sighed. “I swear, if your North Guard is under two hundred, I’m requesting a replacement.”

Erhent raised an eyebrow. “Are you grouping me with the children?”

Jack slowly straightened, grunting, and Erhent shifted so they could both lean against the headboard.

Ace cracked open one eye as they moved, then smirked and settled against the hides. Only Gwen stayed asleep, tucked into Erhent’s side, his arm around her shoulders and a hand on her ribs.

A pang of longing went through Jack, making him meet Erhent’s gaze. It wasn’t jealousy. He understood why Gwen needed Erhent’s arm around her to sleep. Only Erhent and Gwen didn’t have to hide.

Erhent cupped Jack’s chin and gently turned his head, showing the bandages wrapping the right side of his face. He traced warm fingers along his jaw, then brushed his lips over the lump that had once been his ear, then the hollow that had once been his eye.
Qasim pretended to read so hard his stone plates ground.

Jack grinned as Erhent chuckled. He nuzzled Erhent’s neck, then swung his legs over the bower’s edge. The movement made his stomach lurch, and he closed his eye until the swirling sensation stopped.

“Now, who’s disbanding my camp?”
Their last day in Yellowstone, Gwen limped up Druid Peak to watch the sunset. Whatever happened in the dreamscape still pained her ankle, though Erhent’s touch dulled the ache. For a few minutes, she observed the construction on the fracking pad. Semi-trucks lined the road, bringing modulars for a man camp at the same location where the Park Protectors had stayed. She turned her back on it and stared over the northern section of the park: forest fragmented by jagged peaks, Lamar River twisting through the land, clearings dotted with bison.

Maybe Jesse grieved somewhere in that wildness. None of them had come back—Mercury, Jesse, their guard. Two days after AquaCore and the police routed the Park Protectors, a Kurultai representative had flown in, an owlkind. She’d met with Jack privately in Mercury’s old cabin, then flown off. The fallout—the camp would be disbanded, and they’d been reassigned to a secluded outpost in Siberia. A camp for troublemakers, according to Jack. They’d already been assigned their first task, to find the final member of their guard, the North.

Qasim and Ace had grumbled about the distance and the cold, but Gwen had just squeezed Erhent’s hand. As long as nobody wanted to kill him, that seemed like a win.

Even though the sun still shone, she closed her eyes and tilted her face starward. If she listened with whatever sense let her be a Starcatcher, she felt pinpricks of starlight.

She sensed Erhent through that same bond even before he stepped beside her, their shoulders touching.

She leaned into him, her eyes still closed, and he slipped an arm around her waist.
“Are you all right?” he asked.

She sighed. “No. Are you?”

He let out a breathy laugh. “No.”

Their silence stretched with the sunset’s final rays. She wanted to ask if this would be their life—fighting their allies and the authority of the Kurultai, or if things would be different in Russia. Jack’s assumption that the assignment was meant as a punishment made sense since Russia seemed like the worst choice for a Starcatcher with no native Russian speakers. The change scared her. It felt more real—like she was really leaving it all behind.

In Yellowstone, she could’ve hitched a ride to Cody and phoned her high school in New Jersey. She could’ve been back in the Pines a few hours later. In Russia, she’d only have Erhent, Jack, Ace, Qasim—and whoever the North Guard might be.

Erhent held her hand, his skin warm. He’d stopped wearing his gloves since Jack took over the camp. “Say what’s on your mind.”

“Homesick, I think.”

“How so?”

She pulled away from him. “I mean, it’s a different continent. Once I leave America, I think I’ll be really dead, you know? Gwen Gardner will be dead. Whatever’s left of the house and land will go up for auction. I’ll be a missing face, then a social security number, then even that’s going to go away.”

She paced to the edge of the peak, staring north. She tugged off her hat and let the chill wind free her hair. “Don’t get me wrong. I want this. More than anything, I want to be with all of you.” Her throat thickened, and the wind pulled tears from her eyes. “But I’m
leaving my moms, Erhent. I didn’t even get them a proper grave before I left.” She rubbed her eyes. “Sorry.”

“Oh, Gwen.” He brushed the wind-whipped hair from her face and tucked it behind her ear. “From what you have told me about your mothers, they would be so very proud of you.”

“For what? What have we accomplished at the end of all this?” She pointed at the Park Protectors’ former camp. In the end, they failed.

He looked at his bare hands and smiled. “I’m alive because of you.”

She huffed. “More like because of Jack and—”

He cupped her face, his fingers warm. “Close your eyes.”

“What?”

He passed a hand over her eyes. “Keep them closed.”

She did but crossed her arms.

“Do you know what day it is?”

She’d only been counting days since the Solstice, as if the world had cracked irrevocably. It’d been like that after the flood, each day just another gap between her and the slow tragedy. “Four days after everything went to hell.”

“It’s Christmas. As I recall, humans give each other gifts.” He pressed something smooth into her palm. “Look.”

She held a wooden pendent strung on a leather cord. Two round cuts featuring the woodgrain and tree rings had been pressed together, about the size and thickness of a quarter. Constellations had been burned on either side, Gemini and Virgo—her mothers’ sun signs.

“You made this?”
“The wood is Northern Red Oak and Gray Birch, both native to the Pine Barrens.”

She slipped the cord over her head and tucked it beneath her layers. The smooth wood settled against her collarbone, the weight familiar and reassuring, like a hand on her shoulder.

“Thank you.”

She hugged him, hard. They held each other, and she tucked her head under his chin. God, it felt so good to be held—no, more than that. To have a family again. “It’s all going to mean something, right? My moms, Sarah.”

Erhent sighed. “For decades, I’ve only had Jack. I wanted to be part of something larger, to have a purpose to drown my guilt. It seems I can’t escape what I am, but accepting that, accepting us and our pack—maybe we are the start of something.”

“One Starcatcher can’t fix the planet.”

He pulled back just enough to rest his forehead against hers. “The planet doesn’t need fixing. Our harmony with the planet is broken. Possibly a Starcatcher can help restore it.”

After a moment, he straightened, his head tilted to the sky. A grin turned his face youthful. “Do you see them?”

Gwen looked to the night sky slowly turning velvet, the sunset outshining the stars. “See what?”

“The Northern Lights.”

She shook her head, half-smiling. “Not with these human eyes.”

He offered his hand. “Would you like me to show you? I think I know how.”

She laced her fingers with his.

A warmth spread through her palm and up her arm. Her vision blurred, grew silver at the edges. When she looked to the sky, green swirled across the horizon. Purple layered
overtop, rising in waves to push against the stars. Blue, bright as ice, bright as a sun-lit river,
stretched over all, pulsing to the rhythm of her heartbeat.
Epilogue

Letter to the editor, *Cody Enterprise*

The Lamar Valley Protest will not be forgotten. The sheer number of activists never to return from the wilderness will mark this year as another example of the US government valuing and protecting corporations over people.

With only twenty bodies accounted for out of forty-eight missing, the dead and the families of the dead will not be silenced.

I was there when we waited, the roads blocked at the gate. I was there when AquaCore’s hired thugs started going from car to car, taking people, checking names off a list. Then they came. Nobody wants to report it. All the pictures and videos were just digital, all faked. But I was there.

Here’s what I know. I was taken from my car by men in tactical gear. I was marched into the woods with several others. I thought I was going to die.

Then they showed up. One of them looked human, but all he had to do was raise his hand and those men in all that gear ran. They ran for their lives. There were two others with him, people I’d seen at other protests. They helped us to cars and told us to stay inside.

When we passed the girl and boy—all I can say is he looked like a mountain—at the gate, I told her how thankful I was, but I know it’s not enough. That’s why I’m writing it down. If the papers won’t talk about it, then it’s up to us to tell the story so the only legend of Lamar Valley isn’t about death but bravery—of the creatures that Yellowstone sent to our aid and of the Park Protectors who sacrificed so much.
In memory of Mary L’Engle

—A Protestor.

The End