

DARREN SHAN



ARCHIBALD
LOX

and the
Slides of Bon Repell

Book 5

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and

THE SLIDES OF BON REPELL

BY

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Archibald Lox, Volume Two, Book Two of Three

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ONE — THE SOIRÉE

1

It doesn't take Inez and me long to get settled in the Shackleton suite, as we're not travelling with much luggage, so we soon head out to explore, leaving Velvet to lie down again and nap. We find a hot tub on the roof of the building, where our other roommate, Pete – a big, muscular man with lots of tattoos and a Mohican haircut – is resting with a few other players. The air's colder here, which is perfect if you're immersed in the hot water, but it's chilly if you're standing in a thin training outfit, so we don't linger.

There are rooms with weights and gym equipment, and most of the players are already working out and talking tactics while they train.

There's a meditation chamber, where a handful of gropsters are clearing their heads. Olivia is one of them, enjoying some peace and quiet after the stress of the registration and checks.

There's also a kitchen with a chef, a large, red-faced, cheery Topazer who starts to talk as soon as we enter, telling us he's happy to cook anything for us, any time we please, but equally he won't be offended if we want to prepare our own meals.

“Why would we want to do that?” I ask Inez as we leave.

“Some people are paranoid,” she says. “They'd be worried about poison.”

I snort. “As if a chef would poison players to give his team an advantage.”

“It's happened before,” Inez says. “We take grop very seriously, Archie. I'm sure that chef is fine, but if you ask him to whip you up something, make sure you tell him you're not a player, just to be safe.”

We find a room that contains a few shelves with books scattered across them. “A library,” Inez whistles, quickly moving to flick through the books.

“I’d hardly call it a library,” I laugh.

“It wouldn’t qualify as one in the Born,” Inez agrees, “but books are scarce in the Merge, so this is an impressive collection.”

There’s a swimming area near the rear of the complex, three long pools, the water varying from icy cold, to normal, to heated. They’re a novelty for the visitors. Water isn’t common in most realms, so Sapphire doesn’t feature a lot of swimming pools.

“Topaz is famed for its pools,” Inez notes. “We’ll have to give these a try before we leave. You can’t visit Topaz and not go for a dip.”

“What about now?” I suggest.

Inez shakes her head. “We have to get clothes for the soirée.”

Inez explained the soirée to me earlier. It’s basically a fancy party. The royals of the various realms like to gather at the start of a Tourney, with their closest aides and allies, the idea being that if the heads of the realms mix peacefully, hopefully the supporters will follow suit.

We ask a member of staff for directions to a local seamstress. When she hears that we’re going to the soirée, she insists on escorting us and arranging the trade. Inez objects, but the woman – a nice lady called Aly, with a funny face – won’t take no for an answer.

“You’re our guests,” Aly says. “If you went and found your own clothes, I’d be accused of not doing my job.”

Since there’s no swaying Aly, we follow her out of the complex and through the streets of Niffelheim. It’s different to any other town or city I’ve visited. The streets and roads aren’t just covered in ice and snow, but created out of them, as are many of the buildings. The white material

doesn't have the dirty look that it has in cities in the Born. It's pristine, no heavy pollutants to stain it over time.

The daylight in the kingdom must be carefully controlled, as I don't ever catch a glare from the ice. It absorbs light rather than reflect it harshly, so I never have to shield my eyes.

The Niffelheimers that we pass are mostly dressed in furs, even though it's not that cold, and many are sweating. Aly notices me staring and smiles. "It's silly, isn't it?" she says. "They don't normally dress like this. It's because of the Tourney."

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"People from other realms have a perception of Topazers," she explains. "They assume we dress in heavy furs, woolly hats and big boots. And in most zones we do, since the temperatures are much colder than in Niffelheim. That's what they like to see when they come, so even though we usually wear the same clothes as the people in your realm, a lot of us have pulled out our winter gear to dazzle the tourists."

Aly leads us to a small domed building made of ice, and introduces us to a woman called Miriam. She's not a deviser, just someone who makes costumes.

"So you're going to the soirée," Miriam coos as she measures us with her fingers. "How delightful. I've never kitted anyone out for a soirée. I wish I'd had more time to prepare."

"It doesn't have to be anything special," Inez protests, and I can tell she regrets accepting the invite. Inez has never struck me as the sort of girl who likes wearing fancy dresses. "I don't want to put you to any trouble."

"Nonsense," Miriam says. "I want to make sure my clothes impress, even though, model-wise, I don't have a lot to work with. No offence intended."

"None taken," I smile, although I work out a few minutes later, once I've thought about it, that what she's basically saying is that her clothes won't

look that good on Inez and me because we don't look too good. The cheek of it!

Miriam's a fireball for the next few hours, beavering away to make us look "at least semi-presentable," as she puts it. She focuses primarily on Inez, making her try on different frocks and gowns, but I have to step in and out of several suits too. By the end I'm as annoyed as Inez was at the start.

"I wouldn't have agreed to go if I'd known we'd have to do all this," I growl while Miriam's off rooting through boxes in another room. "Would it really matter if we turned up in our regular clothes?"

"Yes," Inez sighs. "We're representing Sapphire. If we turned up looking like our everyday selves, we'd be doing the realm a disservice."

"Remind me never to accept an invitation to anything like this again," I mutter.

"It's not like we had a choice," Inez says. "Malina wants us there. I guess it's a way to slip us inside the palace, so that we can scout it out. I just wish she could have sneaked us in another day, when we could have done without the pomp."

Miriam finally declares herself satisfied when Inez tries on a light blue dress with a flowery bodice and a slit down the left side, while I wind up in a suit of a similar colour, with a cream, high-collared shirt that scratches my throat and neck whenever I rotate my head. She makes some adjustments, takes up Inez's hem then lowers it, loosens my collar then fixes it even tighter. She tests various hats and tiaras on Inez, and handkerchiefs in the pocket of my jacket.

Eventually our ordeal comes to an end. Miriam packages up the outfits and places them in boxes for us to carry. Aly tries to discuss the terms of the trade with her, but Miriam asks only that we tell people the name of the seamstress who kitted us out, to drive more business her way.

Back in our room, we grab forty winks – there's no sign of Velvet, so she must have caught up on her sleep and gone to explore – then take our time

dressing. When we're suited up like soldiers going into battle, we sit on our beds and wait stiffly, both uncomfortable in our clothes, moving as little as possible.

Seamus eventually comes to collect us. He's wearing a stylish blue costume with lots of white decorations, and looks far more suited to an event like this than me.

"I got to see a bit of the city earlier," I tell the guard as he leads us through the streets, dark now that night has fallen, illuminated by gleam-filled street lamps that look like something from Victorian times.

"I heard," Seamus sniffs. "Shopping for new clothes." He casts a glance at me. "Better than the rags you were in earlier, I have to say."

"Niffelheim's a cool place," I tell him, maintaining my smile, even though it's an effort.

"Is that meant to be a joke?" he frowns.

"No," I sigh. "I really like it. It's beautiful, in a cold, dark way."

Seamus slowly smiles. "Well, I'm glad you feel that way. Would you like me to point out some places of interest as we proceed? Indeed, if you don't mind a longer walk, I could take you on a scenic route to the palace."

"That would be great," I say, and Inez agrees.

A happier Seamus leads us on a tour of the surrounding area, telling us something of its history, about the famous people who once lived or worked here. A lot of the local heroes are people who were good at climbing mountains, or swimming, or ice diving. I've no real interest in those activities, but coo and nod where appropriate.

We come to a small, dark igloo, which is roped off, and Seamus pauses. "That's where Old Man Reap stayed whenever he visited Topaz."

"Old Man Reap used to come here?" I ask.

“Quite regularly,” Seamus says. “He never stayed in the palace. He lived as one of us, wore our clothes, ate with us, spent time in some of the more hostile zones and faced the same challenges as the locals.”

“Were you here then?” I ask.

Seamus nods. “Old Man Reap made a big impression on me. I was a newcomer to the Merge, and he addressed some of us one night, told us we were the future, that we had the power to reshape our sphere. He urged us to use that power wisely.”

“You sound like you admired him,” I note.

“I did,” Seamus says, and looks at me gravely. “Old Man Reap enjoyed a lot of support here, and I’ve never been ashamed to admit that I was on his side. He was too aggressive – he should have tried to win over people with arguments rather than brute force – but he yearned to build a sphere where people felt a sense of purpose, a place that would challenge us to be as industrious as we’d been in the Born.”

Seamus stares at the igloo in deep silence.

“Did Old Man Reap go to a soirée?” I finally ask, hoping to lighten the mood.

Seamus laughs out loud, then looks guilty, as if he’s done something he shouldn’t have. “Old Man Reap at a soirée,” he chuckles, tugging his beard. “That’s something I’d have liked to see. The scourge of the Merge, cutting up a dance floor.” He laughs again, unable to help himself.

“I take it that’s a no,” I grin.

“A most emphatic no,” Seamus says. “Besides, he never came here for a Tourney. He had no interest in sports. Too many other things on his mind.”

“Like the conquest of the Merge,” Inez says pointedly.

“Yes,” Seamus replies, as if that was no bad thing, and leads us on.

He doesn't point out any more sights. Instead he picks up the pace and cuts down a number of narrow lanes, until we find ourselves in front of the royal palace. It's an eye-catching structure, built out of ice blocks, only three storeys tall, but wide, with large doors and windows, and lots of impressively carved columns. Different coloured patches of light swirl slowly through the walls of ice. I look for spotlights but there aren't any, so the lights must be contained within the ice.

"The lights are there for the Tourney," Seamus says. "One colour for each of the realms. The pink's for Diamond."

"But diamonds are clear," I frown.

"Most are, or tinged with yellow," Seamus says, "but you can get pink diamonds too. The lights will be quenched as each team's eliminated. Hopefully there will just be a lovely yellow light at the end."

"Sorry to disappoint you, but it'll be blue," Inez grins, and Seamus grins too.

There are lots of guards at the entrance, vetting the guests. Each guard is dressed in white furs, topped with a cap that looks like a polar bear's head.

We get to the door and a surly guard scowls at us. "Names?" he barks.

"Inez Matryoshka," Inez answers.

"Archibald Lox," I murmur.

I expect the guard to consult a list, but he just nods. "You were late additions. Are you happy to be tested by unravellers out here, or would you rather be taken somewhere private?"

"We've nothing to hide," Inez says, and a man and woman step forward. The woman puts her hands on my temples, while the man does the same to Inez. They hold us for a few seconds, then release us.

"Clear," the woman says.

“Clear,” the man says.

The guard grunts and nods at another woman, who was standing further back, in the shadows. When she steps forward, the guard points to Inez, and the woman takes hold of her hands.

“The players who are inside you...?” the woman asks.

“I left them behind in the training complex,” Inez says.

“And are there any others in there?” the woman presses.

“No,” Inez says.

The woman holds Inez’s hands a few seconds longer, then releases them and says, “Clear,” before returning to the shadows.

“Enjoy the soirée,” the guard says, and Seamus nudges us past him and the others, into the lobby.

“What was that about?” I ask Inez.

“Making sure we were really us, and that I wasn’t trying to sneak in an assassin,” Inez says. “That second woman was a truthsayer, someone who can detect if a person is lying. Royals from every realm – except Diamond, obviously – are present tonight, so the guards won’t take any risks.”

The lobby’s a large, bare room, except for oversized, ice-carved statues of what I assume to be dead Family members. There are lots of doors leading off from it, but almost all are barred, with the guests processing through a gold-framed door in one wall. We wait in line until it’s our turn, then are directed along a couple of corridors, before entering a huge room hung with tapestries and lace curtains. Several long tables are overflowing with all kinds of food and drink, and the room is packed with finely dressed people.

There are guards on this door too, but they’re only ceremonial, and they announce the name of each guest as we enter. There are light ripples of applause when some of the guests are introduced, but by and large those

already in the room don't take much notice of the new arrivals. That changes when we step forward.

"Inez Matryoshka and Archibald Lox," a gruff man calls, and conversations die away as everyone stares at us. I feel myself blanch, not sure how to react. Then the normal buzz resumes.

"What was that about?" I croak as we step forward, Seamus abandoning us, his escorting duties at an end until he picks us up again after the soirée.

"We're infamous," Inez says.

"But I thought nobody cared about us," I say. "Back in Cornan, all the songs and plays were about Ghita. You and I were hardly even mentioned."

"That's because the Sapphirites were only concerned about their princess," Inez explains. "The people in this room are the movers and shakers of the Merge, the ones who run zones, kingdoms and realms. We delivered one of their own to a crucial vote which decided the alignment of a realm, and they want to know more about us, why we did what we did, and if we have plans to interfere in their business again."

I gulp, feeling nervous. "Should we be afraid?" I ask.

"No," she says, "but don't offer too much information about yourself, and say as little about what happened in Sapphire as you can. If anyone presses, smile and tell them you bumped your head shortly after you came to the Merge and ever since then you've been rather addled." She smirks. "You're good at acting stupid."

I shoot Inez a dark look, then pull my most bewildered expression (I really am good at looking dumb in this sphere, because I still have so much to learn about it), and follow her into the high society crowd.

2

Everyone's dressed like a movie star, and while my suit's up to scratch, the others seem a lot more at ease in their clothes. I keep scratching beneath the

collar of the shirt and I move stiffly, as if wearing armour. I can tell that Inez feels awkward too, by the way she blinks and prods her lower lip with her tongue. I've seen her stand toe to toe with royals before, as an equal, but here she looks shy and out of place.

The captains of the grop teams are present, and Inez engages a couple of them. One's a woman called Karen, the captain of the Emerald team, and the other's a cheerful man called Manish, from Ruby, who keeps cracking jokes. When he gets called away to talk to someone else, I say I'm surprised by how nice he is.

"Maybe he is and maybe he isn't," Inez grunts, then taps the side of my head. "Don't ever be taken in by their smiles and charm. Many Rubicons are decent people, but some only act decently, and it's hard to tell them apart."

I spot Pitina, smiling regally. Inez points out more royals, Kings Sheng and Joon from Topaz, Queen Elisa and King Alan from Pearl, Prince Jickey from Emerald, who looks a year or two younger than me. She also names some of the nobles and briefs me on their histories. I struggle to take in all the information, but nod as if I'm making a careful mental note of everything.

Waiters and waitresses circle with plates of food, the expected nibbles as well as heartier portions — raw fish, slabs of meat, legs of lamb. It's all been modified from mushrooms (devisers produce the raw goods, which chefs then work their magic on), but looks as real as anything I've had in the Born, and tastes pretty authentic too.

Wine and ale — also devised from mushrooms, so nobody will be needing a toilet break — flow freely, and there are lots of other drinks. I stick to something that tastes like elderflower cordial, while Inez sips champagne from a flute made of ice. It doesn't melt, no matter how long she holds it, and she has it refilled a couple of times.

"You'll get drunk if you're not careful," I warn her.

“Hardly,” she says. “This is only mildly alcoholic, like eating a chocolate liqueur in the Born.”

Hearing that, I try a glass of the fake champagne, but the bubbles make my nose twitch and the back of my mouth sting, so I only take a few sips. The ice of the flute is cool to the touch but not actually cold. When no one’s watching, I break off a piece with my teeth, to see if it will melt on my tongue, but it doesn’t, and I have to discreetly spit it out into my pocket handkerchief when no one is looking. (As my foster mother Rachel would no doubt tetchily but teasingly note if she was present, “You can’t take that boy anywhere!”)

Several people ask us questions about the vote of alignment. Inez answers vaguely and I just grunt. At one point, while she’s talking with a noble from Emerald, I’m tapped on the shoulder by a beautiful woman in a cream dress, who leads me aside.

“You’re Archibald, aren’t you?” she asks, smiling dazzlingly at me.

“Yes,” I say warily.

“I’m Skeen.” She has long, purple hair, matching purple eyes, plus a smattering of purple freckles. All that purple should be disconcerting, but it suits her.

“Archie,” I mutter.

“You prefer that to Archibald?” she asks, and I nod. “Then Archie it is. What do you make of the soirée, Archie?”

“It’s... nice,” I say lamely.

“A bit strait-laced?” she suggests.

I smile. “You could say that.”

Skeen drifts through the crowd, softly beckoning for me to follow, and I trail along beside her. People stare at Skeen – she’s one of the most eye-

catching women in the room – and some glower at me enviously. I feel pleased to be in her company.

“Affairs like this bore me,” she says. “I’m not good at small talk. How about you, Archie?”

“No,” I chuckle. “I’m not much good at big talk either.”

“I don’t believe that,” she laughs. “You’re probably just tired of talking about the same things all the time. I bet everyone asks you about the vote, right?”

“Pretty much,” I admit.

“Well, I won’t,” she promises, and smiles again. Her smile’s so warm, I’m amazed the entire building doesn’t melt.

“Wh... where are you from, Skeen?” I ask, feeling slightly dizzy.

“Ruby,” she says, and takes one of my hands in hers. “I hope that doesn’t mean we can’t be friends.”

“Wh... why should it?” I wheeze.

“I heard what happened at the vote,” she says, not releasing my hand. We come to a set of stairs, carved out of ice like most of the fixtures and fittings in the palace, and she guides me up. “You must believe me, Archie, we’re not all like Orlan and Argate.”

“You know them?” I ask.

“Only by reputation,” she says, her smile fading. “I feel so ashamed sometimes, because brutes like that cast such a poor light on the rest of us.”

“They’re a grisly pair,” I growl.

“I can imagine,” she says. “You were so brave to take them on. I wish more people had your courage and stood up to bullies like them.”

“It was Inez’s call,” I chuckle, then look around. We’ve come a long way from where Inez is still talking to the noble, and are almost at the top of the staircase. I hesitate, not wanting to lose sight of my partner.

“Do you want to go back?” Skeen asks.

“Well...”

She catches me looking at Inez and tilts her head. “She’s a pretty girl.”

“Yes,” I agree, then flush. “I mean... is she?”

Skeen laughs. “It’s alright. There’s nothing wrong in admitting that you like the way a girl looks. Are you just friends, or...?”

“Just friends,” I say quickly.

“Really?” she asks. “Because the way you appear to want to be close to her the whole time makes me think you might be closer than that.”

“No,” I laugh uneasily. “It’s just... this is my first time at an event like this, and I feel lost when I’m not with Inez.”

“There’s no need to feel lost,” Skeen says. “You’re with me, and I’ve been here a few times over the years. I know the palace well. There’s a balcony on this floor, overlooking a delightful part of the city. I was going to take you there, to show you the view, but it’s not a problem if you’d rather return to your friend .”

Skeen squeezes my hand and winks. I feel my blush deepening.

“Will we be gone for long?” I ask.

Skeen points to the end of the corridor ahead of us. “It’s down that way, a left turn, another corridor, then we’re there.”

“OK,” I say, and we press on.

“How are you finding Niffelheim?” Skeen asks.

I say I haven't seen a lot of the city, except the bits that Seamus pointed out on our way here tonight, and tell her what I can remember about them. I'm still talking when we get to an open door and advance onto a balcony.

The first thing I notice is that the view – of a square – is nice, but nothing out of the ordinary. The second is that we're not alone. There are three men standing to our left, talking in hushed tones.

"I think we've disturbed a meeting," I say to Skeen.

"Not at all," she says brightly, and drags me forward. "Gentlemen! Hello! Do you mind if we join you?"

The three men turn and the smile which was forming on my lips freezes. One of the men is a stranger to me. The other is kind of familiar. And the third...

The third isn't a man at all, but a teenager, and I spent quite a bit of time around him when I was in the Merge last year. Too much time for my liking. We were never friends, and when we last parted, he swore to stick a knife in my back the next time we met.

"Well, well," the boy drawls. "Fancy running into you here, Archibald. Are you as pleased to see me as I am to see you?"

I have no answer for that. All I can do is gawp at the tall, handsome duke-to-be, and croak his name anxiously. "Kurtis?"

3

Kurtis is a duke elect from Ruby. Inez had planned to use him to sneak us into the palace in Cornan, so she let him think she wanted to be his girlfriend. He was furious when he discovered the truth, and vowed to get even with us.

He's dressed very much like he was in Sapphire, in wine-coloured trousers and a white shirt, only the material is more high-end and he's sporting a wine-coloured jacket as well, and a black bow tie.

One of the men with him is his uncle Noah, the duke. Noah's a large, stout man, with a crop of thick, red hair. He's gazing at me with a nasty smirk.

I don't know the other man, but he's dressed in a bright red suit, with patterns of forearms and fists stitched down the sleeves, so I figure he's from Ruby. His hair is a rich crimson colour and styled into a bouffant – it sparkles too, so I suspect it's the work of a deviser – and he has piercing grey eyes, which are currently fixed on me and wide open with shock. In fact he seems more astonished to see me than I am to see Kurtis.

“You two know each other, I believe,” Skeen says, slipping forward and caressing Kurtis' cheek, before sidling up to Duke Noah and kissing him.

“My aunt-in-law,” Kurtis says to me as I gawp at the canoodling couple.

“Don't mock me,” Skeen tuts. “Your uncle won't marry me. He doesn't believe in marriage.”

I clear my throat and force a weak smile. “It's good to see you, Kurtis.”

“I bet,” he growls, taking a menacing step towards me.

“Be nice to Archibald,” Noah says coolly, then arches an eyebrow at the other man. “Well?”

The man with the luxuriously styled hair shakes his head wordlessly.

“I was right, wasn't I?” Noah says.

“It can't be,” the man wheezes. “He looks like him, but he doesn't have...” The man starts to reach a hand out to me, then lets it drop. “Do you know me, boy?”

“No,” I answer, confused and afraid, but trying not to let that show.

“We've never met before?” the man presses.

“I'd remember that hair.” I grin shakily, then make the greet. “I'm Archibald Lox.”

“King Adil,” the man replies, completing the greet.

My shaky grin disappears and my thoughts race back to a conversation I had with Winston, when he told me some of the secrets from his past. Adil was trying to bring Old Man Reap back from the Lost Zone, and he conspired with Winston’s apprentice, Stefan. The pair tortured Winston after Stefan had betrayed him.

“He’s heard about you, Adil,” Noah chuckles.

“Nothing flattering, by the look of him,” Skeen giggles.

The king isn’t amused. “Where are you from, Master Lox?” he asks.

“Sapphire,” I lie.

“Which zone?” he snaps.

“Cornan,” I answer quickly.

“What part of the city?”

“Why do you want to know?” I counter, stalling for time.

“How long have you been in the Merge?” he asks. “When did you die in the Born? How? Where?”

I gulp and stare at him mutely.

“Tell me,” he growls.

“I don’t see why I should,” I bleat. “What business is it of yours?”

“I’m a king,” he thunders. “If I say it’s my business, then –”

“You are, of course, a king,” someone says behind us, “but Archibald’s our guest and we owe him more courtesy than this.”

I turn and spot Malina standing in the doorway, smiling frostily at Adil. A furious Inez is next to her, and if looks could kill, she'd be on trial for regicide tomorrow morning.

As Adil hesitates, Malina turns her smile on Noah and his family. "Noah, Skeen, Kurtis. I'm pleased you joined us for our soirée."

"We wouldn't have missed it for anything," Noah says, bowing. Skeen bows too, and so does Kurtis, but his eyes are on Inez as he bends.

"I was surprised when I asked after Archibald and heard that he'd last been seen going up a staircase with you, Skeen," Malina says with fake lightness.

"Why shouldn't Archie and I spend time together?" Skeen replies. "I knew that he and Kurtis were friends but had fallen out with one another. I thought I'd play peacemaker and help them patch up their differences."

"Very thoughtful of you," the queen says. "And you, Adil? What's your interest in Archibald?"

"I've no interest in him at all," the king sniffs. "I was simply grabbing a breath of fresh air and catching up with Noah. But the boy did put me in mind of somebody I knew a long time ago, which is why I was questioning him."

"Who?" Inez asks, then remembers her place and adds, "Sire."

"A friend," Adil says dismissively. "Archibald looks very like him, so I wondered if they might be related." The king waves a hand to make it clear that it's a matter of no significance to him, even though it clearly is. "I'd better return to the soirée. Noah, Skeen, Kurtis, will you accompany me?"

"Of course, sire," Noah says.

"It would be an honour," Skeen simpers, winking at me as she steps past.

Kurtis hesitates. He's still staring at Inez. "Would you mind if I caught up with you later, sire?" he asks.

Adil smiles. “Not at all. Take your time. I can see you have much to discuss with the young lady.”

As Adil and the others depart, Malina raises an eyebrow at Inez.

“Do we have things to discuss?” Inez asks Kurtis quietly.

I’m hoping he’s going to say no, but he nods. “I said some things in Cornan that I regret,” he whispers. “I’d like to apologise and hear your side of the story.”

Inez mulls it over. I want her to tell the young dukeling to get stuffed, but then she nods like he did and says, “It would be nice to clear the air.”

“Hold on a minute,” I pipe up, but Malina takes my arm and cuts me off.

“I’m so glad I found you, Archie,” she says, steering me away. “I haven’t been a very good host. I invited you to the soiree, then left you to your own devices. Let me show you around the palace and introduce you to a few people.”

I don’t want to see anything or meet anyone – I’d rather stay here and watch out for Inez – but I can’t refuse the queen’s invitation, and anyway, it’s clear that Inez doesn’t want me here. So, with a heavy heart, I let myself be led from the balcony, through the corridors and back down the stairs.

4

Malina waltzes me around the grand room, making me try some of the dishes and drinks that I’d avoided earlier, and leads me over to meet Prince Jickey, who’s very pleasant but surprisingly shy for a royal — he looks nervous when we’re introduced, and holds himself slightly back from me while we’re chatting, as if he expects me to lunge at him and bite.

Malina whisks me off to chat with more people and sample more treats. In the middle of a boring conversation with a shrill-voiced woman from Pearl, a murmur of excitement ripples through the room as a young boy, maybe seven or eight years old, dashes across the floor and hurls himself at

Malina. She sweeps him off his feet and whirls him round, before setting him down. He's laughing with delight.

"Hiroto," she says, "I'd like you to meet Archie, a friend of mine from Sapphire. Archie, this is Hiroto."

We make the greet and I smile at the young prince as he bows to me, but my heart has started beating fast, because this is the boy we've come to kidnap.

"Are you a gropster, Archie?" Hiroto asks. "I want to meet some of the players. They're the main reason I came tonight."

"I'm afraid not," I tell him. "I just wrap them in bandages when they get injured."

"Oh." He looks disappointed. "I can't wait for the Tourney to start. I wish I could go to all the matches. I hate having to miss so many of them."

"How come you're not going to every game?" I ask. "As a prince, I'd have thought getting tickets would be easy."

Hiroto laughs. "That's not a problem. But Family members can't all go to a match at the same time. If something really bad happened, and everyone in the royal box was killed..."

"Of course," I say. "The realm would fall."

Hiroto nods glumly. "As the youngest royal, I've been sidelined the most, so I'll only get to a couple of the games."

"It's not fair, is it?" I say. "The grown-ups have all the fun."

"Tell me about it," Hiroto sighs.

I'd like to spend more time with the prince, but I can see he's eager to track down the players, so I let him off to roam.

"A sweet boy, isn't he?" Malina says softly, leaning in close to me.

“Yes,” I say.

“I’d do anything to protect him from danger,” she murmurs.

I gulp and we share a sombre look.

A short while later, Inez returns. I stiffen when I see her coming down the stairs, Kurtis just behind. He heads off in search of his uncle when they get to the bottom of the steps, while Inez makes a beeline for me.

Malina beams and insists on introducing Inez to the people that we’re with. I can’t say anything to her for a time, as we make small talk with our fellow guests, but finally I’m able to draw her aside when the others stop to tuck into chunks of a devised beast that’s the spitting image of a barbecued pig.

“How did you get on?” I ask.

“Better than I feared,” she says, and smiles sadly at me. “I know you have a low opinion of Kurtis, but he’s a lot more sensitive than you believe. I really hurt him and I don’t think he can ever truly forgive me, but he’s doing his best.”

“He didn’t pull a knife on you, then?” I ask cynically.

Inez treats me to a withering look. “I told him the truth, that I really did like him, and under different circumstances we could have been genuine friends.”

“What did he have to say to that?” I ask.

She shrugs. “He admitted he’d have tried to take advantage of me if our roles had been reversed, so everything was fine between us as far as he’s concerned. I asked if we could meet again during the Tourney. He’s not sure if he can swing any free time – his uncle has lots of meetings lined up – but he’ll let me know if he can.”

I start to ask another question, but then a beaming woman presses forward and noisily interrupts. It’s the frizzy-haired Cindy.

“You’re Archibald, aren’t you?” she asks, as if we’ve never met.

“Yes, but call me Archie,” I say, playing along.

“And Inez?”

“At your service,” Inez says, making the greet.

“I’m Cindy, one of Malina’s envoys,” Cindy says. “She can tell you’re not into the soirée – even though you should be, because it’s beyond – and she thought you might like a break, so she asked me to show you round. Would you like to stretch your legs and check out a few rooms?”

“Archie?” Inez says lightly, as if it’s no big thing.

I shrug. “Why not?”

“Super,” Cindy says, then adds as she leads us away, “I’d prefer to stay here and catch the eye of an eligible royal, but when my queen snaps her fingers, I jump.”

We laugh and follow her out of the ballroom, listening politely as she takes us on a leisurely tour of the palace, babbling away as if she was a professional tour guide.

After visiting a few of the state rooms, bedrooms and kitchens, we come to an indoor ice rink, which Cindy explains wasn’t built intentionally.

“We had a scare several hundred years ago, when sections of the palace began to melt,” she says. “Our devisers managed to shore things up, but a few rooms flooded and froze over. The royals enjoyed the novelty of being able to skate inside, and asked that this room be preserved the way it was. Hiroto loves this place.”

“I imagine he’ll spend a lot of time here during the Tourney matches,” Inez says.

“I’m sure he will,” Cindy says breezily.

It sounds like a casual conversation, but I know what's really being said — this is where the kidnapping will happen.

There's an alcove at the rear of the room where crowns and jewels are rather carelessly stored. Hardly any of the modern royals bother with such items, but she tells us they were common in the old days. She asks me if I want to try on a crown made of ice. I expect it to weigh a lot and be freezing, but it's light and only cool to the touch.

“Do you want me to knight you?” I ask Inez, adopting a regal air.

She drops to one knee. “Yes please, Prince Archibald,” she simpers, and I pretend to touch her shoulders with an imaginary sword.

“Me too,” Cindy laughs, and when I knight her, she gasps and declares, “Beyond!”

Cindy's smile fades when she stands and looks around cagily. We're alone in the large room, and the two guards outside can't hear anything through the thick door that she shut when we came in, but Cindy's careful regardless, and whispers, “Do you like mazes?”

It's an odd question. “I suppose,” I sniff.

“I love them,” Inez says firmly.

“Excellent,” Cindy says. “In that case, follow me. I have something extra to show you.”

Cindy moves aside a chest on which some jewels lie scattered, to reveal a trapdoor in the floor, which she opens. There are steps trailing down into the dark. Cindy starts down them, and gleam on the ceiling lights up as she descends, Inez and I closely following.

We find ourselves in a cold corridor. Cindy walks to the end, where it branches left. She takes a couple more turns, before coming to another set of stairs, which lead us further beneath the ground. It's even colder here, and I start to wish I was wearing something warmer.

There's another corridor at the bottom of the steps. It runs long and straight, and at the end there's an arched, wooden door frame (no door) with a sign carved into the arch.

“Upper level of the Maze of Ash,” I read aloud when we get there. “Enter at your own risk.”

“The Maze of Ash,” Inez murmurs, and shivers.

I peer through the doorway at the corridor beyond. “I don't see any ashes.”

Inez thumps my arm. “You're an idiot,” she says.

“Why?” I scowl.

“Ignore her,” Cindy tuts. “It's an easy mistake to make. Ash was the name of the person who discovered and redevise the maze. He was a prince who lived here more than four thousand years ago. He was obsessed with mazes, and when he found this one, it was as if he'd struck gold. He spent a few hundred years reshaping it into the most bewildering, challenging maze imaginable, and his base at ground level later became the royal residence, which is why our palace sits where it does.”

Cindy leads us into the maze and we start to twist and turn. “Don't worry,” she says. “I won't take us far inside. Even though this is only the upper level, I wouldn't dare go beyond the small section that I'm familiar with.”

“It can't be that bad,” I laugh, but Cindy looks at me seriously.

“The Maze of Ash is a nightmare for those who aren't equipped for it,” she says. “The upper level isn't too daunting, but there are four lower levels, accessible only by boreholes which are situated in these corridors and a few spots around the city. They play host to the most fiendish maze that's ever been created.”

“The walls move within the Maze of Ash,” Cindy continues. “They slide and shift away from one another, and also dematerialise and rematerialize in different areas. There's a pattern to their movements, but it takes a long

time to crack it, and you need to concentrate fiercely. Someone who's spent a lot of time training can maybe find their way out in ten or so years."

"Ten years?" I ask incredulously.

"At least," Cindy says. "Most experienced mazers take twenty years or more. And if you've no clue about mazes, you'll spend anywhere between fifty and a hundred years stumbling around."

"I heard there are people who've been in there for centuries," Inez says as I stare at Cindy with wide eyes.

"No," Cindy smiles. "The longest verified stay is a hundred and sixty-three years. We keep tabs on everyone who enters, and at the moment nobody has been in there longer than a hundred and six years. Of course we can't account for people who wandered in on the quiet, but we don't think there are many of those."

"I don't understand," I frown. "Doesn't someone do a sweep every so often, to pick up people who are lost?"

"You can't find anyone in the Maze of Ash," Cindy says. "It's been devised to keep explorers separate. Unless you go in with a partner, you'll wander in isolation until you work your way out."

I see now why Inez shivered when she read the name.

"Prince Ash must have been a weird guy if he built this for fun," I snort.

"As weird as they come," Cindy agrees. "According to one of our legends, even this maze wasn't enough of a challenge for him. He craved a tougher puzzle to crack, so he crossed into the Lost Zone with a view to figuring a way back."

"I never heard that one," Inez gasps.

"We don't talk about it much," Cindy says quietly. "He must have been mad to do that, and we don't like to talk ill of our royals, even when they're long dead and gone. Or just gone, in Ash's case."

“What if he does find a way back?” I ask, and Inez and Cindy stare at me as if I’m mad. “It could happen, couldn’t it?”

“In theory,” Inez says dubiously.

“I’m not even sure it’s theoretically possible,” Cindy says. “A scientist tried to explain it to me once. He’s spent all his time here trying to work out the secrets of the Lost Zone. According to him, it’s like a black hole in the Born, where light can go in but not come out.”

“I’ve never heard of a black hole,” Inez says.

“How can you not...” I start to ask, then remember that Inez died long before the concept of black holes was first developed.

“Anyway,” Cindy says, “this is as far as we’ll go. There’s a little room ahead. It used to be a storage room. There’s a surprise for you inside.”

She says that to me, and I cock my head. “A surprise? What is it?”

Cindy laughs. “If I told you, it wouldn’t be a surprise.”

I glance at Inez, who shrugs. “No point looking at me. I don’t know.”

“The surprise is for you too,” Cindy says to Inez.

We share a curious look, then follow Cindy to a spot in a wall where a heavy rug hangs across an opening in the ice. Cindy peels back the rug and nods at me to enter. I hesitate, worried that this might be a trap, but Inez puts a hand on my shoulder and gives it a squeeze, letting me know she has my back.

I gulp and step forward. The opening is low-lying, so I have to bend to step into the room. There are some bare shelves to my right and left, and a mat straight ahead. A man is sitting on the mat, his back to me, tinkering with something. He’s focused on whatever he’s holding. I take a half-step towards the man, ready to turn and run if I sense a threat.

Then I glimpse a small cuckoo clock in the man's hands, and relax. He's the last person I'd have expected to find beneath the ice in Niffelheim, but he's also just about the last person I need fear.

"Hi, Winston," I shout, laughing as my mentor jumps with shock. "Do you need a hand with that clock?"

"Archie!" Winston cries, then he's on his feet and we're hugging, and Cindy and Inez are smiling, and all is well in this cold, dark, underground world.

5

There are no chairs, so we sit on the mat with Winston. He's still smiling, the scars on his cheeks almost invisible in the dim light. He puts the cuckoo clock behind him – there are a few locks lying around too – and asks if we'd like any mushrooms.

"My apologies," he says, passing around a handful of sorry-looking specimens. "They don't grow too thickly in the maze, and they're not the finest quality."

"What are you doing here?" I ask, taking a mushroom to be polite.

"I've come for the grop," Winston says seriously, but can't maintain a straight face. "No, I'm here for the kidnapping."

"You know about that?" Inez gasps.

Winston nods. "Malina sent an envoy to me after the rest of you agreed to get involved. The prince is going to be stored inside you, and Malina wants the added security of an unpickable lock, like you had when you carried Ghita."

"That makes sense," Inez says. "Cindy told me they had an artful Lox lined up to create the lock, but I'd no idea it was you. When you refused to help me last year, I thought you were out of the game forever. It never even crossed my mind to turn to you this time."

Winston looks sheepish. “I was out of the game. For the most part I still am, and at first I rejected Malina’s envoy, but a few things swayed my call.” Winston nods at me. “Archie was one reason I felt obliged to help — a teacher should look out for his students. He was also indirectly the second reason why I agreed to break cover. I’d told him what had happened to me in the past, why I withdrew from the Merge, the way I was betrayed and tortured.”

“You’ve never discussed that part of your life with me,” Inez says softly.

“It wasn’t something I wanted to talk about,” Winston says, stroking a few of his scars. “For a long time I was sure the memories would crush me if I dwelt upon them, so I blanked them, but after opening up to Archie, I found myself thinking about the past a lot, and it didn’t scare me that much. I’m still worried I might be captured and tortured again, but living alone, a hermit eking out a pale imitation of a life... that isn’t who I want to be any more.

“There was a third reason,” Winston says, “and this was the most motivational of all. Remember, Archie, when I told you that a royal broke me out when I was Adil’s prisoner?”

“Yes,” I say.

“It was Malina,” he says. “She helped me when my need was great, so it would have been poor form not to return the favour.”

The old locksmith laughs, and the rest of us laugh too.

“So what’s the plan?” I ask. Inez and the others haven’t discussed it in any great depth with me, but this feels like the right time to ask.

Inez cocks an eyebrow at Cindy, who looks uneasy, but nods.

“There are several entrances to the upper level of the maze,” Inez says. “One is in a tunnel far across the city, and is almost never used.”

“Hugo knows the way through the maze from that spot to the palace,” Cindy says. “He was a close friend of Sheng’s when they were younger. Sheng liked to explore the upper level and took Hugo along on some of his journeys.”

“That was partly why Hugo insisted on doing this himself,” Inez says. “He knew how to sneak into the palace, which meant one less detail to worry about.”

“So we’ll sneak through the maze with Hugo during a grop match?” I ask.

“Yes,” Cindy says. “Malina will be in the palace that day, so she can dismiss most of Hiroto’s guards and go to the ice skating room with him.”

“Cindy and Malina will bring the prince here,” Winston says. “I’m going to install a lock on one of Inez’s storage zones in advance. I want you to help me when I’m doing that, Archie, so you can learn how it’s done.”

“We’ll pop the prince inside the zone,” Inez says, “and Hugo too, once he guides us out of the maze. Then we’ll split up and meet again in Cornan.”

“We’re going to split up?” I ask, not liking the sound of that.

“The lock will be similar to the one you opened for me in Canada,” Inez says. “If I get taken, no Lox of theirs will be able to pick it, but if you get captured with me...”

“...they’ll force me to open it,” I sigh.

“You’re brave, Archie, but we all have our limits,” Inez says quietly.

“Nobody can hold up under torture forever,” Winston croaks, trembling at some of his old memories.

“If all goes well,” Inez says, “you’ll meet me in Cornan, we’ll release Hiroto and Hugo, and they’ll head off to a zone where he can keep the boy safe.”

“And if it doesn’t go well, we’ll improvise,” Cindy adds, and laughs edgily.

“You won’t be going to Cornan?” I ask Winston.

He shakes his head. “I’ll do my bit, then return home and keep my fingers crossed that I’m never needed for anything like this again.”

I think it over. It’s not the most complicated of plans, but that’s good, as it means there are fewer things that can go wrong.

“When does all this happen?” I ask.

“The first of the semi-final matches,” Cindy says.

“Round one’s a group stage,” Inez explains, although I’ve already picked this up from the players. “Two groups, three teams in each. In round two, the third-placed team in the first group plays the runner-up in the second group. Then the runner-up in the first group plays the third-placed team from group two.”

“In the semi-finals, the winners from round two face the teams that placed first in the group stage,” Cindy says. “Hiroto’s scheduled to attend the second semi-final, so we need to carry this out during the first.”

“We wanted to do it earlier, during the group stages,” Inez says, “but that’s the only time that Malina and Hiroto are scheduled to sit out a match together.”

“It’ll be a long wait,” I note, thinking about how nervous I’m going to be in the run-up to the semi-finals.

“Yes,” Inez says, “but there’s an upside to that.” Her eyes twinkle. “It means we get to enjoy eight group matches before we have to focus on business.”

“You can’t seriously care about the games with this looming ahead of us,” I grunt.

“Are you kidding?” Inez replies. “I’ve been waiting all my life for a Tourney.”

“It doesn’t seem like that big a deal to me,” I mutter.

“Not now,” Inez says, “but by the time we get to the semis, I bet you’ll be looking to push back the kidnapping, because you’ll want to see the final few matches.”

“I doubt it,” I tell her.

“Only because you haven’t seen a big grop match yet,” she says, then leans over and taps my knee. “But you will, and soon — the Tourney’s about to begin, and it’s going to be one hell of a ride!”

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TWO — THE STADIUM

6

Inez and I return to the *soirée* for the last couple of hours, but I don't take much notice of what's going on, and don't sleep much at the end of the night. My head's spinning with thoughts of the kidnapping and all that could go wrong.

The draw to determine the teams in each group is made the next day. There's huge excitement among the players, who gather around the hot tub on the roof of the complex, where they can hear the information as it sweeps through the city.

I'm not bothered by who we get drawn against, but Inez is edgy, discussing the various permutations with Cal, who tugs on his moustache so hard that I'm afraid he's going to pull it off.

The draw is made in the palace, with only the *gropmeisters* and Family members in attendance, as tradition dictates. (Since Diamond isn't represented by a royal, the team captain has stepped in on their behalf.) Julia Vox is waiting outside, and she'll make the announcement to the crowds. Thousands of people have turned up, to be among the first to hear, even though the news will spread through the rest of the city in a matter of minutes.

The appointed time draws close and everything comes to a standstill in the streets beneath us, as people stop whatever they were doing and wait for word to trickle through. But when that word comes, it's not a trickle, but a flood. It surges towards us in the distance, shouts and roars, spreading from street to street. When it hits the area around the team quarters, I can't make sense of the hubbub. There are so many people yelling that it sounds like gibberish. Inez and the players are struggling too, but our roommate Velvet has a keen ear and makes sense out of the chaos.

“Ruby, Diamond and Pearl are in group A,” she bellows. “We’re with Topaz and Emerald in group B.”

Groans ripple through the players, and I get the sense that’s not the news they were hoping for.

“We wanted Diamond,” Cal snaps, showing surprisingly little loyalty to his old realm. “They’re the most vulnerable. If we’d had Diamond in our group, we’d have been assured of second at least.”

“And Pearl would have been easier than Emerald,” Velvet says.

“Hard to tell at this stage,” Cal rumbles, “but those who’ve seen the Pearlies in training say some of their key players are past their prime. Emerald certainly looks the tougher of the two.”

“We definitely didn’t want Topaz,” Inez says glumly. “The host realm, on their own pitch, with the support of a home crowd...”

“We’re up against it,” Cal says, then smiles wickedly. “But that means it will be an even greater achievement when we qualify top of the group.”

Several of the players around us cheer and slap Cal’s back.

The debates about the groups are interrupted when fresh shouting sweeps through the streets below.

“What’s happening now?” I ask as Velvet darts to the edge of the roof to listen more closely.

“The order of matches is drawn after the groups have been set,” Inez explains. “The host realm always plays first, then...”

“It’s us!” Velvet shrieks, cutting Inez short and punching the air with delight. “Topaz versus Sapphire, the first game of the Tourney!”

Most of the groppers are delighted – it’s a huge honour to kick off a Tourney – but Cal’s sombre. “They won’t have seen us in action, which makes it difficult for them to prepare,” he says to Inez and me. “But we

won't have seen them play either, so we're at an equal disadvantage. Plus they'll be fired up for the first match, and the result will be crucial to them, so they'll fight for every point."

Inez nods sourly. "If we'd played them in the final match, and we'd both beaten Emerald, we'd have only been playing for first place. There'd be less pressure."

"Then again," Cal says, "those low-stakes matches are forgettable affairs. Did anyone catch the order of the other games?"

After a bit of questioning, we find out that Ruby will play Pearl in the first group A game. We take on Emerald next, before the Rubicons get to run rings around the understrength Diamonds. The last game in our group will see the Topazers up against the Emeralds, with Pearl and Diamond playing the final game of their group three days later.

Cal and Inez start discussing the likely outcomes of the games, and how the tables might look at the finish, and who we're likely to get if we have to play in the second round, and...

I tune out and strip down to a pair of blue and white swimming trunks. I put them on before coming upstairs. Inez, Cal and the rest will be debating the draw for hours. I could stand around and pretend to be interested, or I could relax in the hot tub. For me, the call isn't even close.

Climbing in, I sigh happily as the warmth of the water seeps into my bones. As the talk of battles to come rages around me, I lean my head back, close my eyes and hum softly to drown out the babble. Inez and her Merged compatriots can keep their grop — this is the life for me!

7

We have three days to wait until the opening match. I'd like to spend some of that time with Winston — it can't be much fun for him, stuck in the cramped room all by himself — but I can't get through the maze without Hugo to guide me, and he's tied up with the team.

I don't see much of Inez. She has to stay close to the squad, to release her cargo whenever they need Logu, Maureen, Hector and Elizabeth. Now that we know who we're playing, the team's working hard on specific tactics for the first two matches, and the secret players have to be part of that.

The gropsters have access to a private pitch, where they can practise moves out of sight of any spies. Only the players, Inez and the coaches travel there, while the rest of us are left to twiddle our thumbs. I thought Baba Jen would be working us hard, but she's off gathering information about the Topazers and Emeralds. She has a long list of people she knows from her acting days and other activities in the past, and is busy calling in every favour she can, getting the lowdown on the opposition players.

With free time on my hands, I track down some locksmiths and test myself on the local locks. Many are made of ice and are unlike locks in other realms. Sometimes I have to breathe on them to make the pieces move. I never imagined there were so many ways to direct breath.

I'm enjoying the lock work so much that I'm almost annoyed when the day of the big match dawns and I'm confined to team quarters. The game doesn't kick off until early afternoon, but we're not allowed to leave the complex. This is what everything has been leading towards, and the coaches don't want any last-minute glitches, not even a bandage boy going missing.

Everyone in the backroom squad is brought to the players' quarters and we spend the morning with the gropsters. Baba Jen makes us put on a bandaging display, and roars at us when we make the slightest mistake. I feel thick beads of sweat trickling down my neck when it's my turn, and I'm sure I'll botch it, but I get the sense at the end, when she mutters, "I suppose that's the best we can expect from a simpleton like you," that I've done alright.

The coaches do their best to lighten the mood, but the players are moody and distant, or jittery and too talkative. More than one dashes away to dry heave in peace and quiet. Even I start to feel nervous.

We eat a big meal a couple of hours before we're due to leave, food that's been carefully devised to give the players every last zap of energy possible.

All of the food is prepared and cooked in the kitchen by members of the squad — while most of the players happily ate the meals that the chef has been serving up, they're not taking any chances today.

There are speeches galore from the coaches, in which they talk about great games of the past and the achievements of the current players. They tell the gropsters to enjoy the game, give it their all and walk off the pitch proud, win or lose, knowing they've done everything they can.

Baba Jen gets up on a table at one point and swears loudly. When all of the players are looking at her, she swivels slowly, meeting the gaze of each gropster directly.

“I'm older than most of you,” she growls. “I went to a few Tourneys when they were a regular feature. So believe me when I tell you, the best team doesn't always win, and the team that wants it the most doesn't always win. Those who have the most to lose normally power through to victory. And you have more to lose than any of the rest of those would-be grop superstars.”

“How so?” Velvet hoots.

Baba Jen glares at her. “If players from the other teams blow it, the worst they face is public humiliation and having to live with the knowledge that they let their team and realm down. But if any of you underperform, I'll chew off a couple of your toes.” Velvet and some of the other players laugh, until they realise she isn't joking. “Bear that in mind,” the tiny terror huffs, and hops down off the table to tuck into her dessert.

I'm sitting next to Arlo, and he leans over to whisper, “If she was just a bit bigger and we could send her out to play...”

“We'd win every match,” I nod, then finish off the rest of my food and join the team in one last conflagration. Then, when the call comes, we head outside to where hand-drawn carriages are lined up to drive us through the crowds thronging the streets, and on to the stadium where all of the games are due to be staged.

The carriages, like so much else in this city, are made of ice. Thick rugs line the benches inside, and each carriage can hold a dozen people. I expected the players to ride separately to the rest of us, but the organisers mix us up, so there's a selection in each carriage, the players positioned by the windows, members of the backroom team sandwiched between them.

We trundle through the streets, remoulded giants pulling the carriages as if they were toys. I expect the locals to boo us, since we're playing their team, but to my surprise it's cheers and applause all the way.

Baba Jen's sitting close by me, scowling at the crowds. "It's always this way," she snarls. "The idiots clap for every team on their way to the stadium. I'd prefer it if they rained abuse down on us — it would rile the players, and I like my teams to hit the pitch in an aggressive mood."

There's no pleasing some people.

It takes about an hour to wind through the city. I don't see the stadium until we're almost upon it, as it's set in a crater, and only becomes visible when we crest the ridge above it.

"You've got to be kidding," I wheeze, eyes widening.

Baba Jen sniffs. "It's nothing," she says. "That place is a pit, and it's a pit we're going to rule, so poke your eyes back into their sockets."

But no matter what Baba Jen says, it's impressive, built to make newcomers cower at its majesty, and I'm not the only one to gawp at it.

The stadium's massive, and circular so that it fills most of the crater. It's built out of a mix of black stone and ice, so it's both solemn-looking and dazzling at the same time. There's a domed roof of ice, supported by pillars several metres thick, and there are four huge, arched entrances, one in each quadrant. Most of the stadium isn't seated. Instead, terraces stretch down from the roofline to the edge of the pitch, and they're already rammed with tens of thousands of people.

"What's the capacity?" I ask.

“Officially a hundred thousand,” Baba Jen grunts, “but you can bet they’ll have squeezed in more.”

We begin our descent down a steep, curving slope. If the giants slipped and let go, we’d pick up speed in no time and hurtle towards the bottom and a certain sticky end, but each of them is wearing boots with large spikes, for extra grip.

It’s strangely quiet. I expected more noise, but either the spectators are standing silently, or the roof traps the sounds. I suspect it’s the latter, and that we’re in for an ear-piercing shock when we get inside.

Once we’re at the crater’s base, the giants haul us three-quarters of the way round the stadium, to an entrance decorated with our team’s colours. Lots of Sapphirites have gathered here, fans who weren’t lucky enough to get tickets, but who crossed realms regardless and came to the stadium to stand outside and show their support.

We have to wait while the fans are cleared. I’m studying a small blue symbol on my right wrist – a deviser known as a ticketer drew one on all our wrists a couple of days ago, and it allows us to attend every match – when I think of something and turn to Arlo, who’s sitting beside me. “Do the fans use paper tickets?”

“No,” he says. “Everyone has been issued with a symbol like ours. Most of them only provide entrance to a specific match. Some are for both group games. Others are valid for all the matches your team is involved in. There are very few like ours, guaranteeing entrance to every single game.”

“Who gets the passes?” I ask.

Arlo shrugs. “Lots of group teams are allocated a selection. Elected officials and nobles. People who’ve worked behind the scenes. There are also random draws.”

“You can’t buy them?” I ask.

Arlo shakes his head. “The symbols are non-transferable. If you can’t make it, you miss the match, but very few people miss a Tourney game.”

When our fans are finally edged out of the way, the giants haul us through the gate, and the noise levels increase dramatically. The players fall silent. Even though we’re in the Sapphire quadrant, where the bulk of our supporters are located, it’s as if every person in the stadium is screaming for the Topazers.

“I knew it would be like this,” Baba Jen spits, her voice only barely audible over the roar.

As we sit in our coaches and listen mutely to the crowd, Cal stands up, bangs the roof of his coach and starts chanting, “Sapphire! Sapphire! Sapphire!”

Others take up the chant. We begin to clap as well, and raise our voices as loudly as we can. Those who are tall enough stand and bang on the roofs of our carriages, while the rest of us slap the walls.

The giants scowl at us. Baba Jen cackles with delight and yells something cutting at them which I can’t hear over the noise. The giants look as if they want to eat her, but start moving again, dragging us through a tunnel beneath the terraces, and a few minutes later we draw up to the side of the pitch, where we dismount and take our places on the team benches.

We’re facing a sea of imposing Topaz fans almost everywhere we look, except on the terraces behind us, which are swarming with Sapphirites. The cheers and songs from our supporters drown out a lot of the other noise when we’re on the benches.

“It lifts the heart, doesn’t it?” Pete the blocker beams, stepping up beside me as I’m twisting and turning to see as much of the stadium as I can. He points to the fans who’ve come to roar us on.

“Let’s hope we can treat them to a victory,” I say.

“You’d better believe it,” Pete laughs, then goes to join the rest of the players, who are gathering around the coaches on the pitch. Inez is with them, ready to let out Hugo, Maureen, Hector or Elizabeth when and if required, though they remain hidden inside her for the time being.

Although the stadium’s an incredible place, the pitch isn’t much different to the one I saw in Cornan last year. Slightly bigger, maybe a hundred and twenty metres by forty, and featuring an icy surface instead of grass. But the odd-looking trees in each of the four corners, with no branches or leaves, and a discoloured spot about six metres up the trunk, are the same.

One notable difference is that there are lots of columns set a few metres back from the playing area, lining the sidelines and end lines, and stone gargoyles are perched atop them.

“What are the gargoyles for?” I ask Arlo, who’s rifling through his supply of bandages, making sure everything’s in order.

“To record the commentary,” he says. “They’ll be shipped off to various zones around the realms after each game, so that people can listen to the entire match. In some places they won’t even allow the scores to be announced — they prefer to hear how it unfurls through the gargoyles. Useful things, aren’t they?”

“Except when they’re used to warp a man’s mind,” I mutter, recalling the gargoyle that had been smuggled into the palace in Diamond, to drive King Lloyd mad.

As the players are readying themselves for battle, the Topazers arrive, and the stadium goes wild. Unlike our players, who were delivered as a group, each Topaz player arrives in a personal carriage, drawn by a giant, and their name is announced by Julia Vox, who’s standing in the centre of the pitch with a megaphone, and somehow manages to be heard over the frenzied roars of the crowd.

“A nice touch,” Baba Jen grunts reluctantly.

The Topazers lap up the adulation, swanning around like rock stars, waving at their supporters and blowing them kisses. Their backroom team files in as they're working the crowd, and there are more of them than us, bigger and meaner-looking.

“Now that’s just ridiculous,” Baba Jen snorts. “As if a fierce-looking thug with a bag full of bandages will make any difference.” But I see her cast an angry eye over her charges, and I know she’s mad at herself for not having chosen a more frightful bunch.

When all the Topazers are in place, Julia Vox calls the name of the gropmeister, then withdraws. A hush falls as the gropmeister and four assistants make their way to the centre, the players converging around them. The gropmeister calls the captains forward and they have a brief chat. Then one of his assistants hands him the grop, a fragile, oval-shaped ball. The gropmeister says something to the captains – I guess they’re deciding who kicks off – then passes the grop to the Topaz captain.

“THE FIRST PLAY WILL BE STARTED BY... TOPAZ!” Julia Vox shouts, from her position next to the royal box on one side of the pitch. The fans go crazy and yell the name of their team, until the foundations of the stadium shake beneath us, while the roof trembles and makes a worrying splintering noise.

“Don’t panic,” Arlo says when he catches me looking scared. “It’s just a ruse to make us feel intimidated.”

“Well, it’s working,” I tell him.

The teams withdraw to their respective ends. The Topaz captain has a quick word with his gropsters, and sixteen of the thirty depart to stand on the touchline. This is a feature of grop — teams can change the number of players over the course of a match, although the maximum they can have on the pitch at any one time is twenty. The team that kicks off gets to make the first call, and after that the team that scores gets the honour after each point made. The opposing team can adjust their players accordingly, adding up to two more, or subtracting one or two, if they please.

When Olivia sees the Topazers depart, she has a quick discussion with her deputy, then dismisses half her team, choosing to set fifteen of our players against their fourteen.

Intrigued murmurs sweep through the crowd. Apparently this is an unusual call. A team normally selects the same number of players for the first move. Sometimes, if they feel at a disadvantage, they'll choose two more, to defend in depth, and occasionally they might go for one or two less, if they're confident of victory and want to unnerve their opponents. But choosing one player more makes little sense, and people are wondering if there's a tactical reason for it, or if Olivia is just trying to confuse the Topazers.

While the debates rage, the Topaz captain hurls the ball high into the air. As it's soaring upwards, every person in the stadium stops talking and bellows, "GROP!"

And the Tourney begins for real.

8

The aim of grop is to move the ball up the pitch – no player can hold onto it for more than five seconds at a time – and hurl it against a whorl (the marked spots on the trees) to score a point. The light weight of the grop means you can rarely score from far out, so you have to get close, and ideally shoot from the air, using one of your smaller players (known as birds), who gets thrown up high to shoot. The game finishes when a team scores a certain number of points. In the Tourney, that's thirty points. There will be two halves, the first ending when one of the teams makes it to fifteen.

In most matches there's a winner and a loser, but in the group stages of a Tourney there's also the possibility of a draw. If one of the teams has twenty-seven points or more when the other team hits the thirty mark, the game continues. If the trailing team manages to draw it back to thirty points each, they share the spoils, but if the leading team scores a thirty-first point before that happens, they take the match.

(In the knockout stages and the final, play continues until a team wins by three clear points. We've all heard the older players and coaches recalling epic contests from past Tournays – including one that finished a crazy eighty-four to eighty-one points – and everyone's hoping for a few classics this time too.)

It's a violent sport. Players are allowed to kick, punch or poleaxe the opposition. The stakes today are high, which makes for a bruising encounter. Limbs are broken, skulls dented, teeth smashed. Medics are summoned onto the pitch after every play, to patch up the wounded and set them back in place for the next frantic passage.

I thought I'd be able to sit back a lot of the time, relax and enjoy the game, but I'm constantly called into action, to wrap up cuts that don't merit the attention of more talented medics, so I quickly lose track of the play. Instead of following the moves, I'm sorting through bandages, replacing strips and throwing away bloodied bits of cloth that I collected while changing dressings on the field.

It's a shame, because I can tell from the occasional glimpse that it's a frenetic, closely contested match. The slippery pitch favours the Topazers, but the Sapphirite coaches trained their players to cope with it, so they don't skid as much as the home fans were expecting. Topaz have the better blockers and chuckers, but our birds are swifter and more accurate than theirs.

Teams normally score from penalties when the fragile grops get shattered, so they set out to earn as many of those as they can, but in Olivia we have probably the best hummingbird in the sphere, so we aim to score a lot of points from open play, even though that's more difficult.

Olivia's in her element, screaming orders that can be heard even over the roaring commentary of Julia Vox. She's always in the thick of the action, darting around the pitch before and during plays, organising blockers, telling chuckers where to run, keeping her fellow birds in formation. The Topazers do everything they can to stop her – she's been crushed whenever their blockers get close enough to hurl themselves at her – but our medics

rush to her after every play and do enough, combined with her determination to continue, to keep her on her feet.

Even though I don't catch much of the action, I'm able to keep up with the scores, since Julia calls them out every time a team wins a point. Topaz plough into a five-two lead early on, before we peg them back to seven-six. We take the lead for the first time shortly afterwards, going up nine-eight. The locals don't like that, and the boos drown out Julia's huge voice, but the cheers from the Sapphirite fans sweep through as the jeers die down, and our players thrive on them. We score another, then another, to take a three-point lead.

“THIS ISN'T LOOKING GOOD, PEOPLE,” Julia bellows, not even pretending to be neutral. “LET'S REALLY GET BEHIND OUR TEAM AND SHOW THESE NO-GOOD INTRUDERS WHAT WE'RE MADE OF!”

The Topazers go crazy as instructed, screaming so loudly that I'm surprised their heads don't explode. At first the noise doesn't have an impact, and we score again, but then the fearsome blockers of Topaz start coming into their own, hitting our players even harder than before, slowing down the play and hurting our birds.

Topaz score the next three points. We claw ourselves back into a thirteen-eleven lead, before they score twice to even things out. Then they score again, to move within a point of a half-time lead.

“THAT'S MORE LIKE IT,” Julia crows. “ONE MORE, AND LET'S BRING THE BABY HOME, SO THAT WE CAN ENJOY OUR HALF-TIME HOTCATS.”

The mention of hotcats seems to tempt the Topaz gropsters to greater heights, and they break down our next attack before it's properly started. (The team that concedes a point always starts the next phase of play.) As our players grapple with them and fight to stop them gaining a penalty too close to our trees, their hummingbirds dive forward and break into the open for the first time. Before Olivia can redirect her troops, a Topaz blocker dinks the grop over the heads of the Sapphirites, and one of the birds grabs

it and tears forward. There aren't any Topaz chuckers in this part of the pitch – they held back, which helped fool our players – but one of the birds is bigger than most, and he grabs the hummingbird with the grop and launches her into the air. She doesn't fly especially high, but it's enough to let her shoot clearly, and the grop smashes into the whorl and explodes. The gropmeister blows his whistle and the first half comes to an end, with Sapphire fifteen-thirteen down.

As the crowd goes into raptures, and Julia sings her team's praises, the players drag themselves from the pitch, bloodied, bruised, exhausted, the Topazers jubilant, the Sapphirites downbeat.

Our coaches are more positive than the players. They say we've done brilliantly, that the Topazers expected to cruise to half-time five or six points ahead, that they've played their best game and not managed to tear free of us, that the second half will be ours.

Even Baba Jen is upbeat, telling me and the other bandagers that we're doing an almost adequate job. She warns us to be a bit quicker getting to the players, but does so without too many curses or threats.

Inez comes over to chat while I'm resting. "You look as tired as the gropsters," she laughs.

"It's crazy," I pant. "I couldn't understand why Baba Jen was training us so hard, but now I get it. I'm amazed the players are still going."

"Several would have hobbled off by this stage in a normal match," Inez says, "but nobody wants to quit during a Tourney. They'll go until their legs are ripped off."

She produces a hotcat, similar to a hotdog, except the meat is a greenish colour. I thank her and take big bites, demolishing it in no time. "That was delicious," I say, smacking my lips. "Any more?"

"After the game," Inez says. "If you ate another now, you might get indigestion, which could slow you down and land you in trouble with Baba Jen."

“How’s Logu doing?” I ask, careful not to refer to Hugo by his real name.

“The coaches haven’t used him,” Inez says. “The Topazers have turned it into a wrestling contest, but Logu needs space to flourish. I imagine they’ll hold him back for the next match.”

Inez starts telling me how she thinks the second half will unfold, and what we need to do to overcome the Topazers, but then the gropmeister blows his whistle and it’s back into the fray.

The second half picks up where the first left off, more crushing tackles, more dislocated limbs, more cuts that need quick stitching and bandaging.

Responding to instructions from the coaches, our players target a couple of their key blockers, pounding them whenever an opportunity presents itself. Julia Vox isn’t impressed, and cries foul after a few nasty tackles, but although their fans boo our players, the gropmeister declares nothing amiss.

Our brutal tactics pay off, and one of their blockers has to leave the pitch with a broken back — it can be repaired, but not today. The loss shakes them, and we hustle our way to a twenty-two to nineteen advantage.

Then disaster strikes. Out of nowhere, as we’re launching another attack, Olivia’s foot catches beneath her and she goes over on it so hard that it snaps and twists a hundred and eighty degrees. Olivia screams with pain and hammers the icy ground with her fists. Our medics want to rush to her aid, but the grop’s still in play, and her teammates don’t think to put it out. They’re fixated on getting up the other end of the pitch and scoring.

The Topaz captain makes a split-second decision to concede a point, and instead of launching his blockers at the players closing in on a whorl, he signals a pair to target Olivia. Our coaches see the danger and roar at our players to help her, but the message doesn’t get through, and just as they’re passing the grop to a bird and chucking her into the air, the Topaz blockers hurl themselves at Olivia, grab her foot and twist it savagely in every direction they can, drawing more screams from the tormented captain before the pain overwhelms her and she blacks out.

Our bird scores and the gropmeister blows his whistle. The Topazers immediately release Olivia – you’re penalised if you strike an opponent once play stops – but the damage has already been done, and they jog away from her, chuckling wickedly.

The Sapphirites cut short their celebrations when they see the medics and coaches rushing to Olivia’s side, and hurry to their captain to watch with wide, scared eyes as the medics tend to her.

The medics do their best in the time allowed, but Olivia’s still unconscious when the gropmeister whistles at them to leave the pitch, and they’re forced to withdraw with her. I can tell, by the way one of the coaches shakes her head when a player asks a question, that Olivia won’t be rejoining the action.

We have a four-point advantage, only seven away from victory. It’s a commanding lead, and from the mutters of people around me, I get the sense that we’d expect to win from here, regardless of the loss of a key player. But our gropsters are deflated. Olivia was at the heart of everything. She wasn’t just our top scorer — she also broke down many attacks, often sensing a threat even before it presented itself.

Cal and some of the others do what they can to keep up morale, but heads drop. Injuries and tiredness drain the gropsters, who lose their focus. As well as that, the Topazers have the scent of victory in their nostrils, and come at us like wrecking balls, hungry and full of renewed self-belief.

We hold the lead over the next several phases of play, but it begins to narrow worryingly. Twenty-four to twenty-one. Twenty-five to twenty-three. Twenty-seven to twenty-six.

We almost score our twenty-eighth point, to regain a two-point lead, but our bird throws high and the grop shatters millimetres above the whorl. The Topazers take heart from our cruel miss, and although we launch a desperate defence, they score to draw level, twenty-seven points each.

“I’d take a draw now,” Arlo growls. He’s sweating, not just from running on and off the pitch, but with nerves.

“Never,” Baba Jen snaps. “A team should always play to win.”

Topaz score the next point, then the next, to go up twenty-nine to twenty-seven, but we get the next, making it twenty-nine to twenty-eight.

The next play is the longest of the match, most of it taking place in the middle third of the pitch, neither set of players wanting to make a mistake that will cost their team dearly. Baba Jen’s furious – she keeps screaming that we should attack, not defend – but the coaches are pleased with how we’re holding our own.

Julia Vox’s voice has hoarsened, but she maintains the commentary at the same furious volume, detailing every play, naming every player involved, praising not just the Topazers, but giving credit to the Sapphirites too.

“THIS IS AN AMAZING PERIOD,” she gasps. “I WANT IT TO LAST FOREVER, BUT IT CAN’T. WHO WILL FALTER? WHO WILL SOAR? WHO CAN TAKE THIS BEYOND MERE HEROISM AND INTO THE REALM OF THE MYTHIC?”

We force play into the Topaz third of the pitch and our players fight to get to a spot where we can take a penalty, but the Topazers dig in and launch one desperate defensive tackle after another, holding firm. The passage of play lengthens. It seems like hours since the last point was scored. How can they carry on like this? Surely someone has to snap.

Eventually someone does, and unfortunately it’s one of our players. A bird gets caught with the grop and possession shifts to the Topazers. They grind their way out of their third of the pitch, back into the middle, then into our third. We do all we can to halt them, but they slowly advance to a section where they can muster a shot from a penalty. They’re still a long way out, and Julia declares it one of the riskiest moves of the match, but their condor sends the grop flying in an arc that ends with it brushing against the whorl and shattering.

Thirty points to twenty-eight.

The draw is now the best we can hope for, and Baba Jen changes her tune. “If we get a point out of this, it’ll be a majestic achievement,” she sniffs.

Our players head up the pitch, passing the grop between themselves, hell-bent on getting the next score and forcing the match to a make or break point. Surprisingly, a lot of the Topaz fans urge them on. Thirty-to-twenty-nine games are extremely rare in grop, and for many spectators, the excitement of such a situation would be worth the risk of maybe drawing instead of winning.

Sadly for us, some of our players are thinking too much about the next point and not enough about this one, because as most of them grapple with the Topaz blockers, a couple of our birds are caught daydreaming while passing the grop back and forth. One of the Topaz birds slips through and intercepts the grop way too easily. Our players yelp and scramble after her, but the bird dances free and lopes towards the nearest tree, racing to get there within the five seconds allowed before she has to release the grop. Our fans scream, trying to put her off, but I doubt she hears them over the ecstatic cheers and aggressive whistles of the Topazers.

With the vast majority of people in the stadium roaring her on, the bird takes a careful running leap, then hurls the grop at the tree. It hits the whorl dead in the centre and explodes in a shower of splinters.

The roars of the Topazers threaten to lift the roof off the stadium and send it flying like a Frisbee out of the crater and halfway across the city.

The score’s thirty-one to twenty-eight.

The first game of the Tourney is over.

We’ve lost.

9

There are huge celebrations among the locals. Showers of coloured snowflakes rain down on the terraces, and the Topazers sing while their

gropsters conga around the pitch.

Our players trudge to the sidelines in silence, heads low, most fighting back tears, some openly crying. Their legs are heavy and they shuffle like old people. A few of the coaches try to cheer them up, but their efforts are in vain. This loss hurts .

I slowly pack my rolls of bandages back into my rucksack. I feel sick, which isn't what I expected. I thought the Tourney wouldn't bother me. I was worried that I'd struggle to fake enthusiasm, that people would see I wasn't into it and maybe wonder why I was here.

Those worries are a thing of the past. I might not know a lot about grop, but I've caught the bug and I'm gutted. We gave everything we had out there and it's agony that we have to slink back to our quarters with nothing to show for our efforts.

"You did well," someone says behind me. It's a soft, unfamiliar voice, but when I turn to see who it is, I'm stunned to find that it's Baba Jen.

"Thanks," I whisper.

"We all did well," she says in that same, soft voice, "but it wasn't enough, was it? Sometimes our best just doesn't cut it."

"It was the injury to Olivia," I mutter. "That changed everything."

Baba Jen nods glumly. "That's the problem when you rely on a player too much."

"Will she be OK?" I ask.

"Don't know," Baba Jen says, then glares at me, her voice returning to its normal bark. "I hope not. I want to win the next match without her, to prove we're not a one-trick pony. Now stop dawdling. This game's history. Time to look ahead."

I hide a wry smile and follow her to where the carriages are waiting, the smirking giants standing by. We pile in haphazardly, no order to where we

sit this time.

Many fans are lining the streets when we clear the crater. They cheer as we pass, shouting out compliments, letting us know we played a good game, wishing us luck against Emerald. Of course it's easy to be generous when you've won, but I think they were genuinely impressed. Quite a few yell that they expect to play us again in the final, and I don't think they're saying it just to be polite.

"The final seems a long way off, doesn't it?" Arlo mumbles. He's sitting next to me, his rucksack perched on his lap, looking as drained as I feel.

"I thought it was odd that they don't stage more games," I reply. "I know there are only six teams, but I felt they should play each other two or three times in the group stage. But having seen how fiercely they contested this match, I understand now why it's set up this way."

"We're not out of the running," Arlo says. "Second place is up for grabs, and a few teams have even won the tournament from a third-place group finish, but the first-placed teams have the advantage of playing one less game, and that's massive."

"Hey, we could still finish first," Velvet says. She's sitting close by and overheard us talking. She has a black eye, her left arm is bruised from the shoulder down to the wrist, and a couple of her fingers have been twisted out of shape, but she's smiling despite her injuries. "If we beat Emerald, and they beat Topaz, we could top the group yet. It goes to how many points you've scored if that happens, and we notched up a lot today."

Velvet was one of the birds who gave the drop away and allowed the Topaz player in to seal our loss. I'm surprised to see that she's smiling now and dreaming of finishing first. I thought she'd be downcast, that the others would be shooting her dirty looks, but nobody's pointing the finger of blame at her.

"I messed up," she says, perhaps seeing a hint of disapproval in my gaze, "but it happens to us all. One of the things you learn in drop is that it's all about the team. I feel horrible but I'll get over it. Life's too short to worry

about what went wrong in the past. It should be all about what we're going to do in the future. And do you know what I'm going to do, Archie?"

"Beat Emerald and go on to win the Tourney?" I guess.

Velvet's smile spreads. "Say that again, but sell it to me this time."

"We're going to beat Emerald and go on to win the Tourney," I giggle.

"Hey," Velvet shouts, grabbing the attention of the players around us. "Have you guys heard what Archie's saying?"

I blush as the others stare at me, but when Velvet pokes my leg, I mumble, "We're going to beat Emerald and win the Tourney."

"Again," Velvet grunts, and I repeat it, but with more conviction.

"What the hell do you know?" Baba Jen growls. "You're a bandage boy. Stick that rucksack in your mouth and let us wallow in miserable silence."

I gulp and look away, but Velvet taps my knee and raises an eyebrow, egging me on. I look from her to Baba Jen, then back again. Velvet bares her teeth, pretending to be a lioness, and a fire ignites inside me.

"I'll stick the rucksack in your mouth if you don't shut up," I tell Baba Jen.

The tyrannical toddler blinks, perhaps wondering which part of my body she's going to cut off first. I stand on the seat and bang the roof of the carriage. "We're going to beat Emerald and win the Tourney!" Some of the players laugh and I quickly round on them. "We're going to beat Emerald and win the Tourney," I say again, only this time I chant it, and bang the roof of the carriage in time. "We're going." Bang. "To beat Emerald." Bang. "And win the Tourney." Bang.

Velvet stands up and chants it with me, banging on the roof the same way I am. Then Arlo stands and starts chanting and banging too. Soon it's spread through the entire carriage, as well as the carriages ahead of and behind us, and everyone's standing, roaring and slamming the roofs with the palms of their hands, and the pain of the loss is almost forgotten.

At the height of the uproar, when Baba Jen has climbed onto my shoulders to pull my ears painfully and howl with delight as she headbutts the roof, Velvet leans over and shouts, “I didn’t think you had that in you, Archie.”

“Me neither,” I shout back.

“Which just goes to prove,” she laughs, “we should never underestimate the quiet ones.”

And we grin with delight at one another as we chant and cheer and thump the roof all the way home.

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THREE — THE SURPRISE

10

There's a group match every three days in the Tourney, so the players are given a short break the day after their loss, before they have to start preparing for their next game against Emerald.

Most of the players head off to explore Niffelheim, apart from those who are still being treated for injuries. (Olivia is one of them, and there's no word yet on whether or not she'll be fit to play again.)

Hector and Maureen played in the loss to Topaz, so they don't have to hide inside Inez any more, as they're no longer a surprise factor. That means they can roam the city with the others. Hugo and Elizabeth, on the other hand, weren't involved. For that reason they've been told to stay in the team quarters, to keep the opposition guessing.

I want to visit Winston, so I wait until Hugo's by himself, then ask if he'll guide me through the maze. (We told Hugo that the elderly locksmith was here, after we returned from the soirée.)

"Sure," Hugo sighs, still downhearted after yesterday's defeat. "That'll be better than moping here all day. But I'll need Inez's help to sneak out of the building."

Inez is happy to assist, and lets Hugo retire to his resting place inside her.

"That still freaks me out," I tell her once the yellow light has faded.

"Then don't look next time," she says tartly.

It's nice to be outside. I spot a couple of rats scurving along a frosty white vine. Many of the vines in Topaz are frosted over, though some, for whatever reason, have warming veins running through them, to keep them

ice-free. The hooks on the rats' hands and feet are sending little chunks of ice flying down onto the heads of the people beneath. The sight of the mischievous rats – they laugh with glee whenever anyone shouts or shakes an angry fist at them – makes me wonder how Pol is getting on and if he's settled in.

Inez is distracted and keeps glancing around. I've an idea who she's looking for – a certain duke-to-be – but don't say anything. I'm hoping Kurtis wandered outside in his sleep one night and froze to death, and is currently being mistaken for an ice statue by a group of tourists.

“What are you grinning about?” Inez asks.

“Nothing,” I lie innocently.

We keep going until we sight the Lair — the island where we disembarked from the barges. We walk along the bank and find an isolated spot where Inez can release Hugo. We have to enter the tunnels to gain access to the maze. The entrance we used before is guarded, but Hugo knows another entry point nearby.

The young king's in better form out here. He takes deep breaths and comments on how crisp the air tastes, telling us about some of his previous trips to the city. “I'd forgotten how much I enjoy Niffelheim,” he says. “I meant to spend more time in Topaz, but official business kept getting in the way. Maybe when I'm done with the Steppes in the Born...”

He leads us to a deserted part of the city. There are some old buildings which collapsed a long time ago and have been left to rot. Hugo guides us into the ruins, warning us to watch our footing. “The ground's treacherous,” he says. “These were some of the earliest houses to be built in Niffelheim. The area should have been reclaimed long ago, but the royals keep it in this state because of the little-known entrance to the tunnels.”

We come to a crack in the ice and Hugo climbs down into darkness. Inez and I follow him. There are lots of handholds, and although it looks challenging from the top, it's an easy descent. Hugo produces a small torch at the bottom of the chasm and gleam lights our way.

“If these tunnels connected with the tunnels leading to the complex where we’re staying, this entrance would have been sealed up or placed under guard long ago,” Hugo says. “But the Maze of Ash intersects them, making this a self-contained circuit.”

“What about the entrance to the room with the ice skating rink and the crown jewels?” I ask. “Aren’t the royals worried that someone could sneak through the maze and into the palace?”

Hugo shakes his head. “The Maze is like a computer, devised to make a record of everyone who enters it, and to set itself out to them in pre-programmed ways. The path to the palace from here will only reveal itself to someone who’s been guided by a royal of Topaz. Everyone else will be subtly directed away from it by rotating, reconfiguring walls.”

We twist through a few more tunnels before coming to an arched, wooden door frame like the one I saw beneath the palace, with a similar sign carved into it. Upper level of the Maze of Ash . Careful as you go!

I’m almost past the sign when I pause and study the letters. “What language is that written in?” I ask.

“No idea,” Inez says. “It’s Portuguese to me, and I suppose English to you.”

I whistle appreciatively. “The Merge translates writing as well as sounds?”

“Unless the writer doesn’t want their words to be understood by people who don’t speak their original language,” Inez says.

Hugo progresses with confidence, even though it’s been a long time since he last came this way.

“Shouldn’t I be marking the route,” I ask after a few turns, “so that I can find my way back when I’m done?”

“I’ll come for you,” Hugo says. “Let me know how long you want with Winston and I’ll return at an agreed time.”

“I don’t want to bother you too much,” I protest. “Can’t you just mark the turns and leave me to make my own way home?”

Inez laughs. “I’m almost tempted to let him try,” she says to Hugo.

“What?” I snap. “You don’t think I’m smart enough to retrace my path?”

“It’s not a question of smarts,” Hugo says kindly. “Because Sheng showed me the way to the palace, that path will always be open to me, but it wouldn’t remain in place for you if I wasn’t with you, because I’m not a royal of this realm. Even if you marked the corridors as we progressed, you’d wind up lost, as the maze would change shape if you tried to get through it without me.”

“And once you were off Hugo’s path, he wouldn’t be able to find you,” Inez says. “Even though this is only the upper level of the Maze, you’d wander for months, maybe longer, depending on how adept you are at solving puzzles.”

“Shifting mazes,” I say with wonder. “The Merge is such a weird place.”

“You don’t know the half of it,” Hugo laughs. “No matter how much I see, it still regularly surprises me. A Born like you or I can never truly understand the Merge. That’s something only the slain can fully comprehend.”

“But if you want to find out, just give me the nod,” Inez murmurs, producing the hilt of a knife from a sheath strapped to her right boot.

I shoot her a dark look, then move closer to Hugo, not wanting to fall adrift of him and wind up lost in the twisting gloom of Prince Ash’s devious Maze.

11

Winston’s pleased to see Hugo, even though he doesn’t recognise him when he first enters the room disguised as an aura-free Logu, and they spend a

while catching up. We tell him about the first match of the Tourney and he smiles.

“It’s been a long time since my last grop match,” Winston says. “I played when I was younger, but I wasn’t very good. I always enjoyed watching it though.”

“Why don’t you come to a game?” Hugo tempts him. “I could bring a remoulder here to give you a different appearance.”

Winston shakes his head. “Too risky. There’s no point doing anything that might jeopardise our plans.”

They discuss the kidnapping, trying to predict every potential problem that we could run into. Inez asks Winston if he wants to work on her lock, but he says he’ll wait until closer the time.

“I’m superstitious,” he says. “I don’t want to play my hand until we know for certain that we’re going ahead with this.”

“Of course we are,” Hugo frowns. “Nothing can derail us now.”

“Don’t be so sure of that,” Winston says. “Malina might have a change of heart, or Hiroto might be whisked back to the Born for some reason. Maybe you’ll be badly injured in a match, or the SubMerged will get word that something’s up.”

“Don’t be a pessimist,” Hugo grunts.

“It’s not pessimism,” Winston says. “It’s realism. I’m older than you, and I’ve seen more of life than you have. The spheres have a way of shifting abruptly and making fools of careful planners.”

Hugo would like to stay longer but has to go train — because he wasn’t involved in the action yesterday, he won’t be as match fit as the others. Inez goes with him, to smuggle him back into the training quarters.

“I brought a gift,” I tell Winston when we’re alone, and pass him my rucksack, which I earlier emptied of bandages.

“I’ve an idea what this might be,” he smiles, and empties the contents onto the floor of the small room.

“Ice locks,” I confirm. “These are some of the trickiest that I’ve found. I haven’t opened them yet. I thought we could work on them together.”

“I love an eager student,” Winston chuckles, sifting through the locks, dividing them into three piles. He takes a few locks from the first pile and places them behind him. “I’ll work on those in my own time. They’d take too long to open now.”

He taps the third pile and tells me to choose a lock. I randomly select one and he chooses another. “We’ll pick these simultaneously,” he says. “You can watch what I’m doing if you need guidance.”

“And you can watch what I’m doing if I get ahead of you,” I reply cheekily, and Winston laughs.

We chat as we work. I tell Winston more about my run-in with Orlan and Argate, how I’m able to tell where boreholes lead if they connect with a zone that I’ve been to before – Winston assures me that’s not normal, even for a locksmith – and how I crosshaired and zizzed Inez. He finds my abilities fascinating, and asks if I have any idea how I communicated with Inez.

“No,” I tell him. “The others couldn’t understand it. They said it’s impossible to encode detailed information inside a distress signal when you zizz. And I shouldn’t be able to zizz or crosshair anyway, because I’m Born.”

“That’s true,” Winston nods, “but you’re no ordinary Born.”

Something in his tone makes me pause and look up. “Do you know how I did it?”

Winston pulls a face. “I have an idea, but I won’t share my thoughts with you just yet. We’ll talk about it another day, when I’ve had a chance to study you further and reflect.”

“You make me sound like a lab rat,” I scowl.

“Oh, you’re far more interesting than that,” Winston says, and laughs at my sour expression.

I return to the lock, but I’m distracted. I’m getting to a point in the story that I should have come to sooner, but I’ve been stalling, not sure how to broach it.

“I spent a lot of time in Canadu while I was in Cornan,” I say casually.

“That must have been fun,” Winston replies, focused on his lock.

“Ghita arranged for me to visit a room full of inactive boreholes. She thought I might like to practise on the old locks.”

Winston clicks his fingers. “I know the room you’re talking about. I spent many happy hours there on visits to the capital. I trust you learnt a lot?”

“Yes,” I say.

I pick at my lock, but vaguely, keeping an eye on Winston. I want to judge his reaction before I reveal more than I should.

“I found a lock the same as the one in Seven Dials,” I mutter.

“Of course you did,” he chuckles. “I spotted it as well, many moons ago.”

“I had a go at it,” I continue. “I was making headway on the one in London when Orlan and Argate interrupted me, so I figured I’d carry on where I’d left off.”

“I admire your dedication,” Winston says. “You’ll never get ahead if you’re not prepared to work hard. I’m pleased you –”

“I opened it,” I say in a rush.

Winston’s left eyelid twitches, but he gives no other indication that he heard, and carries on fiddling with his lock.

“Winston?” I say after a long silence. “Did you hear me?”

He nods imperceptibly, and I realise his hands are shaking. He looks at me, but isn’t able to maintain eye contact. Instead, he stares at his lock, even though his fingers have stopped manipulating the levers and pins.

“Did you cross when the borehole opened?” he asks hoarsely.

“Yes,” I say. “Inez and Hugo came with me. I didn’t want to go by myself, in case there was something dangerous on the other side.”

“A wise move,” Winston murmurs.

“We wound up somewhere strange,” I say, needing to tell him about the message, but not wanting to reveal too much and break the promise I made to Kojo.

Winston doesn’t reply immediately. He puts the lock aside and studies his hands, as if surprised by the way they’re trembling. Eventually, when I think he’s not going to say anything, he whispers, “The Crypt .”

“You know about it,” I cry, my heart lifting.

He licks his lips. “I never thought... I hoped you could... but in my heart I felt it would prove beyond... Oh, Archie, what a wonder you are,” he sighs, then gets up and bows to me as if I’m the master and he’s the student.

“Stop it,” I grunt, thinking he’s doing it to tease me, but he’s perfectly serious-looking when he sits down again.

“Malina once asked me to investigate a Crypt lock,” Winston says. “That’s the reason I know about it. The knowledge has somehow been lost over the centuries, for reasons nobody –”

“Kojo said it was Old Man Reap,” I stop him, then tell him about the guardian of the Crypt and how the old fella had broken the locks and killed anyone who knew how to open them.

“A guardian,” Winston whistles when I finish. “Malina assumed the Crypt was deserted. She wasn’t even sure the place was real. She’d only heard rumours, passed on by another royal when they were enjoying a few bottles of wine one day. But then she found a lock like the one he’d described. She was sceptical, but asked me if I could get anywhere with it.”

“It’s only supposed to open for Family members,” I tell him.

“She’d gathered that much,” he says, “but thought I might be able to guide her to a point where she could open it. I worked on the lock a long time before I was forced to admit defeat. Malina laughed when I came to her years later and sheepishly said it was beyond me. She couldn’t believe I’d wasted so much time on it. The lock was no big thing to her, but I couldn’t shake the sense that it was important.”

Winston asks me to tell him more about the Crypt and its guardian, so I describe the room and the statues of heads, the narrow moat of blood and the boreholes to the Lost Zone, and the young but ancient boy who’s spent so long there by himself, a good chunk of it in the dark, never sleeping or eating.

“He must be an extraordinary person,” Winston says.

“I’d like to take you to see him,” I say, “but he doesn’t want to admit anyone unless they’re Family. He didn’t even want us to tell any non-royals about it.”

“I understand,” Winston says, then frowns. “Which begs the question, why have you shared the information with me ? I appreciate the confidence, Archie, but you should have kept this to yourself.”

I gulp. “I wouldn’t have said anything if you hadn’t known what the Crypt was, but... Kojo said it had been something like a hundred years since the last message from the Departed. Just before we left, for no real reason, I asked him what they’d said, and he –”

“Stop,” Winston barks. “This isn’t something you should share.”

“I have to,” I say miserably, “because it concerns you. It was about Stefan.”

Winston’s eyes and mouth widen. “They passed on a message about Stefan?” he wheezes. I nod, then arch my eyebrows, asking if he wants me to continue. Winston gulps the way I did a few seconds ago, then weakly motions for me to go on.

“They said, ‘Beware the locksmith called Stefan.’”

Winston stares at me with horror.

“It probably doesn’t matter, given that it was so long ago, before you killed him, but I thought I should –”

Winston wags a finger at me, then puts it to his lips. I’m not sure if he’s asking me to stop talking, or signalling that he’s too shocked to say anything. Either way, we sit there in silence for a long time, Winston dazed and distant as he ponders the message I’ve shared.

Finally he says, “You were right to tell me. Thank you.”

“Why do you think they tried to warn the Families about him?” I ask, relieved to be able to discuss it. “Do you think they knew he was trying to bring back Old Man Reap from the Lost Zone?”

“I can think of no other reason,” Winston says quietly, “but it’s hard to see why they’d break their silence over such a matter. From what you’ve said, the Departed don’t take sides, so why should it bother them if Old Man Reap returned and led the SubMerged to victory? There’s more to this, I suspect.”

He falls silent again, looking troubled.

“It’s not really relevant now, is it?” I say, trying to comfort him. “The message wasn’t passed on, but you ended up killing Stefan anyway, so, you know, all’s well that ends well, right?”

“I suppose,” Winston croaks. He looks at me and starts to say something, then scowls and shakes off his dark thoughts. “The Crypt boreholes have

been closed for too long. We need to reopen them, and the royals must resume their visits, so that a vital message like that one is never overlooked again.”

“I left the borehole in Canadu open,” I tell him, “and Ghita said she’d visit Kojo while we’re here. Inez felt like we should tell Pitina and Farkas too, but Hugo said he wanted to think about it.”

“What’s there to think about?” Winston huffs. “The SubMerged royals have as much right to visit the Crypt as the Merged.”

“But Old Man Reap broke the locks and closed the boreholes,” I remind him, “and he still has followers, like Adil, who might not be too happy if we start undoing his work.”

Winston twitches at the mention of his old foe’s name, then strokes his scars and frowns as he mulls it over.

“It’s not straightforward, is it?” I ask.

“These things rarely are,” he says glumly. “In the end it’s a matter for the royals. But regardless of what Hugo and Ghita think, I’m going to tell Malina. There has to be involvement from the Families of the other realms. We can’t leave something this major in the hands of a young king and a teenage princess, no matter how much we admire them.”

“I’ll show you how to open the lock in Canadu or London,” I say. “Then you can teach Malina how to do it.”

Winston snorts. “I hope it’s that easy, but you might have to guide her yourself. I’m not sure I can match you on this one.”

That throws me. “Surely, if I walk you through it a step at a time...”

“Perhaps,” he says, “but I wouldn’t bet on it. That lock thwarted me in the past and I think it might again.”

“It can’t be that complicated,” I say uneasily.

“It is,” he says.

I lean forward. “Winston,” I whisper, “how come I was able to open it if it’s that challenging and was only supposed to work for a royal?”

“I don’t know,” he says, but I think he’s lying.

“You said in London that you thought I could open it,” I remind him.

“Did I?” he says airily.

“You knew what the lock was,” I press, “and that it should only work for a Family member, but you said –”

“I know what I said,” he snaps. Then he softens. “I had no idea you’d rise to the challenge this swiftly. I thought maybe, after years of hard work, as you learnt from other locks...”

“But even then I shouldn’t have been able to open it,” I say. “I’m not Family. Unless... I know I don’t have an aura, but do you think maybe...?”

“No,” he smiles. “You can’t be a royal without an aura. That’s an absolute.”

“Could someone have masked my aura, the way a deviser masked Hugo’s?” I ask. “Without my knowing about it?”

Winston shakes his head. “If you were an inheritor, your aura would have ignited the moment you set foot in the Merge, that day last year when you crossed spheres after Inez, and she’d have seen it when you caught up with her.”

“Then how did I do it?” I ask again. “And why did you think that I could?”

Winston looks around guiltily. He starts to answer... stops... starts again... stops. In the end he sighs and meets my gaze directly. “Do you trust me, Archie?”

“Of course,” I reply.

“Then I’m going to ask you to bear with me,” he says. “I know that’s frustrating, but there are things I’m still learning about you, talents that you’re revealing as you explore and tap into your abilities. When I have a solid answer, I’ll share it. Until then, will you allow me to be mysterious?”

I roll my eyes. “Do I have a choice?”

“Yes,” he says. “If this is going to drive a wedge between us, I’ll tell you what I suspect. But I honestly don’t feel it’s the right time.”

I think about it some more, then say quietly, “I’ll let it lie if you answer one question now.”

“That sounds like a fair deal,” he says.

“Are you afraid I might turn on you like Stefan did? Is that why you’re being so cagy? Do you trust me?”

He answers without a moment’s hesitation. “Implicitly. I’ve never once doubted you, and I’m sure I never will. So, are you content to wait?”

He arches an eyebrow, and I shrug and say sullenly, “I suppose.”

“Then let’s crack on with these locks,” he says, and we carry on as we were, the mystery reluctantly set aside, to be returned to another day.

12

The first group A game rolls round, Ruby versus Pearl, and the city goes into hyperdrive again. While the level of excitement isn’t quite as high as it was for the Tourney opener, a lot of Topazers support the Rubicons, so interest in the result is intense.

As a member of a backroom team, my stamped pass gets me into every match. I feel bad that I’m taking the place of a true grop fan, but transfers aren’t permitted, so I have nothing to gain by not attending. Besides, I want to see the Rubes in action — I’m hoping they get stuffed.

Most of the players go to the match together, but Cal was feeling guilty for not spending more time with Inez and me, so he's come with us. We told him not to be silly, but he said he wanted to hang out.

The big man is recognised a lot as we make our way through the packed streets. Even though we lost the first match, Cal was widely hailed as one of the best players on the day, and there's talk of him being a possible star of the Tourney. Cal smiles when people shout compliments, and scowls when a few insult him, but never stops to reply.

"What's it like, being famous?" I ask mischievously.

He blushes. "I don't like the attention, Archibald, and that's the truth."

"Well, you won't have to endure it much longer," Inez says. "The Tourney will be over before you know it, then you'll be able to step back into the shadows."

"As much as I love grop, it will be a relief," he huffs. "I worry about Ghita when I'm not there to look out for her."

It takes less time than I anticipated to file into the stadium. Although there are long lines, and everyone has to be vetted by guards, there are lots of entrances, one of which is reserved for players, backroom teams, and nobles.

I'm being patted down for a second time when I feel hands grip my shoulders. "There's something suspicious about this one," the person growls, and I look back anxiously, only to find a grinning, purple-haired woman behind me, with matching purple eyes and freckles.

"Skeen," I snap, brushing her hands away.

"Sorry," Duke Noah's partner laughs. "I saw you and couldn't resist." She raises her arms and continues speaking as she's patted down. "I hope you aren't too angry about what happened at the soirée."

“Angry because you tricked me into being interrogated?” I reply hotly. “Of course I am. If Malina hadn’t turned up –”

“– nothing would have happened,” Skeen says calmly, getting the all-clear and gliding past the guard. “Noah merely wanted to chat with you in private, and didn’t think you’d come if he asked, so he sent me to tempt you away from the crowd.” She turns to Cal. “You didn’t deserve to be on the losing team in the first match. Our captain’s extremely concerned about how to deal with you if our paths cross later in the Tourney.”

I thought Cal couldn’t blush any deeper, but I was wrong. He goes a bright red and mumbles something incoherent.

“Oh, for mercy’s sake,” Inez tuts. “Why do men turn into drooling fools every time a pretty woman pays them a compliment?”

“I don’t know,” Skeen says, “but I’ve used it to my advantage many times. You could too if you looked a bit older. Have you thought about spending a few years in the Born? You’d return a striking young woman.”

Inez sniffs. “I couldn’t care less about things like that.”

“No?” Skeen’s eyes sparkle. “It’s odd. Kurtis says the same thing whenever I say that he could be a very handsome man. How modest you both are.”

Inez had been giving Skeen the cold shoulder, but now she cracks. “How is he?” she asks, smiling weakly. “I haven’t heard from him since the soirée.”

“Noah’s working him hard,” Skeen sighs as we move on for our next search. “It’s been one meeting after another, barely time to draw breath. They’re even missing the start of today’s match, though they hope to join me for the second half. Perhaps you’d like to stand in my section, so that you can spend some time with Kurtis?”

Inez starts to respond eagerly. Then she spots my glowering expression and stops. “Thanks, but I’m with friends.”

“Cal and Archie could come too,” Skeen says.

“Stand with the Rubes?” I laugh harshly.

“Never,” Cal growls.

“There’ll be supporters from all the realms, as in most sections of the stadium,” Skeen says, taking no notice of my use of the insulting term for the Rubicons.

But Inez is already shaking her head. “I’d like to see Kurtis, but I came here to watch the match with Cal and Archie, and they’ll be happier in our assigned section.”

“I understand,” Skeen says. “I’ll tell Kurtis, and do my best to convince Noah to let him off the leash.” She stops for another search – it’s the final one – then swivels as Inez is being checked, and reaches up to touch her cheek. “You seem like a sweet girl. I hope it works out for you and Kurtis.”

Inez isn’t sure how to reply, and mutters something every bit as senseless as what Cal said a while ago.

“She could charm a mother and father into letting a rattlesnake nurse their baby,” I snarl as Skeen walks away.

“Don’t be mean,” Inez says. “I think she’s nice.”

“ I think she’s dangerous,” I counter, but Inez either doesn’t hear or doesn’t want to acknowledge what I said, and moves on swiftly.

Cal leans down to whisper in my ear. “One of the things I’ve learnt over the years is that ladies tend to stick up for each other. If you insult one, you insult them all. Worth bearing in mind as you move forward in life, Archibald.”

“But she’s from Ruby,” I complain. “She’s Duke Noah’s partner. She probably is dangerous.”

“Most likely,” Cal says. “And Inez knows that. But it’s a blood-is-thicker-than-water kind of thing.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” I huff.

“I agree,” Cal says, “but most of what women say and think doesn’t make much sense to me.”

I laugh, then shove past the people around us and hurry after Inez, who’s heading away at speed to find a good viewing point.

We settle in an area where most of the supporters are cheering for Pearl, but there are plenty of Rubicons too. There are no clashes between the rivals. They sing with good cheer, and tease each other in a fun way. I expected more tension – Pearl was the first realm that Old Man Reap invaded all those centuries ago – but old rivalries seem to have been left at the gates.

The gropsters take to the field, to huge applause. The Rubicons look menacing in their red outfits, with the clenched fists stitched into the fabric of their chests, while the Pearlies look vulnerable in their plain white costumes. But appearances can be deceptive. The Pearlies start brightly and aggressively, and take the first three points of the match.

“I thought Pearl were meant to be underdogs,” I shout to Cal as the players are celebrating their third score. “Didn’t you say their best players were too old?”

“That’s what I’d heard,” Cal says.

“The rumours don’t appear to be true,” I chortle.

“Maybe the Pearlies started them to outfox their opponents,” Inez says.

Cal strokes his ginger moustache thoughtfully. “Perhaps,” he purrs, “but there’s a long way to go. Let’s see how they hold up as legs tire and the pressure mounts.”

Ruby score their first point of the match, to jeering from the Pearl fans, then the Pearlies score three more points without reply.

“Six-one,” I hoot. “It’s going to be a massacre.”

“I hope not,” Cal sighs. “It’s never much fun when two sides are mismatched. I want Pearl to win, but only after a battle.”

“I don’t know about that,” I laugh. “The Rubicons getting hammered thirty points to one would be fine by me.”

Of course that’s a hopeless dream, and the Rubes start asserting their authority as the half wears on. They hit the Pearlies hard, focusing on the players more than the ball, happy to make little progress or even concede ground as long as they break a few bones in the process.

Two of the Rubicons are especially vicious, kicking and punching whenever they get a chance, throwing elbows wildly, headbutting, breaking fingers and crushing toes. Grop isn’t a game for the faint-hearted, but this takes things to an eye-watering extreme, and the crowd turns on them, booing their every lunge and gouge.

“He can’t do that, can he?” I shriek as one of the villains rips off a condor’s left ear and throws it to the ground with a delighted howl.

“It’s disgusting,” Inez shouts.

“Reprehensible,” Cal agrees, “but legal. She was in a position to receive the grop if it had been passed to her, so she was fair game.”

“But her ear,” I protest.

Cal shrugs. “It can be reattached, or with help she can grow a new one.”

The ear-severing Rubes are called Trevor and Tommy, but somebody brands them the Red Devils, and the nickname soon rings out around the stadium. Some hail them as heroes, but most – including a good few Ruby fans – cry foul every time they execute a particularly brutal move.

The tide turns, and although Pearl stay ahead, the score is just fifteen to fourteen at half-time. The Pearlies limp off to loving applause, while the Rubicons stride to the sidelines with contented sneers, happy with how they’ve forced their way back into the game.

I go to fetch hotcats for us. Inez and Cal are having an in-depth debate when I return, and don't even thank me as I pass them their snacks.

"The Pearlies need to change their tactics," Inez says, taking a bite out of her cat. "You have to fight fire with fire."

"It's not easy when players are as ruthless as Trevor and Tommy," Cal disagrees. "If I was the captain, I'd tell my team to carry on as they started, take the blows without complaint, and calmly play their way to victory. If they let this turn into an ill-tempered scrap, the Rubes will come out on top."

"No," Inez says. "They have to give as good as they get, crack skulls the way the Red Devils are cracking them, force their captain to call off his hounds."

They keep on in that manner for the rest of the break while I munch silently on my hotcat, not knowing enough about the sport to voice a valid opinion.

It seems, when the teams take to the pitch again, that the Pearl captain shares Inez's view, because they target the Rubicons from the off, tugging on ears, biting at ankles (literally), ripping at faces, slowing the action until it becomes almost a wrestling match in the middle of the field.

"No good," Cal mutters as the Pearlies score to go twenty-seventeen up.

"They've extended their lead," Inez smirks.

"But they're exhausting themselves," Cal says. "They won't have anything left for the final quarter. The Rubes will grind them down."

It's as if Cal's psychic, because although the Pearlies score the next point, the Rubicons then score four times without reply, to level the match. They score the next as well, to take the lead for the first time.

The Pearl supporters are in shock, and their cheers abate, until all I can hear are the roars of the ecstatic Rubes. The gropsters in white are stunned too, and a few now look like the over-the-hill players of rumour, while several

are stretchered from the pitch and don't return. They go down twenty-six to twenty-two, score from a break to threaten a rally, but then concede another four times in quick succession, to crash out by thirty points to twenty-three.

The Rubicons hug each other and whoop with joy. A lot of them try to slap Trevor and Tommy on the back, but the Red Devils storm from the pitch, not interested in praise, looking as if they're already thinking only of the next match and the legs and arms that they plan to break.

"Diamond are next up," Cal notes gloomily. "The Devils will eat them alive."

"They should never have been allowed to get away with all that," I pout. "It was thuggery."

"Cynical, certainly," Cal says, "but it worked, and that's all that matters. History only remembers the winners, not the way they won."

"Do you think Ruby are serious contenders?" Inez asks.

"Based on that second-half performance, yes," Cal says. "Not just because of the Red Devils. They have skilful players as well, who capitalised on the chaos. With Trevor and Tommy disrupting play, and the others quietly picking up points..."

"It's a good job we didn't stand with Skeen and Kurtis," I sniff. "I bet the smug dukeling's unbearable right now."

"He'll crow a lot tonight," Inez agrees, "but so would I in his position. They won their first game, which is more than we can say."

"At least we lost fairly," I growl.

"Ruby won fairly," Cal insists. "We have to acknowledge that, Archibald, or we'll look like sore losers."

"I suppose," I grumble. "I just hate thinking of their fans tonight, singing and cheering, rubbing our faces in it."

“Let’s look on the positive side,” Inez says as we file out with the rest of the crowd. “If we keep losing and they keep winning, we won’t have to play them.”

“I’ll never look at it that way,” Cal says, offended by the suggestion. “I want to win our next match all the more now, so that we can line up against them and prove that bullying will only get you so far and no further.”

“And if they beat us?” Inez presses.

Cal shrugs. “Then we’ll accept that they were our superiors on this occasion, and nobble them next time.” He slips a boa-thick arm around each of us and squeezes tightly until I fear my eyes are going to pop. “There’s always a next time, in grop, as in life. Never forget, second chances are what the Merge was made for.”

13

There’s a lot of talk the next day of adjusting our style of play and getting more physical.

“There’s no point trying to play with finesse if our opponents break every bone in our players’ legs,” Baba Jen says.

“The Topazers tried breaking all the bones in my leg,” Olivia growls in reply. Our captain has thankfully made a full recovery, although we’ve kept that a secret, letting everyone think she might be out for the rest of the Tourney. “And OK, maybe my injury was the reason they won, but I wouldn’t have approached the match any other way, even with hindsight. We have to play our own game, not try to beat the Rubicons at theirs.”

“We might not even have to play against Ruby,” Velvet points out.

“Even if we don’t,” Baba Jen says, “others will copy them now they’ve seen that brute force works. It wouldn’t surprise me if the Emeralds are choosing a pair of animals to savage our best players.”

“Let them,” Olivia says. “While they’re trying to smash us, we’ll zip up the other end and score.”

“Maybe we can use this to our advantage,” Hugo murmurs.

“What do you mean?” Olivia asks.

“Elizabeth and I didn’t play in the first match,” he says. “Nobody knows why we were kept under wraps. What if we leak misinformation that we’re a version of the Red Devils?”

“Logu’s onto something,” Elizabeth says, her eyes lighting up. “Baba Jen could let her tongue slip when she’s out and about with her friends from Ruby –”

“Hey!” Baba Jen barks. “I don’t give away our secrets.”

“But you could pretend to,” Olivia says, nodding thoughtfully.

“You could sneer at all the talk of Red Devils,” Elizabeth continues. “Boast to your friends that Trevor and Tommy are nothing compared to Logu and me.”

“You’d have to be careful not to make it seem too obvious,” Hugo says.

“Please,” Baba Jen sniffs. “I’m an actress. So I get them to believe that you make the Devils look like a pair of monks. Then what?”

“They’ll tell the Emeralds,” Hugo grins, “because they surely see us as more of a threat and would prefer it if we lost. That insider info will put the wind up the Emeralds, so instead of training to deal with the known threats that we present...”

“...they start training to cope with a couple of imaginary pit bulls,” Olivia hoots. She likes it, so Baba Jen slips away to have several friendly drinks with her contacts in the Ruby camp.

The next few days fly by and match day comes around almost before I’m ready. Originally I thought that three days was a long time between games,

but now it feels nowhere near long enough. I've no idea how the players can face another gruelling encounter just six days after their last outing, but the gropsters are made of tougher stuff than me, and they sail into the coming storm without complaint.

Olivia leads out the team, and the groans of the Emerald fans are music to our ears — they'd hoped their players wouldn't have to face her.

We get off to a shaky start. This is Emerald's first match, so they're fresher than us and race around as if powered by high-voltage batteries. Fortunately our coaches planned for this, so the players don't panic, confident that the game will settle into a more natural pattern after a while.

We go six-two down, then nine-four, before scoring four times in a row to draw within a point of the Emeralds. Our coaches hold hushed discussions, but within earshot of known spies, about whether it's time to introduce Logu and Elizabeth. Word swiftly spreads to the gropsters that the Lethal Leopards (as Baba Jen named them) are being considered, and the players in green start looking nervous.

We concede the next two points, then score three times to draw level. An Emerald blocker makes an unlikely break with the grop during the next play, lurches up the pitch, throws wildly at the whorl just before being tackled, and the grop somehow carries and shatters against its target. Even the Sapphirites applaud that one, and those around me agree that it will go down as one of the more memorable points of the Tourney.

The Emeralds are thrilled, but it doesn't last, as for the second time in the match we score four points without reply, to go in fifteen-twelve at the break.

Our players are in high spirits. Some are still analysing the freak point scored by the blocker, laughing about it, saying he'll be a hero in his realm regardless of the match's outcome.

I notice some of the gargoyles on the columns around the pitch being removed, to be replaced with others, and ask Arlo what's going on.

“They’re for the more impatient fans, who don’t want to wait until the end,” he explains. “They’ll be sent to a few select cities and towns, where eager crowds will listen to the first-half commentary while the second half is playing out.”

Julia Vox’s voice booms round the stadium and play recommences. The second half turns out to be a damp squib. The Emeralds suffer a couple of injuries early on and we tear ahead, going up twenty points to sixteen, then twenty-three to eighteen, then twenty-seven to twenty.

Our coaches leave Hugo and Elizabeth in hiding, since there’s no need to play them, and this way they’ll remain a mystery going into the next game.

The Emeralds are almost relieved when Velvet scores the final point to confirm a thirty to twenty-one victory. It’s not the glorious opener they were dreaming about, and next they have to face Topaz, the team who beat us, and who’ll have had a long rest going into the match. It’s not looking good for the men and women in green.

But that’s their problem, and we retire victorious, second place in the group all but assured, which will give us an advantage going into the next round, as it means we’ll be playing the bottom-placed team from group A. Things are looking up, and after the dejection of the first match, there’s a real sense among the Sapphirites that the Tourney could yet be ours.

Since there’s a lengthy break until our next match – there are still two games to be played in group A, along with the last one in our group – the players are given a couple of days off to recover. They’re warned by the coaches not to go crazy, but I don’t think they need any warnings. They’ve tasted defeat already in this Tourney, and they’re not in a hurry to taste it again.

Inez is still waiting to hear from Kurtis, and stays in the complex in case he pops by. Even though there’s no love lost between me and the dukeling, I hate seeing her like this, and I hope he gets permission from his uncle to swing by to visit her.

I spend the first day of furlough with Winston, working on locks and giving him a rundown of the most recent match.

“Maybe I could bring you a gargoyle from the stadium,” I joke, “so that you could listen to the full commentary.”

“No need,” Winston chuckles. “I like the way you describe the games.”

Kurtis still hasn’t turned up, so I spend the next day with Inez. I try convincing her to explore the city with me, but she won’t budge, so we stay in the team quarters and do our best to amuse ourselves. Most of the players are absent, and those who’ve stayed – Cal and Hugo among them – are working out and training.

We chill in the Shackleton suite for much of the morning, then head to the hot tub for a long soak. Inez is in the middle of complaining about Kurtis – I bite my tongue as best I can – when someone coughs to announce their presence. We look up to find the ice-bearded Seamus standing close by.

“Hi,” I smile. “Long time no see.”

“My duties have taken me elsewhere,” the guard says, “but I’m back for the next few days.” He’s looking at us oddly.

“Is everything alright?” Inez asks.

“Yes,” Seamus says, then starts mumbling. “When we first met... I didn’t wish to be rude... I thought you were just a camel and a locksmith... I didn’t know...”

“Know what?” Inez frowns.

“That you were... more ,” Seamus finishes weakly.

Inez and I share a confused glance.

“What are you talking about?” I ask.

The guard grimaces. “It doesn’t matter. I just wanted to say, if I was curt with you, I’m sorry.”

Inez scratches her shoulder, genuinely bewildered.

“Do you want to join us in the tub?” I ask, saying the first thing that comes to mind.

That brings a laugh from the burly guard. “I’d be sacked if I was caught using the facilities. Thank you, but no. In fact I’ve come to ask you to cut short your soak. A visitor has asked if you could join him at your earliest convenience. He said there was no rush, but –”

“I know who this is,” Inez hoots, punching the water with delight.

I’m pretty sure I know too – it can only be the dukeling – and I sigh. “You go,” I tell her, lying back to stare at the sky. “I don’t want to get in the way.”

“Actually, he asked me to fetch both of you,” Seamus says.

I frown at Inez. “Why would he want to see me?”

“Maybe to apologise for ambushing you at the soirée,” she says, hopping out of the tub.

We get dressed and follow Seamus to a room we haven’t visited before. “This is a meeting room,” Seamus says as we draw close, “a place for players or coaches to entertain guests in a more formal setting.” He stops at the door and knocks. It’s opened by a familiar but unexpected face.

“Cindy?” Inez and I say at the same time.

“What are you doing here?” I ask.

“How do you know Kurtis?” Inez asks.

“Who?” Cindy replies, and as we stare at her, she thanks Seamus for escorting us and ushers us inside. “You guys have to keep this to yourselves. Everyone will find out tomorrow, but they want to keep it quiet

for now. He's tired from his journey and needs to rest, but he insisted on coming to see you. We're so thrilled that he came. It's... it's... beyond!"

"What are you talking about?" I ask as Cindy closes the door.

"Who's come to see us?" Inez snaps, upset that it's not Kurtis.

"A friend who owes you a debt he can never repay," someone says in a trembling voice from further within the room.

Cindy steps aside and our guests – there are two of them – are revealed. One's a prim-looking woman with her hair pinned up, dressed in plain, dark clothes. The other's an elderly black man, bald on top but with white frizzy hair at the sides of his head, wearing a business suit. The last time we saw him was in New York, as he was about to embark on a new – and almost certainly the final – phase of his life, and he's the last person I expected to run into here.

"King Lloyd?" I exclaim, as Inez gawps.

"The one and only," the frail king smiles. Then his eyes widen with fake surprise and he says, "Is something the matter, my friends? You look surprised to see me..."

14

"What are you doing here?" I cry when I've recovered from my initial shock. "No one was expecting you. Have you returned to the Merge for good? Are you going back to Diamond?"

"Archie," Inez says, patting my shoulder to calm me. When I stop babbling, she turns to King Lloyd and makes the greet. He stares at her solemnly, then snorts.

"Let's have none of that nonsense," he says. "I want a hug." He pulls us in close and squeezes as hard as he can, which isn't very hard at all.

"You've been in New York too long," Nora, his aide, tuts behind him.

“Hugging’s nicer than the greet,” King Lloyd says. “I put up with the greet for a long time, because it was expected, but at this stage of the game...” He coughs and releases us.

“Do you want a hug too?” I ask Nora innocently.

“Come near me and I’ll clout your ear, boy,” she growls, fighting to hide a smirk. She solemnly makes the greet, then gives in and smiles. “Your faces when you caught sight of us,” she chuckles, taking King Lloyd by an arm and leading him gently to a nearby chair. There are chairs for the rest of us as well.

The king’s beaming and drumming his fingers on his knees. “It’s good to see you again, Archibald and Inez. I forget a lot these days – more than I realise, probably – but thankfully I’ve held on to my memories of you. That day in my palace, when you stopped the noises and rescued me from hell...” Tears well in his eyes and I turn my head aside.

“No need to look away,” King Lloyd says, reaching over to let his fingers dance across my left knee. “These are tears of happiness, not madness. The madness is still there, but it’s not as bad as it was, is it, Nora?”

“No, my lord,” Nora says. “Some days you could even pass for half-normal.”

King Lloyd scowls. “Of all my subjects, why did she have to be the one that ended up looking after me?” he complains to Inez.

“There weren’t many left in the end,” Inez says with a straight face. “I guess she was the best of a bad lot.”

Nora laughs out loud, then covers her mouth with a hand, looking contrite.

“I hope I seem half-normal tomorrow,” King Lloyd says, his smile slipping. “I have good days and bad days. I’m keeping my fingers crossed that tomorrow will be one of the good ones.”

“It will,” Nora says kindly. “And if not, nobody will care. They’ll be so happy to see you that they won’t mind if you drop your trousers and drool.”

“I’m not so sure of that,” King Lloyd mutters. “Not so sure.”

The king looks away and starts mumbling something. Nora looks at us and sighs. “I’m keeping my fingers crossed too,” she whispers.

“Is he often like this?” Inez asks, staring sadly at the distracted king.

“Yes,” Nora says, “but rarely for long periods. He’ll snap back to his senses in a matter of minutes.”

“Snap!” King Lloyd shouts with excitement. “Snap! Snap! Is it time for checkers with the crocodile?”

“No, my lord,” Nora says, then catches my pitying expression. “That’s not part of the madness. He really does play checkers – you call it draughts in England, I believe – with a crocodile.”

As I stare at Nora, wondering if the king’s madness might be infectious, his focus steadies. “I didn’t want to miss the Tourney,” he says, in answer to the first question that I asked, “but I didn’t feel that I could come, as I was sure my legs and brain weren’t up to it. But Nora kept nagging me, and in the end I relented, and I must admit, I think she was right. I feel years younger, the best I’ve felt in a long time, except on Tuesdays. Will I be back for Tuesday? The crocodile...”

“We’ll be back,” Nora says. “We timed our visit so you wouldn’t miss your lunch date.”

“Excellent,” the king says. “Tuesdays are the best. I never thought I’d end up playing checkers with –”

Nora clears her throat to interrupt him. “Your promise, my lord, not to mention certain matters.”

“Oh.” King Lloyd reddens. “Mustn’t tell. They’re tetchy about such things. They shouldn’t be – we’re all friends – but I promised, and I’m not about to

start breaking promises.”

King Lloyd’s attention wanders again, but only momentarily, and he resumes speaking. “The more I tried not to think about the Tourney, the more my thoughts spun towards it. I told everyone to leave Diamond. They’re crazier than me if they stay until I die. But some won’t move on. They’re determined to hang in until the bitter end. When I heard that they’d mustered a team to compete, how could I not come to support them?”

“He kept talking about it,” Nora says. “I’d tell him that if it meant that much to him, he should come, but he resisted until a few days ago.”

“I was swayed by the reports of the first two matches,” King Lloyd cackles. “I’d been avoiding the gargoyles – not too fond of them since what happened back in the palace – but I finally listened to the commentary for the opening games. As soon as I heard Julia Vox announcing the squads, I knew I had to attend. Although it’s not too late to change my mind. Maybe I’ll have a quiet word with the captain tonight, then slip away in the morning. I might prove a distraction for the team.”

“Never,” Inez says. “You’ll inspire them to try even harder. Who knows, maybe they’ll be inspired so much that they’ll go out and beat Ruby.”

King Lloyd almost doubles over with laughter. “Beat Ruby!” he howls. “And they say that I’m the mad one!”

Inez laughs, and we discuss the Tourney and how the matches have been going. I tell the king about the Red Devils, how some of our players are scared of coming up against them, while others are longing to be paired against the Rubicons so that they can teach the crimson menaces a lesson.

In the middle of our discussions, the door to the meeting room opens, and Seamus leads in another guest. This time it’s Cal. The huge man is smiling awkwardly when he enters, wondering who could have summoned him. When he spots Nora and King Lloyd, his eyes almost double in size.

“My king,” he gasps, sinking to his knees and lowering his head.

“None of that, Master Riser,” King Lloyd says, getting up to stagger forward and embrace Cal. “We’re equals here. If anything, I’m your inferior, since I hear you’re shaping up to be a star of the Tourney.”

Cal looks up and he’s weeping. “I never thought I’d see you again.”

“If you don’t stop crying, you’ll make me wish that I’d stayed in the Born,” King Lloyd replies.

“I’m sorry.” Cal wipes the tears away, only for fresh tears to fill his eyes again. “I can’t stop.”

“That’s fine,” the king says softly, then claps Cal’s back. “It’s a good job he’s not this soft on the grop pitch.”

Cal laughs at that and the tears stop. He lets the king help him to his feet and lead him to a chair, though he refuses to sit until King Lloyd has sat down first.

“Archibald and Inez have been telling me about the matches,” the king says. “I wish I’d come earlier, to catch the first few games.”

“It’s been a strong start,” Cal nods. “Not the most recent match – Emerald were weaker than expected – but the first two games were corkers. It’s anyone’s Tourney, except for Emerald if they can’t raise their game, and...”

He coughs and blushes.

“...Diamond, of course,” King Lloyd winces. “Are the brave volunteers going to be torn apart, Cal?”

“I can’t see any other outcome,” Cal says gloomily. “They don’t even have a full squad. If I’d known they were going to send a team, I’d have offered my services.”

“No,” King Lloyd says. “You’re a Sapphirite now. It would have been wrong of you to turn out for us.”

“Perhaps,” Cal says, then looks up with a firm expression. “But you’ll always be my king.”

“You make a tired and confused old man feel very loved,” King Lloyd whispers, then lays a hand on Cal’s knee, the way he laid it on mine earlier. But his fingers are steady this time, and instead of drumming on the big man’s knee, they squeeze, to show how much Cal’s support means to him. And this time the rest of us are the ones blinking away tears.

15

Cal and King Lloyd get into an in-depth grop discussion, so we move away to leave them to it. Nora’s smiling as she observes the old man’s animated expression. “It’s been a long time since he was so himself,” she says. “He’s usually in good form on Tuesdays, but even then his attention strays.”

“Why are Tuesdays so important?” I ask.

Nora hesitates, then says carefully, “He’s friendly with a boy in New York. They both love checkers, so they meet each Tuesday in various spots around the city and engage in combat.”

“What about the crocodile?” I smile.

Nora chuckles. “The boy loves dressing up.”

That sparks a memory and I start to react. Before I can say anything, Inez grips my right calf – unseen by Nora – and pinches so hard that I choke on a yelp.

“How are you , Nora?” Inez asks. “What’s it like, living in the Born?”

“Difficult,” Nora says. “I’d be happier in Diamond, but my loyalty lies with King Lloyd, and that’s where he wants to be, so I don’t complain.”

“Does he still intend to stay there until he dies?” Inez asks.

“Yes,” Nora sighs. “He loves wandering the streets, looking at the skyscrapers.”

“And going to the theatre?” I ask, rubbing the back of my calf and shooting Inez evils.

“Not so much,” Nora says. “He finds it hard to concentrate. Occasionally we go, but sometimes we leave even before the interval.”

“How long will you stay in Topaz?” Inez asks.

“Not long,” Nora says. “We’ll hang around after the match tomorrow, as lots of people will want to pay their regards, then depart the following morning.”

“You won’t get to see much of the city,” Inez notes.

“No,” Nora says. “We’re staying in the palace – Malina’s a good friend of the king’s, so we were able to cross using a borehole to her quarters – and we won’t be straying far from there. But he was eager to thank you again, so Cindy and Seamus guided us here through the tunnels.”

“There’s no need for thanks,” I mutter. “We were glad to help.”

The king calls us back to rejoin the conversation, which has moved on. He wants to know if we’ve been to Diamond since he last saw us, and is disappointed that we haven’t.

“I’m looking forward to having a chat with the players,” he says. “I want to know if anything’s changed, if life’s still pleasant there, if there’s anything I can say to convince them to leave before the realm falls.”

“You mustn’t be hard on them,” Nora says sternly. “They’ve made their choice. Don’t try to make them feel guilty.”

“I won’t,” the king says sadly. “I just hate to see them throw their lives away.”

“Maybe they won’t,” Inez says. “An inheritor might yet be found. If that happens, the ones who didn’t desert will be hailed as heroes by the others when they return.”

“How likely is that?” King Lloyd asks.

Inez shrugs. “How likely was it that an amateur locksmith would wind up in your palace and save you from all-out madness?”

King Lloyd blinks. “You’re a very straightforward young girl.”

“I’m not that young,” Inez grins.

He smiles. “You’re right — strange things do sometimes happen. I’ll be delighted if an inheritor’s found, and in my crazier moments I believe that’s already happened, but the realist in me...”

The king lapses into a sad silence. To nudge him out of it, I ask if he’s gone on any plane trips since he’s been in the Born.

“No,” he says, brightening up, “but I’ve been in a helicopter a few times. They’re incredible. Have you been in one, Archibald? The way they can hover... exquisite!”

King Lloyd remains in a good mood as we talk about flight, New York, and grop again. Cal sits there, beaming throughout, but also looking slightly worried, as if he’s afraid this is a dream and he’s going to wake any second to discover it was all in his imagination.

When the king starts to tire, Nora asks Cindy if they can leave. She summons Seamus, and the guard carefully helps King Lloyd to his feet.

“That’s a fine beard,” the king notes.

“Thank you, sire,” Seamus says, inclining his head respectfully.

“Does it itch?” he asks.

“Only on snowy days,” Seamus smiles, leading the king away, ready to steady him swiftly if he stumbles.

“What’s your name?” King Lloyd asks.

“Seamus,” the guard replies.

“Are you any good at crocodiles?” Seamus looks startled, but the king corrects himself. “Checkers. I meant are you any good at checkers?”

“I prefer chess, sire,” Seamus says, “but I play the odd game of checkers as well.”

“You must pop by if you’re ever in New York on a Tuesday,” King Lloyd says. “My game’s not so good. The crocodile would appreciate a fresh opponent.”

“I’ll bear that in mind, sire,” Seamus says, as if playing checkers with a crocodile was the most natural thing in the spheres.

Nora rolls her eyes at us, then smiles. “It was nice to see you. We probably won’t get a chance to say goodbye tomorrow as we’ll be in the royal box and all the Family members and nobles will insist on meeting him afterwards. It’ll be a tiring day.”

“Don’t worry,” Inez says. “We’re honoured that you came to see us.”

“Truly honoured,” Cal adds, and he looks like he might start crying again.

“Yes,” I murmur dumbly, unable to think of anything more artful.

Nora steps out after Cindy. Cal sighs as the door closes, and withdraws to a corner to brood. Inez and I stay seated, giving him time to compose himself.

“The boy in the crocodile costume,” I whisper. “We saw a boy like that when we were in New York with King Lloyd last year, after we left him in Times Square.”

“I haven’t forgotten,” Inez says. “The young SubMerged prince. His protectors knew who I was and gave chase, hoping to kill me.”

“Do you think that prince is the king’s crocodile ?” I ask.

“Quite likely,” Inez says. “The Born’s a small place and the Merged tend to bump into one another when they stay there.”

“But would the SubMerged guards want their prince mixing with a Merged king?” I frown.

“Most royals are respected by us, even if they’re of a different alignment,” Inez says. “I don’t think his guardians would mind if he spent some time with an addle-headed old king. Of course, it might not be the prince at all, but based on the way Nora shushed him...”

“Why keep it secret?” I ask. “And why stop me asking questions? I thought you were going to rip through my calf when I tried to mention it.”

“If the boy is the prince, his guardians won’t want people knowing he’s in New York,” Inez says. “The SubMerged often think the worst about us, since they’re so devious themselves. If they knew that word had spread, they’d move him to another city.”

“So you didn’t want to put Nora in a position where she’d have to lie to us,” I nod, seeing now why Inez prodded me to shut my mouth.

“You’re slow, Archie,” Inez says drily, “but you get there in the end.” She laughs when I scowl at her. “Come on, let’s grab Cal and go. I don’t want to be absent too long, in case anyone else comes calling.”

“Like who?” I ask with venomous sweetness.

Inez winks. “You’re slow, Archie,” she says again, “but not that slow.”

I chuckle, then we head across the room to find out if Cal’s tears have dried.

FOUR — THE SLIDES

16

I can barely stop smiling the next day as we make our way to the stadium for the Ruby versus Diamond match, thinking about the impact King Lloyd is going to make when he turns up.

Cal has gone with the team this time, so that they can study and analyse the Rubes in the company of their coaches, in case they meet in a later round. Inez and I travel with Arlo and a few others.

There isn't as much of a buzz around the stadium. It's still a packed house, but a lot of the spectators are people who weren't able to get tickets to the more mouth-watering encounters, or those with only a passing interest in the game who merely wanted to catch a match to sample the Tourney. There aren't surging crowds outside, eager to be the first to hear what's happening. Nowhere near as many stalls.

“The atmosphere's a bit dead, isn't it?” I note.

“Everyone expects a walkover,” Arlo says. “The Diamonds are pretty much nailed on to get hammered.”

“Have they really no hope?” I ask.

Arlo shrugs. “I guess there's always hope, but it would take a miracle to even keep the scores close.”

We pass through the checkpoints and find a spot in our section of the stadium. We've come early, so we manage to get up near the front, with a clear view of the royal box.

We're testing hotcats – we gathered a selection from different vendors, to see how they compare – and chatting about nothing important when

someone clears their throat and says, “Would it be rude if I asked for a bite?”

We turn and spot a beaming Kurtis, accompanied by a girl with light red hair, and a tall boy, who were with him in Cornan when our paths first crossed. I’m trying to recall their names when Kurtis says, “Do you remember Poppy and Dai?”

“All too well,” Inez says, her eyes narrowing. “You weren’t very pleasant to us.”

“Sorry about that,” Dai says with a chuckle.

“We were horrible, weren’t we?” Poppy simpers.

“We’d have been nicer if we’d known you were going to become friendly with Kurtis,” Dai says, as if that excuses their behaviour.

“You were using a false name before,” Kurtis says to Inez, “so let me introduce you properly. Dai and Poppy, this is Archibald and Inez.”

“Archie,” I growl, knowing the duke elect knows that I don’t like to be called by my full name, except by a select few people like Cal and King Lloyd.

Inez makes the greet and introduces the rest of our friends. They’re not keen on the newcomers and withdraw slightly to separate themselves from us.

“I thought grop was supposed to bring the citizens of the realms together,” Poppy says with a thin smile.

“They’ll share the same air as you,” I retort. “What more do you want?”

Poppy glowers and Dai takes a menacing step forward. Kurtis stops him with a tut. “Do we have to go through this posturing again? Let’s act as if we can get along like rational people.”

Inez smiles. “You’ve become more diplomatic since Sapphire.”

“My uncle’s ways are rubbing off on me,” Kurtis says.

“It’s only taken a couple of hundred years,” I sniff.

Kurtis’ nostrils flare, but Inez stops him before he can retort.

“Archie has a point,” she says jokingly. “You’ve been a duke elect for an awful long time. It makes one wonder if you’re a bit on the slow side...”

Poppy hisses and Dai’s hands bunch into fists. Kurtis starts to redden with anger, then catches himself and laughs. “I walked into that one,” he says.

“He hasn’t been a duke elect all that time,” Poppy snarls.

“His uncle only named him as his heir forty years ago,” Dai adds.

“Only forty years,” I purr, keen to stir them up some more, but Kurtis doesn’t rise to the bait.

“I’m in no rush to complete my studies,” he says calmly. “As I told you before, I’ll probably have to kill Noah when I’m ready to replace him, and I don’t want to do that any time soon. I owe everything to him.”

“If you owe him so much, why kill him?” I ask.

All three of the SubMerged teenagers laugh at me.

“Is he really that stupid?” Poppy sneers.

“He knows nothing of our ways,” Dai snorts.

“There’s no reason why he should,” Kurtis says with fake kindness. “He’s not one of us.” He leans over and pats my arm as if comforting an infant. “My uncle will fill with pride on the day that I knife him in the back. Someone will do it to him sooner or later, and he wants it to be me, so that I can carry on in his name. If I ever adopt an heir, I’ll want the same thing from him or her.”

“Adopt me ,” I growl. “I’ll grant your wish sooner than you’d think possible.”

Kurtis shakes his head, then faces Inez. “Sorry I couldn’t meet up with you any sooner. Noah’s been running me ragged. I finally managed to wrangle some time off, thanks to Skeen, so if you’re agreeable, we’d like to watch the match with you, then head on together afterwards to see the sights, if you haven’t any other plans.”

“We’re busy after,” I snap.

“No we’re not,” Inez contradicts me. “And yes, we’d love to watch the game with you. At least I would. Archie?” She raises an eyebrow.

“You can come with us to our terrace if Archibald would prefer to be by himself,” Kurtis says.

“No,” I say quickly, wanting to remain close to Inez. “I don’t mind if they stay.”

“Then it’s settled,” Inez says. “We’ll watch it as a group, and Archie and I will try not to crow too much when Diamond spring the shock of the Tourney.”

“You think they’ll beat us?” Dai hoots.

“The raggle-taggles of Diamond, overcome the Red Devils?” Poppy cries.

Kurtis grimaces. “I have to agree with Poppy and Dai on this one. There won’t be any shocks today.”

“I don’t know,” Inez murmurs, nodding towards the royal box, then winking at me. “I can think of at least one assured shock. Can’t you, Archie?”

“Oh yes,” I grin, then look away as if the SubMerged aren’t here, and try to ignore them while I wait for the stadium to fill and the royals to appear.

I didn’t pay much attention to the royal box during the previous matches. I caught an occasional sight of a few familiar royals – Malina, King Alan and

Queen Elisa, Prince Jickey, King Adil – but I never scanned the box in detail. I thought the royals would arrive in a group, with a lot of fanfare, but they trickle in singly or in pairs, and no one pays them much notice. As beloved as the Family members are, nothing can distract rabid group fans when an important game's in the offing.

Julia Vox takes to the pitch to announce the players. It doesn't feel like much of an occasion when the Rubicons trot out, since we're familiar with the squad from their first game, but there's more excitement when the Diamonds come forward. Even though everyone expects them to be humiliated, they love that the falling realm sent a team, and roar their approval of the players as Julia calls their names.

"I hope we don't beat them by too many points," Poppy says as Julia finishes and heads for her place near the royal box.

"Yeah," Dai says. "Seven or eight points would be fine, to let them leave with a sliver of self-respect."

"Oh, I don't expect it to be that close," Poppy says. "I'm just hoping they make double figures."

"You're all heart," I snarl.

Poppy shrugs. "I'd have preferred not to play them. There's no honour in beating a mishmash of a team like this."

"It's unheard of for a team to be beaten by twenty points in a Tourney," Kurtis says. "We'll be almost as embarrassed as them if that happens."

"Maybe they'll beat you by twenty points," I huff, and Kurtis smiles glibly.

I look away angrily and focus on the royal box again. I see Adil, clad in a brilliant red costume that's almost a match for his dazzling red hair, and there's a woman next to him in similar colours. I ask Inez who she is, and she says it's Queen Dilys, the other Ruby royal who travelled here for the Tourney.

Of the Topaz Family, Queen Suqi is absent, along with Hiroto and King Joona, but the other four are present, Kings Sheng and Oki, and Malina and Queen Gaia. If there are any ill-feelings between the Merged and SubMerged royals, they show no sign of it.

There are servants in the box too, and one of them – a familiar guard with a long, icy white beard – leaves as I’m watching, to have a word with Julia Vox. I see her stunned expression from where I’m standing, and she asks Seamus to repeat what he said, to be sure she heard correctly.

On the pitch, the gropmeister passes the grop to the Rubicon captain, which is the signal for Julia to announce the start of the game. But she hesitates, either still reeling from what Seamus told her, or artfully letting the crowd know something’s different, to let the suspense build.

As people fall silent, wondering why Julia isn’t making her announcement, she clears her throat and says, in what’s almost a whisper for her, “FORGIVE ME FOR THIS BREAK WITH THE NORM, BUT WE’VE BEEN GRACED WITH THE PRESENCE OF A VERY SPECIAL GUEST, AND I’M SURE YOU’LL WANT TO HONOUR HIM BEFORE THE MATCH BEGINS.”

There’s a lot of confused muttering. Nobody has any idea what’s going on. Kurtis catches me smirking, and sees Inez smiling too.

“You two know what’s happening, don’t you?” he says accusingly.

Before we can answer, Julia speaks again, her voice rising as she goes along. “HE’S A MAN WHO’S COME BACK FROM FAR AWAY, AND I’M NOT JUST TALKING GEOGRAPHICALLY. HE APPEARED TO HAVE BID FAREWELL TO THE MERGE, BUT HAS RETURNED FOR ONE LAST SHOWING, TO GIVE HIS TEAM THE SUPPORT THEY DESERVE. LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, BOYS AND GIRLS, LET’S ROAR OURSELVES HOARSE FOR A DOGGED FIGHTER, A VISIONARY BUILDER, THE LAST ROYAL STANDING IN DIAMOND... KING LLOYD!”

Jaws drop, and I suspect many people think Julia is joking, but then Nora steps forward with the blinking, scared-looking, but determined old king.

The crowd reacts the way the crowd at the Lair did when the Diamond gropsters arrived unexpectedly, and a hush falls over the stadium. It's probably the quietest that a crowd of one hundred thousand people has ever been.

Then Adil starts to clap. The SubMerged king might be a vicious torturer, but to his credit he applauds as heartily as he can, beaming warmly.

The other royals take up the applause, and it quickly spreads through the stadium. Within seconds, everyone's clapping. Many people are blinking away tears, while most of the players and coaches of Diamond are openly weeping with joy and pride.

The applause lasts longer than I imagined it could, at least three or four minutes. It starts to die down a few times, then rises again as people change their minds and continue. It could go on even longer, but Julia Vox bellows into her megaphone to bring things to a close.

"PEOPLE!" she cries, and repeats it several times until the clapping has stopped. "IT'S NOT HOW WE USUALLY DO THIS, BUT WOULD YOU LIKE TO HEAR A FEW WORDS FROM KING LLOYD?"

He shakes his head, clearly mortified, but the roars of encouragement leave him with no real choice, and eventually he gives a single, reluctant nod.

Nora leads the shy king to the side of the royal box, where Julia hands him the megaphone, before bowing as low as she can. A hush again falls over the crowd.

King Lloyd considers his words, staring at the megaphone as if concerned it's going to turn into a snake and sink its fangs in him. Then, when I'm starting to worry that he's frozen completely, he says in a low, trembling voice, "Let's... play... grop?"

The simplicity of his words finds favour with the crowd, and everyone starts shouting, “ GROP ! GROP ! GROP !” They keep the chant going as the teams withdraw to their respective ends of the pitch, and even drown out Julia as she informs them that the first play will be started by Ruby.

The chant lasts until the Rubicon captain hurls the grop into the air, and there’s one last, ground-juddering bellow of, “ GROP !”

Then attention finally turns to the pitch, where the brave but ill-matched Diamond players are steeling themselves for their inevitable, unavoidable thrashing.

17

To everyone’s astonishment , the game doesn’t go according to expectations. The Rubicons know they’re up against a weak team, and that affects the way they go about their business. The captain opts not to play Tommy and Trevor in the early stages, and holds back a few of the other players who shone in the first match. As a result, Diamond take an early lead and are soon four-one up.

Kurtis and the other SubMerged fans around me aren’t concerned.

“It’s nice to let them score a few points early on,” Dai says.

“They’ll be able to boast of having led the match,” Poppy agrees.

But Diamond lead for longer than anyone anticipated. Ruby score the next couple of points, but then concede the next three. The captain’s roaring abuse at his team, but the players don’t respond to his commands.

He introduces Trevor and Tommy, but even the Red Devils look subdued. They go in with some heavy tackles and crack a few bones, but they’re not the relentless hounds of the first match.

“What’s going on?” Kurtis snarls as Diamond score their tenth point. “If they keep this up...” He doesn’t finish, unable to voice the unthinkable.

I'm having a fabulous time, cheering every Diamond score, laughing whenever a Rubicon fumbles with the grip or lets a player slip past. I'm sure it can't last, so I'm determined to enjoy the temporary upset as long as I can.

"Remind me again," I murmur to Dai and Poppy. "Who are the amateurs?"

They can't answer. They're pale with shock.

On the pitch, the Diamonds start to believe that they might be poised to spring not just the surprise of this Tourney, but surely of any in grip's long history. Nobody gave them a chance, but here they are, bossing the match, and even though they've been impressive to this point, they switch up another couple of gears and hit half-time with a fifteen-to-eight lead.

The players of the doomed realm race to their coaches, laughing and punching the air, while the Rubes storm to the sidelines with faces like thunder. Some look sullen and disinterested, while others are screaming with rabid frustration.

Someone in the crowd shouts King Lloyd's name, and it develops into a chant. "King Lloyd! King Lloyd!" It's clear they won't stop until he acknowledges them, so he creeps to the front of the royal box – he'd been sitting in the background – and waves. They roar their approval, as do the Diamond players.

I see Trevor and Tommy having an argument. Trevor's pointing savagely at the celebrating Diamonds, and draws a finger across his throat. Tommy shakes his head, points to the royal box, then says something in his partner's ear. Trevor snarls, spits at his feet, then nods reluctantly.

"I think I know what's going on," I whisper to Inez, leading her out of earshot of Kurtis and his cronies.

"What are you talking about?" she frowns.

"They're losing on purpose," I smile.

Inez stares at me. “The Rubicons?”

“It’s because of King Lloyd. They know he’s on his last legs. They’re throwing the match, to treat him to a victory, so he can die a happy man.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Inez snorts. “The SubMerged don’t work that way.”

“Adil applauded him when he entered the box,” I remind her.

“They might have sympathy for him,” Inez says, “but they wouldn’t throw a game on his behalf.”

“You watch,” I smirk. “Not all of the players are in on it, but Trevor and Tommy are. Keep an eye on them and tell me if they don’t deliberately make mistakes.”

Inez shakes her head, but I’ve set her thinking, and she watches the Rubicons carefully when play resumes. At first it looks like they’ve sorted themselves out, as they score the first three points, then three more soon after, to drag the score back to seventeen-fourteen. But then four of them stray out of position. One mistsrows the grop. They concede three of the next four points, then four of the next six.

“Twenty-four to seventeen,” Inez says wonderingly, as the Ruby fans boo their players.

“Are you starting to think I’m right?” I sing.

“I would if they were from any other realm,” she mutters, “but losing a game on purpose... Many Rubicons would call it treachery.”

“Maybe the Rubes are more human than we give them credit for,” I chuckle. Then I cast a glance at Kurtis and scowl. “Although having said that...”

Inez laughs. “I don’t know if you’re right or if I’m imagining things because you put the thought in my head. Every team has an off day, and maybe this is just a very bad day for Ruby. Let’s see how it pans out. There’s still time for them to recover.”

For a while it seems as if they might. Ruby score four of the next five points, then three in a row, to move within a point of the tiring Diamonds. The SubMerged have a bigger squad of players, and the captain's been cleverly utilising them, filling the pitch with as many of his squad as he can. It's stretched the Diamonds thinly. They're dead on their feet, and even a novice like me can see that they're struggling and there for the taking.

Then something extraordinary happens. Trevor and Tommy have been arguing with their captain, trying to convince him to do things differently. The captain's ignored them – he even sidelined them for much of the recent action – but when Ruby score to move within a point of levelling the game, the Red Devils storm the pitch and start punching and kicking their astonished and terrified leader, and have to be dragged away by their teammates.

Everyone's shocked, especially when Trevor and Tommy turn on the players and poleaxe them, before attacking the stunned captain again. As we're all wondering where this will end – they look as if they plan to kill him – Adil hurries onto the pitch, having rushed from the royal box. He roars at Trevor and Tommy, who stand down, but instead of demanding an apology from them, he tears into the poor captain, poking him in the chest, grabbing his head and saying something in his ear.

The bewildered captain nods wildly at everything his king says, then Adil calls Trevor and Tommy forward. At his command, they shake hands with the trembling captain and appear to set their differences aside. The king returns to the royal box, to muted applause — nobody's quite sure what he said, or why he admonished the captain when the Red Devils were in the wrong.

Inez turns to me with round eyes. “If you're right about some of the Rubicons sabotaging their own team, it looks like Adil might be behind it.”

When play resumes, the Ruby captain sidelines lots of players and restores Trevor and Tommy to the team. They lose the next four points, leaving the Diamonds just one score away from an unlikely, famous triumph.

I'm not the only one who thinks this is rigged. Rumours circulate like wildfire. I thought that might anger the Rubes, but it actually calms them. They were unable to understand how their team could be trailing to a pack of part-timers, but now they have an answer of sorts, and that satisfies them. They're not happy, but if the order to lose has come down from their king, they'll accept it.

The Rubicons score the next two points, to make us wonder if this was part of an elaborate ruse, designed to add drama to what would have been an otherwise boring game. Will they overtake the Diamonds and push on for the win?

No! Because just as the Rubes are threatening to turn the match on its head, the weary but dogged Diamonds force their way into a shooting position and score the winning point, to send their supporters into utter raptures of delight, and leave the Rubicons streaming from the stadium in a foul mood that won't lift any decade soon.

"You know what?" I remark sweetly to a glowering Kurtis, Dai and Poppy as the Diamonds go on a celebratory lap of honour. "I like watching grop with you guys." And their expressions as they glare at me hatefully are the best part of maybe the entire year.

18

I keep reminding our SubMerged friends about the match as we file out, mentioning the more memorable Diamond scores and Ruby mistakes. Dai and Poppy bristle and seethe, but Kurtis shrugs it off.

"The better team won," he says calmly, and Inez smiles.

"Even though you thought you were going to crush them?" I sneer.

"We were wrong," Kurtis says. "It happens sometimes. We're hurting now, but we'll recover."

“Especially if our players let them win,” Poppy says. “I’ve no doubt we’ll finish second. It means we’ll have to play an extra round, the same as Sapphire since you can’t top your group, but it shouldn’t prove too much of an obstacle to us going on to claim ultimate victory.”

“We can’t meet until the final if we both finish second,” Inez notes.

“Your pack of losers won’t make it to the final,” Dai laughs cruelly.

Kurtis elbows him in the ribs before Inez or I can retort. “We’re the biggest losers of the Tourney after today,” he says, “so don’t make a fool of yourself.”

“My hero,” Inez simpers.

Kurtis winces. “There’s nothing heroic about admitting the truth,” he says, then looks around. We’re outside the stadium and have drawn clear of the crowds. “What do you want to see?”

“Any suggestions?” Inez asks.

“Plenty,” Kurtis says. “Are you happy for me to take the lead?”

He says that to me, knowing Inez will be only too willing to follow him.

“I want to know where we’re going first,” I tell him.

“Don’t you trust me, Archie?” he replies.

I sniff. “I just don’t want you taking us halfway across the city to see something we might have no interest in.”

“Fair enough,” Kurtis says. “In that case I’ll clear each destination with you in advance. To begin with, I was thinking of the zoo. Poppy’s been before and highly recommends it.”

“There can’t be a zoo,” I frown. “There aren’t any animals in the Merge.”

“You’re right on the second point,” Kurtis says. “Not on the first. Inez?”

“He’s not trying to kid you,” she says. “Niffelheim really does have a zoo.”

I don’t see how you can have a zoo without animals, but I shrug. “If it’s not too far away...”

“It isn’t,” Kurtis promises and marches us off. He keeps up a running commentary as he goes, telling us interesting facts about the city.

“You sound like a local,” I grunt.

“You say the sweetest things, Archibald,” he grins.

“How come you know so much about the place?”

“I’ve been here lots of times,” Kurtis says, “but also we study Topaz in Ruby. The Topazers have been our allies in the past and could be again in the near future. We like to familiarize ourselves with realms that we’re poised to control.”

“You seem very sure that Topaz will turn,” I say.

Kurtis shrugs. “It’s only one royal defection away from becoming SubMerged.”

“And we know just the woman to turn it,” Poppy cackles.

“Suqi! Suqi! Suqi!” Dai chortles.

“She’ll see sense and return to us,” Poppy says.

“Or maybe Hiroto will bend,” Kurtis smiles. “They say Gaia’s like a mother to him, so maybe he’ll follow her lead.”

“I heard he was closer to Malina,” I counter.

“Time will tell,” Kurtis purrs, acting as if he knows something I don’t.

We arrive at the zoo, which is a large, circular structure. You don’t have to pay anything to get in, but Kurtis digs some small shot glasses out of a

pocket inside his jacket and leaves them with the attendant on the door, who looks impressed with the contribution.

We walk down a long, dark tunnel, and emerge in the centre of the zoo, which is enjoyably weird. Instead of live animals, it boasts loads of models. Fake monkeys, lions, elephants, giraffes, crafted out of wood, metal, fabrics and all sorts of other materials, animated (I assume) with hidden strings to mimic the movements of their Born counterparts.

“The models take months to piece together,” Poppy says as we stroll from one exhibit to another. There are no cages, just open areas where the fake animals mix peacefully, in a way they never could if they were real. “My first time here, one of the keepers told me an elephant can take up to a year to perfect, even longer if they have to wait for parts to be delivered from other realms.”

We come to a large, submerged water tank. As we watch, a dolphin slowly breaks the surface, followed by a turtle, then a platypus. Their movements are unnatural, but that’s in order to let us see them clearly and admire the work that’s gone into fashioning them.

“They had a whale when I visited before,” Poppy says, “but it disintegrated. It’s hard maintaining the water animals. They used to employ a deviser who specialised in them, but he departed the sphere and the aquatic team never fully recovered.”

The best attraction is a crocodile. We’re walking by a stream, heading for some flamingos perched at its far end. Logs are bobbing in the water. We pay no attention to them until one of the logs leaps into the air. Its jaws widen as it soars towards us, eyes flashing viciously. Poppy laughs as we scream and hurl ourselves clear. The crocodile’s jaws snap together, short of where we would have been standing if we hadn’t dived for safety, and it slips back into the stream.

“Your faces!” Poppy howls.

“I bet you screamed too, the first time,” Dai growls, getting back to his feet.

“Nonsense,” Poppy coos. “I smiled faintly and kissed its snout.”

We don’t believe her, but chuckle once we’ve picked ourselves up, and discuss how it might work, if there’s a hidden sensor, or a keeper watching, manipulating the crocodile with strings and pulleys beneath the waterline.

As we’re drawing near the end of our visit, talk turns to our next destination. “It’s out of the way, but I’d suggest the fires of release,” Kurtis says.

Inez was smiling, but her smile fades. “I tend to avoid the fires,” she says. “They sadden me.”

“I know what you mean,” Kurtis says, “but they’re beautiful here. The play of flames on the ice generates something like the aurora borealis in the Born.”

“The what?” Dai asks.

“The Northern Lights,” Kurtis says.

I’ve heard about the Northern Lights, but know nothing about the fires of release, though I recall Winston and some other people mentioning them. I murmur to a wavering Inez, “I’d like to see them.”

“You’re interested in the fires of release?” she asks with surprise.

“Well, I always wanted to see the Northern Lights, so if this is similar, it’ll be the next best thing, right?”

Inez shrugs. “OK, let’s go.”

It’s a long trek, so we hire sleighs, and their handlers race along behind, pushing the vehicles. The bearded, red-cheeked men have been remoulded to have legs like giraffes and arms like gorillas, and can cover several metres with a single stride, which allows them to push us fast and effortlessly keep up. Their hands are huge too, four or five times the size of a normal pair, so they can manipulate the sleighs easily, guiding them

across the icy terrain as if they were toys. Kurtis, Dai and Poppy go in one of the sleighs, Inez and I in another.

“Do you know what the fires of release are?” Inez asks as we’re sweeping down an icy hill, the whoops of the SubMerged trailing to us as they slip ahead.

“I haven’t a clue,” I admit.

“They’re a means of departure from the Merge for those who are ready to move on to the next sphere,” Inez explains.

“A way to commit suicide?” I ask quietly.

“Not quite,” she says. “We’ll talk about it more when we get there.”

I’m nervous now, and part of me wishes I hadn’t pushed to see the fires, but I’ve wondered how people leave the Merge, so it will be interesting to find out.

The last stage of the journey is uphill, and the handlers won’t take us, saying it’s forbidden, so we dismount and Kurtis hands over more of his rare shot glasses. The handlers are delighted, and offer to stay and take us back, saying they’d feel guilty if they accepted such a generous payment for a one-way trip.

There are several other people on the hill, heading for what looks like an ice cave near the top, and we fall into line behind them. Everyone’s silent and solemn, even the normally chirpy Poppy.

It turns out the opening isn’t a cave but a tunnel. It leads us through the hill at a slight decline. When we step out at the other end, we’re overlooking a stretch of flat, low-lying land... and the fires of release.

They’re towering waves of flames, maybe twenty or thirty metres high, though they flare higher and subside lower as the waves shimmer and dance across the plain. The fires stretch away to our left and right, maybe a couple of hundred metres wide. They’re constantly moving, creeping first one way,

then another, advancing and retreating, but always in a group, the waves never separating.

The fires would be mesmerising enough, but the shadows cast by the flames slide across the ice and generate a mist of shifting lights, which eddy across the plain like multicoloured ghosts.

“Takes your breath away, doesn’t it?” a woman close to us notes after we’ve been staring in round-eyed silence for a few minutes. She’s sitting on a stool which she must have brought with her. “I come up here most days, at different times. I never tire of the spectacle. I suppose when I do, it’ll be a sign to head out into the fires, not back to my home.”

“Do the fires burn all day long?” I whisper.

“And all night,” the woman says. “I came here a few times in the dark – that’s when they’re most impressive – but it was too eerie. You don’t get many spectators at night, though you’ll usually find a stream of people seeking release. I’ve always thought it was sad to shuffle off in the darkness, unseen and alone, but who’s to say I won’t choose the night as well when my own time comes?”

We drift on, to view the fires from different angles. There are lots of viewing spots, some up high, some down low. We wander between them, saying nothing, soaking up the sights of the ever-changing display.

As we’re watching, someone moves to the base of the hill and advances across the plain. I can’t tell if it’s a man or a woman, as we’re far away and they’re wearing a thick coat with a hood pulled over their head.

“Inez?” I croak as the person marches towards the glowing pillars of flame.

“One of the released,” she murmurs.

“In search of the spheres beyond,” Kurtis says softly.

“May their soul fly true,” Dai mutters.

The person continues towards the fires of release, and I'm sure that everybody's gaze is fixed upon them.

"This is why a lot of people prefer to come when it's dark," Poppy says with a shiver. "I wouldn't like to make that walk during the day, everyone watching. What if I changed my mind? I might feel pressured to push through with it, even if I didn't really want to."

"There aren't many who change their mind once they set off on that walk," Kurtis says. "When your time comes, it comes. If the Merge holds no more appeal for you, why dig in your heels?"

The person keeps going until they get to the fires of release. He or she pauses at that point to disrobe.

"Old school," Kurtis says appreciatively. "Leaving the Merge as they entered."

"I'll keep my clothes on when I go," Poppy says. "I don't want nasty little voyeurs like Archibald ogling me."

Kurtis frowns at the insult – he clearly thinks it's out of place here – and Poppy winces, then mouths to me, "Sorry."

I focus on the person on the ice. The man or woman spreads their arms, then steps into the fire. I cry out and the others stare at me oddly.

"The flames," I moan.

"What about them?" Kurtis says.

"Won't they hurt dreadfully?"

"Of course not," he grunts, and looks questioningly at Inez.

"Archie's brain never quite settled when he was delivered," she says. "He's still learning things about the Merge that the rest of us instinctively know."

I expect Kurtis to sneer, but he actually shoots me a sympathetic look. “That must be hard,” he says, and for a rare moment it feels like we’re friends, not enemies.

The person in the fires of release turns, their hands above their head, and I see smoke coming off them. No... it’s not smoke. They’re unravelling, the atoms of their body separating and rising into the fiery air in a stream of tiny drops.

“There’s no pain,” Inez says as the released’s body comes apart and disappears in front of us. “You can get close to the fires, if you’re prepared to risk being caught if they shift direction suddenly. People have gone out with the released, to observe up close, and those unravelling in the flames have all said it’s painless. The fires exist to send us on our way in as pleasant a fashion as possible.”

It’s a relief to know that the person isn’t in agony, but I still feel uneasy about what I’m witnessing. “So how is this different to suicide?” I ask.

“Suicide is something the Born normally choose when they’re in a dark place and unable to see a way forward,” Inez says. “They don’t know what’s going to happen next. I suspect many never even think about that. They just want to escape the pain.”

“That doesn’t really happen in the Merge,” Kurtis says, “for all sorts of reasons, not least that we know for a fact that death isn’t the end. The Merge was waiting for us after the Born, and we know from the Departed that there are other spheres beyond this one.”

“Our brains heal here,” Poppy says softly. “We’re delivered to the Merge thinking clearly, calmly, the stresses and demands of the Born left behind forever.”

“The Merge is a resting place,” Dai says. “We discard the confusions of our old lives when we’re delivered. We stay a while – days or decades or centuries – and enjoy the time and experiences that were denied us when we were killed in the Born, until we feel the pull of the spheres beyond.”

“ Pull? ” I echo uncertainly.

“It’s a gut feeling,” Kurtis says. “Assuming we aren’t killed again, or die in an accident, we tend to know when we’ve spent long enough in the Merge. The desire to depart becomes a craving. When that happens, we set off for the nearest fires of release, often without bothering to say farewell.”

“I’ve noticed that,” I say. “The Merged don’t do goodbyes.”

“Because we don’t believe in them,” Inez says. “When we depart, we know our friends and relations will follow when their own times come, so it’s a short parting, not a permanent divide.”

“It’s a strange way of viewing life,” I say dubiously.

“Only if you’re Born,” Kurtis sniffs.

That’s the cue for me to shut up, before I show how truly ignorant I am and maybe tip them off to the fact that I’m not one of their own. So I hold my tongue and let further questions fade away, and study the swaying, spitting waves of fire on the canvas of ice, wondering mutely about life and death, and everything in between.

19

We’re in a reflective mood on our way back and nobody says much as we’re pushed along in our sleds, studying the icy landscape as it blurs by. At one point we come abreast of a forest and veer into it at a command from Kurtis.

I spot a small mountain in the near distance when we exit the forest, and that’s what we aim for, the sleigh handlers propelling us ever closer as they lollop along behind. Night is falling and the ice seems to be turning a darker shade as the light fades.

We stop at the base of the mountain, where I see the start of an ascending path. Dai and Poppy hop out and race to the path, laughing and hollering, but Kurtis hangs back to wait for Inez and me. “We need a change of

atmosphere after the fires of release,” he says, “so I’ve brought us here, where it’s all about fun, but if you don’t fancy the climb, the handlers can take you back to your quarters.”

“What’s up there?” I ask, staring at Dai and Poppy as they scamper up the side of the mountain.

“The slides of Bon Repell,” Kurtis says. “They were a popular attraction long ago, before they fell into disrepair. They’re ice tunnels, cut through the heart of the mountain by a deviser called Bon Repell. There were a dozen slides originally, but only three are currently operational.”

“This is starting to ring a bell,” Inez says.

“The slides have been closed for more than six hundred years,” Kurtis says. “The roofs of some tunnels cracked, while others filled with snow. They remained blocked until a few years ago. One of our devisers got it into her head to restore them, and asked for permission to attempt it. The Topaz royals gave her the go-ahead and the help of some local devisers. The project’s nearing completion, and she’d hoped to open in time for the Tourney, but it wasn’t to be. She’s cleared three tunnels, but they need more work before they’ll be ready for the thousands who’ll gather to try them once word gets out.”

“So the slides aren’t open?” Inez asks.

“Not to the masses,” Kurtis says, “but a few people with friends in high places have clearance to use them, so, if you’re game...”

Inez looks excited, but checks with me. “Archie?”

“I dunno,” I mutter. “How safe are they? I don’t want a tunnel roof collapsing on me when I’m halfway down.”

“We wouldn’t be so lucky,” Kurtis grunts.

“Don’t be nasty,” Inez tuts.

“Sorry,” he winces, then forces a smile. “The tunnels are safe. If a lot of people use the slides, the ice starts to melt in places, so they need to find a way to stop that happening, but that’s the only glitch.”

“How fast do you go?” Inez asks as I waver.

“ Very fast,” Kurtis chuckles.

“They’re definitely safe?” she presses.

“One hundred percent,” Kurtis says. “The first guinea pigs went down them more than a year ago. They’re close to ironing out the final kinks, and the slides will open officially within months. Each slide’s different, offering a variety of twists, turns and drops. When it’s busy, you’ll have to take whichever one’s available, but tonight you’ll have a free choice, and no wait.”

“How long’s the climb?” I ask, still stalling.

“Depends on how fit you are,” Kurtis replies, starting up the steps. “It should take no more than half an hour, less if you jog. If you fancy it, you’re welcome to join us. If not, take your sleigh back to base and I’ll see you next time.”

He scurries up the path after Dai and Poppy. Inez looks at me.

“It’s getting dark,” I note.

“And cold,” she nods.

“I don’t have any gleam,” I tell her.

“Me neither,” she says.

“Or a coat.”

“No.”

“We could come back by ourselves tomorrow,” I suggest.

“I doubt they’d let us up,” she says. “Since this is a SubMerged project, I imagine they’ll only admit approved visitors.”

“Kurtis might not be approved at all,” I counter. “Maybe he’s not supposed to be here and we’ll get into trouble if we’re discovered.”

“It’s possible,” Inez says.

“If we got stuck...” I mutter.

“...we could freeze to death in the heart of the mountain,” Inez says soberly.

We stare at one another in silence.

I crack first.

“Of course, if this is on the level...”

“...and the slides are working...” Inez grins.

“...and we’re among the first to try them...” I smile.

“Worth the risk of freezing?” Inez asks.

“Definitely,” I laugh.

We take off up the mountain, hurrying to catch up with the SubMerged teenagers and maybe even be first to the top.

The temperature drops the higher we climb, but that only encourages us to run faster. There are cleared areas to the left or right of the path at intervals, which will serve as resting places when the slides open for business.

We overtake Dai about halfway up – he says he tore a muscle a few weeks ago and is still recovering, though I didn’t notice him limping earlier – but Kurtis and Poppy maintain their lead and reach the summit before us.

There's a large, flat area carved out of the tip when we crest the mountain, the mouths of tunnels dotted around it. There are a lot more than three — I count at least nine.

“They're trying to restore the other slides too,” Kurtis says. “A few are beyond repair, but they're hopeful of eventually getting seven or eight back in full working order.”

“Which three have been reopened?” Inez asks.

“That one,” Kurtis says, pointing off to our far right, “and those two.” He points to a pair that are nearer.

“Do they all feed out in the same place?” I ask.

“No,” Kurtis says. “There are exits round the entire base of the mountain.”

“The far-off one leads to a spot on the opposite side to where we left the sleighs,” Poppy says.

“With the other two,” Kurtis says, “the one on the left comes out close to where the handlers are waiting, while the one on the right leads somewhere else, though I'm not sure where exactly. I haven't been down it yet.”

“You've been on the slides already?” Inez asks.

“Just once,” Kurtis says. “Noah brought us here, but we couldn't stay long. Poppy chose the Vulture, the far-off one, since it's the slowest and least frightening.”

“I wanted to save the real thrills for later,” Poppy says sheepishly.

“Dai and I chose the Harpy, which is the fastest and most thrilling,” Kurtis says, as Dai appears at the top of the steps and stops, hands on knees, panting. “That's the slide on the left.”

“They have names?” Inez asks.

“Of course,” Kurtis says. “Most of the original names have been forgotten, and where they’ve been remembered, the deviser can’t be sure which of the rides they once applied to. But the Harpy was a crowd favourite in the old days and she’s pretty sure it referred to this one.”

“What’s the third one called?” I ask.

Kurtis widens his eyes. “The Abyss of the Doomed.”

“That’s a bit of a mouthful,” I sniff.

Kurtis chuckles. “I agree. Maybe they’ll change it before the slides open.”

Inez wanders over to the mouth of the Harpy and bends to peer down its maw. “I suppose we have to choose this one, since it comes out close to the sleighs.”

“Not at all,” Kurtis says. “If you want to go down one of the others, and don’t mind a short wait, we’ll swing by in the sleighs to collect you. The Harpy’s the pick of the bunch, but if you’d rather the Vulture or the Abyss, feel free.”

“While you’re making up your mind…” Poppy hoots, then pushes Inez aside and hurls herself down the tunnel. We hear a faint, “Woo-hoo!” Then she’s gone.

“They’ll have carpets when the slides open,” Kurtis says. “You’ll sit on one and it’ll make the ride even faster than it is now. But it’s still a pretty hairy experience without them. Inez, do you want to go next?”

“Ladies first?” she smirks.

“Ever the gentleman,” Kurtis smiles.

Inez laughs and tips me a wink. “See you at the bottom, Archie.”

“Don’t get lost,” I laugh as she sits and slips down the slide.

Dai has recovered his breath and joins us. He steps in front of me, blocking the tunnel entrance.

“Who’s an eager beaver?” I snort. “Alright, I don’t mind, you can go first.”

Dai says nothing, just stands there staring at me.

“Go on,” I mutter, flapping a hand at him. “It’s not getting any warmer up here. Don’t keep us waiting. Or are you afraid?”

Dai still doesn’t say anything, only continues to stare at me coldly, and I start to get an uneasy feeling.

“What’s up with your goon?” I ask Kurtis, looking to him for reassurance, but his expression is as flat as Dai’s.

“Did you honestly think we’d forgive and forget, Archibald?” he asks in a soft, menacing tone.

“What are you talking about?” I snap, taking a step away from the slide.

“You made a fool of me in Cornan,” Kurtis says, “and helped sway the vote against Pitina and Farkas.”

“Your lot tried to kill Ghita,” I snarl.

“That’s never been proven,” Kurtis says sweetly.

“Merged heresy,” Dai huffs.

“The princess could have opposed the vote openly,” Kurtis says. “We think she went into hiding to smear the good name of the SubMerged.”

“Then you’re crazy,” I jeer.

“Not as crazy as you’re going to be by the time we’ve finished with you,” Kurtis says, advancing slowly, forcing me back another couple of steps.

“You want a fight?” I snap. “Come on then, let’s fight.”

“No,” Kurtis says. “Your fight lies elsewhere. And it’s not with us.”

“What do you –” I start to ask, but Kurtis cuts me short.

“Now!” he shouts, and Dai rushes me, no trace of a limp.

I back-heel rapidly, to avoid being tackled. As I’m doing that, Kurtis grabs my right arm, digs his heels into the ice, then whirls and sends me spinning. I turn in a confused circle two or three times. Then, before I can right myself, Dai hurls himself into my back and sends me flying forward, into the mouth of the tunnel that Kurtis called the Abyss of the Doomed.

“So long, Archibald,” Kurtis crows as I lurch down the slide. “I’ll see you in the next sphere — though you might not make it there as quickly as you’d like.”

That’s a bizarre parting shot, but I don’t have time to consider its meaning. I’ve fallen onto the slide sideways, and as I hurtle downwards, I spin round and round, bashing my head repeatedly. I cry out with fear and shock, and try to bring myself under control.

Eventually I manage to stretch out on my back. I’m whizzing down the slide at a frightening speed, twisting and turning wildly in the darkness, but at least I’m in the correct position now.

I do everything I can to slow down, using my elbows, feet and hands, but I’m moving too swiftly. In the end I abandon myself to gravity, cross my hands and feet the way I would on a water slide, and wait for it to end.

Of course, that end is what scares me the most. Maybe Kurtis just wants to give me a fright, but this doesn’t strike me as a harmless prank. There was real venom in his expression, but also a hint of nervousness, as if he was doing something that he thought he might regret. I’m worried that the Abyss might not be fully restored. Maybe it’s blocked further down, and I’m going to fly into a wall of rubble and ice at fifty or sixty kilometres an hour. (That’s the sort of speed it feels like.)

I think about what such a collision would do to me, the bones it would break in my legs and back, the way it might send my spinal column smashing up through my brain. Even if it doesn't kill me, the shock and cold would surely finish me off before Inez could return with a rescue team.

For a few seconds I wonder if the same fate awaits Inez, but then I recall Poppy sliding down the Harpy before her, so at least she'll come out of this safely. Unless they have something else lined up for her.

As I'm picturing all the horrors that might be about to befall Inez and me, the most unexpected but delightful thing happens. I fly out of the tunnel and skim across a long, flat section of ice, to come to a halt on a cold but soft bed of snow, beneath a bright and beautiful sky.

"It was just a trick!" I want to scream jubilantly, but the breath has been torn from my lips, and all I can do is lie in the snow, panting with relief as the terror drains from my limbs and my heartbeat slows.

Then, as I'm readying myself to sit up and storm off in search of Inez to tell her what her wretched little boyfriend did to me, someone leans forward, blocking my view of the sky.

"Hello again, Master Lox," a man murmurs.

I've no idea who it is, but I'm sure it's no one I want to run into on a dark night in an isolated spot at the base of a mountain in the middle of nowhere. I roll away and stumble to my feet, getting ready to run.

"Peace, my young friend," the man says. "I haven't come to hurt you."

I glance up and force myself to focus. At first I can't see his face, but then he steps forward and a large, thickset, red-haired man is revealed.

"Duke Noah?" I gasp.

"I hope my nephew wasn't too rough with you," the duke says. "I told him he wasn't to hit you."

"What are you doing here?" I wheeze, warily backing away.

“I’m playing the part of a camel tonight,” Noah chuckles, not chasing after me. “I promised an old friend that I’d oversee your delivery, and while I’m not sure what he has planned for you, I know it won’t be pleasant. You have my pity, whether you believe me or not.”

“What are you talking about?” I cry, still backpedalling, comforted by the fact that the duke isn’t pursuing me.

“You’ll find out,” someone says behind me.

“Though you’ll soon wish you hadn’t,” somebody else says.

Hands grip my shoulders. My head twists left, then right, and I’m stunned to find myself in the clutches of the Red Devils, Trevor and Tommy, the dirty, hard-hitting Rubicon players.

“What –” I manage to shout, before they each slide a hand up to grab my throat and squeeze. The pressure is excruciating and I start to black out almost instantly, a dark veil falling across my eyes. The last thing I see before I go under is Noah, who shakes his head sadly and turns away, as if upset by what’s happening.

Then there’s only darkness.

FIVE — THE INTERROGATION

20

I awake in a large room, but despite its size, I instantly know it's a prison cell. I'm lying on the floor, shivering. I rise slowly – my throat still hurts – and shuffle round as my head clears.

The cell's rectangular, about eleven metres long by seven wide. There's a door in one end, made of wood and steel. No lock on this side, so I can't pick my way out. The ceiling's high above me. An oddly shaped thick vine cuts in and out of it in one corner — its twists make it look like the number 5.

The walls, floor and ceiling are all constructed from ice. I try scratching the walls in various places, in case I could chip out niches and climb to the vine, but it's solid as steel.

No mushrooms grow here. If I was left in the cell long enough, I'd starve and become a hell jackal. Or does that only happen to the Merged? Being Born, maybe I'd simply die. It's not an experiment I care to put to the test.

Despite its icy structure, the cell isn't that cold. I couldn't freeze to death, so at least I have that much to be grateful for.

I don't call for help. I'm sure I'm being watched, and I don't want to please my captors by crying out. They'll doubtless let me know what this is about in their own good time. Unless they plan to leave me here to starve. But it's unlikely they'd go to so much trouble just to do that.

I seethe as I recall my betrayal. I always told Inez not to trust Kurtis. He's SubMerged, so deception's in his nature. That said, I never thought he'd turn on me this way, placing me in the hands of his uncle and whoever Noah is working for. (I've a good idea, based on my earlier meeting with the duke at the soirée, but hope I'm wrong.)

I'm still worried about Inez. I suspect, if I'm right about Noah's boss, that I'm the only one who's been imprisoned, as he wasn't interested in her at the soirée, but I can't know for sure. Maybe there were other agents waiting at the bottom of the Harpy, and she's tucked away in a neighbouring cell.

As I'm debating whether or not to call Inez's name, in case she's nearby and can hear me, the door to my cell opens and two men in red robes step inside. One is a stranger. He's weird-looking, thin, bald, with completely blue eyes – it's as if a pair of blue marbles have been inserted into the sockets – and two long front upper teeth that curl down over his lower lip like a walrus' fangs.

The other is all too familiar and is, to my dismay, the man I was expecting.

“King Adil,” I growl, trying not to let my terror bubble through.

“Archibald,” the crimson-haired, grey-eyed king smiles.

“I take it there's been a terrible mistake, that I was brought here by accident, and I'm to be returned to the team quarters immediately,” I challenge him.

“You can take it any way you like,” Adil laughs, closing the door. I hear a key turning in the lock on the far side.

“Is that Duke Noah?” I ask.

“Noah's gone,” the king says. “And you won't be meeting with anyone else while you're here. It's just you, me, and Kerwin.”

The bald man doesn't react to his name. He's circling me, his eerie blue eyes unblinking, lightly gnawing at his lip with the long incisors.

“What's with the crazy blue eyes?” I ask Adil. “Are they contacts or has he been remoulded?”

Adil waves that away and says, “You should have answered my questions when we bumped into one another at the soirée.”

“We didn’t bump into one another,” I snort. “Noah arranged for me to be brought to you, the same way he’s brought me to you now.”

“He’s a faithful friend,” Adil says.

“A faithful dog,” I sneer. “How do you think the royals of Topaz will react when they find out what you’ve done? They won’t stand for the kidnapping of one of their guests.”

“You’re assuming they’ll find out,” Adil purrs, “but they won’t.”

“This is their realm,” I counter. “They’ll find me.”

“Who says we’re still in Topaz?” the king asks. “What makes you think I haven’t carted you back to Ruby?”

“The ice…” I say weakly.

“We have ice in Ruby too,” he smiles.

I shake my head. “There wasn’t enough time. I wasn’t unconscious that long.”

“You’ve no idea how long you were out,” Adil says. “It might have been days.”

I stare at him wordlessly, trembling. If I’ve been removed from Topaz and taken to Ruby, I’m truly doomed.

“Anyway, it makes no difference,” he says. “Do you think I’d have brought you to a place where your allies could track you? Do I strike you as a man who leaves anything to chance?”

“I don’t know you well enough to make a call like that,” I mutter.

The king smiles frostily. “By the end of our time together, you will,” he whispers.

I gulp and try to think of a reply. The man called Kerwin stops circling while I'm thinking. He's standing in front of me, slightly to my left.

"Will you answer my questions now, Archibald?" Adil asks.

"Sure," I smile. "What do you want to know?"

"Where are you from?"

"Sapphire," I lie.

"Kerwin?" the king sniffs.

The man with the blue eyes shakes his head. "I don't even have to touch him to know that's not true," he says, and his voice is low and gargly.

"I am from Sapphire," I insist. "From Cornan, like I –"

Adil raises a hand to stop me. "Why bother with the dance?" he sighs. "I'm not a patient man. Let's cut to the chase before I lose my temper."

"What do you want to know?" I croak.

The king leans forward, his expression solemn. "Everything," he says. "Who you are, where you've come from, why you're here."

"I'm here because you kidnapped me," I snap.

The king smiles thinly and says, "Kerwin's a mind reader."

"Yeah?" I sniff and grin at the bald, blue-eyed man. "What number am I thinking of?"

"His job is to strip bare people's brains," Adil continues, "to wring their thoughts from them, everything they've ever imagined or dreamt, every secret they might have fought to hide. It's a painful process that often destroys the victim's mind. I rarely have to kill someone when Kerwin's done with them, as there's not enough of them left worth terminating."

Kerwin smiles for the first time and makes a sucking noise through his two fangs. He reaches a hand towards me and I note that there are lots of little suckers on his fingers, like on an octopus' tentacles. I flinch and steel myself for contact, but he stops short, the repulsive fingers five or six centimetres in front of my face.

“Last chance to play ball, Archibald,” Adil says. “Where are you from?”

“Cornan,” I whimper.

The king's eyes twinkle. “So be it. Kerwin, begin.”

At his command, the mind reader touches his fingers to my forehead and cheeks, and the world turns red and white with pain.

21

“Where are you from?” Adil asks.

I scream in reply.

“Where are you from?” he says, and again I scream.

I'm only barely aware of the king's question, which he calmly repeats over and over, because all of my senses are focused on the pain in my head. Although Kerwin is only lightly touching me, those suckers hold my flesh tightly, and it's as if he's dug his fingers through the flesh and bone of my skull, deep into my brain. I try to pull away but I'm rooted to the spot, eyes wide, mouth open, unable to move, unable to speak, only to scream.

“Relax a little,” Adil murmurs, and I feel the ghostly fingers retracting, though they don't withdraw completely. The pain lessens and I groan with relief, shoulders slumping.

“That's a taste of what's to come,” Adil says. “We'll get to the answers one way or another. I'd rather not torture you, Archibald. You aren't my enemy. If anything, we might become great friends and allies in the future.”

“You’re kidding,” I moan, sweat pouring from my forehead.

“I’ve never been more earnest,” the king says. “Cooperate, help us to help you, and there’s no telling where this might lead.”

“What are you talking about?” I mumble. “Why do you care about me?”

He purses his lips. “That might cloud your responses. I don’t want you telling me what I want to hear — I crave only the truth. Will you be truthful, Archibald? Will you spare yourself the horrors of what you must experience if you defy me?”

I nod weakly and the king gestures to Kerwin, who removes his hand — there are tiny popping sounds from the holes in his fingers as he peels the suckers free. I sink to my haunches and rub my eyebrows, fighting back tears.

“I’m Archibald Lox,” I say weakly. “I come from Sapphire. I —”

Kerwin lays his hand on my head without needing to be told, and the daggers jab into my brain again. Adil carries on asking where I’m from, as Kerwin’s fingers dig and scratch, drawing screams from my lips, but no answers.

After a while, as the torment drags on and I’m fighting an overwhelming urge to tell the king that I’m really from London, not Merged at all, but Born, I flash on an image which offers me a glimmer of hope. At first I thought Kerwin was clawing randomly through my brain, just to hurt me, but I was wrong. The image that comes is of a lock, and even though I’m in agony, I pause to reassess.

Kerwin’s trying to unlock my mind. Adil called him a mind reader, but that’s not accurate. He’s a mind picker, in many ways a locksmith like me, except one who specialises in brains.

It takes a huge effort, but I manage to raise my head a fraction, so that I can see Kerwin’s eyes. They’re thin blue cracks in his face, as they’re almost

fully closed while he concentrates. I probably look like this when I'm working on a lock.

The realisation that this is a game of locks changes the playing field. Even though I've been training to open locks, I surely have the ability to close them too, to jumble the tumblers and roll the pins in a way that can stall someone who's trying to tease free a lock's secrets.

Without fully knowing what I'm doing (a familiar story — I always operate more by instinct than knowledge), I fight back. I picture my brain, not as an organ but a complex lock, and as Kerwin's fingers dance across the imaginary pins and tumblers, I use mental fingers of my own to block his way and drive him back.

"Where are you from?" Adil asks.

"Sapphire," I say, but this time it's a clear statement, not a painful groan.

Kerwin trembles and I slide a leg forward.

"Where are you from?" Adil asks, hesitantly, sensing a change.

"Sapphire," I say pleasantly, and force myself to my feet.

Kerwin hisses and tries to push me down, both physically and mentally, but I stand firm.

"Sapphire," I say again, before Adil asks the question. "My answer will always be Sapphire, no matter how many times you ask."

The pain's still there, but it's lessened dramatically, and I chance a weak smile. The smile infuriates Kerwin, and I feel his ghostly fingers digging in again, but the king barks, "Stop."

Kerwin turns, without letting go of me, to look at his master.

"What's happening?" Adil asks.

"He's fighting me," Kerwin growls.

“How?”

The mind reader’s pale cheeks redden. “I don’t know.”

I decide to capitalise on Kerwin’s confusion and try something daring. While he’s focused on his king, I send imaginary fingers inside his head, to poke at him the way he’s poked at me.

Kerwin cries out, more with shock than pain, and breaks contact, taking a few quick steps away from me. “How did you do that?” he shouts.

“Where are you from?” is my wicked response.

Kerwin’s fingers bunch into fists and he raises an arm. Adil catches it and shakes his head, then steps closer to me and crouches so we’re eye to eye. “I didn’t expect this,” he says softly.

“I’m glad to disappoint you,” I smirk.

“But it’s not the first time it’s happened,” he adds, and my smile fades. “I’ve had other Loxes in rooms like this over the years. A few defended themselves this way, and held out against us for a while, but they succumbed in the end, as everyone must in this position. All you’re doing is prolonging the agony.”

“Don’t be offended if I don’t believe you,” I snarl, but in truth I do, because I remember Winston telling me that the king’s torturers had the breaking of him, that they came close to being able to make him do whatever they wanted, that he only escaped a treacherous fate because he was rescued before he cracked. If no one comes to rescue me, how can I expect to hold out when Winston couldn’t?

“Kerwin,” the king says softly.

“Sire?” he replies.

“Are you fit to continue, or shall I summon one of my other mind readers?”

Kerwin's nostrils flare. "I can handle this arrogant stripling," he vows. "I was only thrown because he caught me off guard. I won't be surprised again."

"Very good," the king says, taking a step back. "In that case, continue."

Kerwin nods, grabs my face, and the torment begins again.

22

The interrogation's relentless, and this turns out to be just the first session of an endless parade of them. Kerwin is with me all the time, except for short breaks when I assume he leaves to nap and eat. I try to sleep during those intervals, but it's hard, as the pain lingers even after he's withdrawn.

Adil drops in on us occasionally, but mostly it's just me and Kerwin. He asks the same sort of questions that Adil does, only he can query me mentally, without having to speak out loud.

He brings me mushrooms to eat. I think about refusing them, choosing insanity or death over torture, but I figure they'll force feed me if I don't eat voluntarily.

I quickly lose track of time. If Kerwin went away to sleep for seven or eight hours every night, I might be able to mark the days, but the short, regular breaks send me into a spin. After the first handful of sessions, I struggle to estimate how long I've been held captive, and as the torture keeps up, I'm soon lost in a timeless haze. Have I been here days? Weeks? Months?

I mount a spirited defence, in spite of the pain and confusion. It's as if there's someone else inside me, sliding blocks around. Kerwin's frustrated and hateful, but he continues to chip away, pounding at the barriers that I mount.

Eventually, in a weak moment, when I'm exhausted and in pain, wishing I was home with George and Rachel, my barriers crumble at the edges, and he squeezes a tired, "London," out of me in reply to the first question I was

asked. That startles him, and he stops to go fetch Adil. I should enjoy the respite, but I spend it cursing myself. Now that they've wedged my mind open a crack, it's surely only a matter of time before they force the rest from me.

Adil's thoughtful-looking when he returns. "London," he says, circling me as I lie slumped on the icy floor. "That's not the answer I was expecting."

"I only said it to tease you," I croak, but he doesn't buy the weak lie.

"I want to know where you came from in the Merge," he says. "Why mention a place in the Born?"

"To wind you up," I jeer. "I've never even been to London."

"A lie," Adil says, "and a curious one. I know you have ties to London, as that's where Orlan and Argate first crossed paths with you, and where I..."

He coughs and tries to wave away what he was saying, but I pounce on his error. "...and where you sent them to search for me more recently," I accuse him.

The king smirks. "I haven't a clue what you might be referring to," he says with a twinkle in his eye, and I'm certain now that he was the one who sicced the killers on me. "But why claim London as your point of origin?" he muses aloud. "If I didn't know better, I'd think you were Born."

"Maybe I am," I chuckle, trying to use the truth to throw him off the scent.

Adil chuckles too. "The spheres are strange, but not that strange. You couldn't be a locksmith if you were Born. Although, if you were a descendant..." He thinks about something, then shakes his head. "No, regardless of your heritage, you're a Lox, and there are no Born Loxes, except for the occasional royal or two."

I pretend to wince. "OK, you got me, I confess. I'm a prince. So you'd better let me go, or they'll be hell to —"

"A prince without an aura?" he smirks.

“I had it masked by a deviser,” I say blithely.

“No,” he says, seriously this time. “I wondered if that might be the case, so I had you examined by an unraveller while you were unconscious, one who can expose even the most artfully hidden aura. You’re not Family, but you are a Lox, so you’re definitely Merged, which makes me wonder...” He turns to Kerwin. “Might Archibald truly be teasing us? Could London be a red herring, not a revelation but a cunning distraction?”

“Only if it was extremely cunning,” Kerwin grunts. “I prised it from him and he was distraught when the word slipped out. You can’t fake a reaction like that.”

“Don’t be so sure,” Adil says. “Perhaps he’s been trained to resist mind readers, and this was a sly parry, not a weary capitulation.”

“I suppose it’s possible,” Kerwin says grudgingly.

Adil stops in front of me and runs a hand through his bouffant of sparkling red hair while considering his next move.

“Let’s assume it wasn’t a trick,” he finally says. “We’ll treat it as if it’s a genuine slip. Make London the focus of your enquiries for the time being. Perhaps there are issues in his past that we have to address before we can move on to his life in the Merge.”

“What do you want to find out?” Kerwin asks.

“I’ve no idea,” Adil says, “but there must be something he wants to hide from us. Whatever secrets he’s sitting on, uncover them.”

“It won’t be easy,” Kerwin warns. “Mind reading works best when you maintain a narrow focus. If we broaden this out to his Born days, it might open a can of worms that could take ages to sift through.”

Adil shrugs. “We’re in no rush. If we have to devote months to this, we shall. Years, if necessary, until we know.”

“Know what?” I ask shakily.

“Everything,” he says darkly, as he said once before. Then the king calls for the door to be opened and leaves me alone with an annoyed-looking Kerwin.

“I’m confident you weren’t trying to play me,” Kerwin says coldly, “but if I’m wrong and you were acting...” He flexes his fingers. “The pain you’re experiencing now will be nothing compared to what I’ll put you through.”

“A vain threat,” I sneer.

Kerwin shakes his head slowly. “A promise,” he says. Then he smiles – his smiles are so rare that they always fill me with unease – and extends his hands towards me. It’s probably just my imagination, but the suckers in his fingers seem to be opening and closing, like dozens of tiny mouths. “Now,” he gargles grimly, “let’s find out more about London ...”

I continue to battle with Kerwin over the coming sessions, as he quizzes me about what I did before I was delivered to the Merge. He asks about my family, education, home. I refuse to answer even the most innocent question, putting so many blocks in place that at times I’m not sure of the facts myself. There are periods, during the bleakest moments, as I’m scrambling to deflect his mental feelers, when I truly can’t recall the names of my parents or what happened to them to leave me an orphan.

The grey areas inside my head infuriate Kerwin. “It’s like you don’t have a past,” he complains.

I chuckle weakly and stare at the vine in the corner of the ceiling. I often focus on it when I’m being interrogated. I decide to mention it to Kerwin, hoping that if I can engage him in chitchat, maybe he’ll start seeing me as a real person, not a subject to interrogate. Highly unlikely, but anything’s worth a shot.

“Does that look like a 5 to you?” I ask.

Kerwin glances at the vine. “Of course,” he snorts. “It was devised that way. Did you think it was a natural quirk?”

“Yes,” I say.

He sneers. “This is one of a series of cells. I’m not sure what the Topazers used them for in the past, but they fell under our control long ago. We have rooms like this in many cities across the realms, so that we can conduct our business on the go. It saves us having to haul nuisances like you back to Ruby.”

“How many cells are there?” I ask.

“That’s classified,” Kerwin smirks. “Maybe five, maybe dozens.”

“Anybody in cells 1 to 4?” I press.

“No idea,” Kerwin says cheerfully, “but the fact that they stuck you in 5 makes me suspect you’re not alone.”

I nod thoughtfully, then say, “Thanks.”

“For what?” Kerwin replies, startled.

“I wasn’t sure if I was in Topaz or Ruby. You’ve cleared that up for me.”

Kerwin’s face falls. I don’t think his king would look on him kindly if he found out what his henchman has unwittingly revealed.

“Don’t worry,” I tell Kerwin. “I won’t say anything if you don’t.”

He shoots me daggers. “Oh no,” he growls. “I won’t fall for that trick.”

“What trick?” I frown.

“You’re trying to establish a bond between us,” he says.

“The thought never crossed my mind,” I lie.

“It won’t work,” Kerwin yells. “I’ll inform Adil of my lapse, and if he chooses to punish me, I’ll consider it fair treatment. There’ll be no secrets shared between you and me, boy.”

“Have it your way,” I shrug, disappointed. Then I cackle. “You know what? We should trade places.”

“What are you talking about?” he asks frostily.

“I’m much better at getting information out of you than you are at wringing it out of me,” I say with malicious pleasantness.

Kerwin shivers with rage, then opens his mouth wide and lunges for my throat with his fang-like front teeth. It looks like he’s turned vampire, and I picture him ripping open my jugular to shower in my blood as it leaves my body in a grisly red fountain.

But he pulls up short before making contact, slowly closes his mouth, and makes a noise that’s a cross between a tut and a sucking sound. “No,” he gurgles. “Adil wouldn’t approve.” His lips lift into one of those rare, chilling smiles, his blue eyes blazing, light glinting off his two unnatural teeth. “Besides, I have better ways to hurt you.” He spreads his suckered fingers and wriggles them slowly, grinning like a shark.

Then he advances.

23

I don’t enjoy many lighter moments after my minor victory over Kerwin. He was never overly talkative, but now he says nothing at all, except when nailing me with questions, and they come faster and more aggressively than before.

If Adil punishes Kerwin, it’s never mentioned. He doesn’t remove the mind reader from his post. I try bringing it up with the king the next time he visits, hoping to drive a wedge between them, but he doesn’t bite, only calmly asks about my life in London and the people I knew there.

I’m more lost in time than ever. Kerwin rarely seems to leave me for more than half an hour now. I don’t know how he’s getting enough sleep, but he always seems fresh and rested. I’m far from fresh or rested. My thoughts

are all over the place. My limbs ache, my head spins, I feel physically sick. Sometimes I drift off while Kerwin's interrogating me, only to bolt awake with a shriek when he mentally jabs me to wake me up.

I've definitely been here a few months, maybe a lot longer. I don't think it's been a year, but I could be wrong. There isn't a chance in hell that I'll be rescued. I'm sure Inez, Cal and my other friends scoured the streets of Niffelheim in search of me, but if they were going to find me, they would have by now. I'm secreted away in some forgotten place, known only to Adil and his cronies, theirs to do with as they please.

There's been one more serious slip, but I got away with it. I flashed on an image of Big Ben. If Kerwin had seized on that and focused on the train of thought, it might have provided him with the big breakthrough that he's been chasing, but he dismissed it as nothing more than me recalling a famous tourist attraction that I'd visited.

Still, the slip haunts me, and I have nightmares about it on those rare moments when I grab a snatch of sleep. Winston suffered at the hands of Adil, and I don't want to reveal anything that would put the foul king back on his scent and lead him to the wrap zone.

I'm exhausted. I haven't had any real sleep since I was imprisoned. My thoughts are wandering, and that must allow something to seep through, because suddenly Kerwin's no longer inside my head. He's pulled back and is staring at me.

"Wrap zone," he says in a low, gurgly voice, and an icy blast shoots through me. "Why were you thinking about a wrap zone in London?"

"Don't know... what you're... talking about," I gasp, scrambling to erect new barriers. "Rat zone?"

Kerwin ignores my clumsy attempt at deflection. "Tell me more about this wrap zone," he murmurs, running a finger across my right cheek, stroking me the way a lab technician might stroke a mouse that he plans to inject with poison. "Where is it? Who built it? Who lives there?" he asks softly,

and my eyes must widen, because he chuckles. “Now we’re getting somewhere,” he crows.

Before I can say anything, all ten fingers are spread across my scalp, the suckers have me in their grip, and he’s back inside my skull.

I scrap doggedly over the next few sessions, but I’m feeling vulnerable. The wrap zone was a major reveal. It’s a sign that my defences are dissolving, that Kerwin is beginning to break me.

He focuses solely on the wrap zone now, firing question after question at me. I blank him as best I can, but he starts picking out bits and pieces. He sees that it links London to other cities, and manages to pinpoint a few of them, spotting the Eifel Tower and Sydney Opera House in among my jumble of thoughts.

He brings in Adil to help with the interrogation, and the pair discuss wrap zones. There aren’t many, as they’re incredibly difficult to create, and this one is unknown to the king and his underling.

“It’s clearly a monumental work,” Adil muses aloud. “Who could have built such a thing? Who would have had the powers required?”

“And the contacts to keep it a secret this long?” Kerwin asks. He’s probing my thoughts as they speak.

“Do you spend a lot of time there, Archibald?” the king asks kindly.

“Rat zone,” I gasp, which is what I’ve been saying since the questioning began.

“How did you find it?” the king asks.

“Rat zone.”

“It can’t have been deserted,” he mutters.

“Rat zone.”

“Why would the people living there invite you to stay?” he presses. “Kerwin says you look on this place as a base. Who could have trusted you enough to share such a secret with an apprentice locksmith?”

“Rat zone,” I cry, tears coursing down my cheeks.

“The clock,” Kerwin says out of the blue. “Big Ben. He’s thought about it before. I didn’t put it together with the wrap zone until now, but yes... I see... that’s how he gets in.”

“No!” I shout. “Rat zone! Rat zone! Rat zone!”

“I see steps,” Kerwin whispers, real fingers squeezing my skull as his mental fingers dig deeper than ever. “He climbs up steps. But not the first time. The first time he entered through the clock face... there was a lock...”

I try to shake my head, to shudder, to push him away, but I’m helpless. The worst thing is that the more he says, the more I find myself thinking about Big Ben and walking towards one of its clock faces after my trek from New York, fiddling with the lock...

“Yes,” Kerwin says excitedly. “It’s all about the lock... no, not just one... all the locks... so many of them...”

I try to turn my thoughts away, but I’m let down by whatever force it is that’s been giving me the power to repel Kerwin’s advances. In fact it’s almost as if that part betrays me and drags my attention back to that day, because in my mind’s eye I’m forced through the borehole in the clock face, into a room full of...

“Cuckoo!” Kerwin cries. “Cuckoo! Cuckoo!”

Adil stares at the mind reader as if he fears for his sanity, but Kerwin keeps chirping, “Cuckoo! Cuckoo!”

The call of my tormentor drives my thoughts further into that room, a room full of cuckoo clocks, collected and maintained by...

“A face,” Kerwin breathes. “I see it clearly. I’ll remember. We can get someone to sketch it.”

“I hope it’s not a cuckoo’s face,” Adil says drolly, but Kerwin ignores him. His features are alight, his blue eyes practically shining from within.

“More,” he says greedily, leaning towards me, his curved fangs mere centimetres away from puncturing an eyeball. “Feed me. I want it all. You fought for so long, so smug when you deflected me, but now you’re mine. I’ll have it all.”

“No!” I roar, almost finding the strength to push him away. Almost, but not quite. And as I’m trying to break clear of the mind reader, he slips further inside my head, and in a moment of perfect dread, his expression ignites.

“A name,” he croons. “I have the name of the person who gave him shelter.”

“Excellent,” Adil beams.

“He’s known to us,” Kerwin says. “Someone who escaped your clutches.”

“No!” I moan, trying to deny the truth of the accusation to come.

“Escaped?” Adil frowns.

“One of the few who got away,” Kerwin nods.

“No,” I wheeze, but neither man hears me. “I don’t... I didn’t... rat zone...”

But it’s too late for rat zones or anything else, because Kerwin has it now, the location and the identity, all that he needs.

“Winston Lox,” Kerwin says, and Adil’s grey eyes blaze with fury.

“Winston,” the king echoes.

“The wrap zone is where he’s been hiding all these decades,” Kerwin chortles, and it’s the sound of a pig being slaughtered.

Adil whistles. “No wonder we couldn’t find him.” He looks distantly at the 5-shaped vine in the ceiling, his thoughts elsewhere, lost in the past.

“Please,” I whimper, though I know I’m wasting my breath. “Please...”

Adil’s gaze swims back into focus. “Winston Lox,” he breathes. “There’s a name I haven’t heard in a long time.”

And to my guilty horror, he smiles.

24

“We must fetch him,” Adil coos, rubbing his hands together like an actor in a pantomime.

“You want me to come with you?” Kerwin asks, surprised.

“No,” the king says. “You need to stay and keep pumping our young locksmith for information. I’m sure he has far more to reveal. But I’ll set off with a few of my people immediately. I doubt he’ll have heard that Archibald is missing, but once he does, he might be inspired to up stakes.” The king stares at me oddly. “It’s strange that he took you in and befriended you. Seeing that face appear outside his den, I’d have expected him to...”

He trails off into silence, and I’m too distracted to pay much attention to what he was saying. My thoughts are reeling as I desperately search for a way out of this mess. Kerwin has released me, and I use the brief break to flounder for words to convince Adil to leave the old locksmith alone. I’m sure there’s nothing I can say, so I’m astonished when the voice inside my head, which hasn’t spoken since the day I was chased by Orlan and Argate, pipes up.

“I deliberately slipped the wrap zone’s existence to them,” it says. “Now repeat what I tell you.”

The voice starts feeding information to me, in pictures rather than words, and the shadowy outline of a plan swiftly reveals itself. It would have been

helpful if this had been shared with me before, but I guess the voice was wary of revealing too much in advance, in case Kerwin caught wind of it.

“Winston’s of no interest to you,” I tell Adil as images of Moscow and rats flicker through my thoughts.

He frowns. “What do you know about my interests?”

“He’s a retired wreck,” I continue, glad that Winston isn’t present to hear me talk about him this way. “He’s the past, old news, nothing to do with our business.”

“I disagree,” Adil says. “He became relevant again when he took you under his wing. I wouldn’t have expected him to mentor another locksmith after... and one who looks...” He pauses. “Has he told you about his other students?”

I think the king’s trying to find out if I know about Stefan and what happened when he betrayed Winston. I play dumb, but not too dumb. “Winston told me he’d had a run-in with you,” I mutter. “He said you tortured him, but he broke free.”

“Not quite,” Adil snaps. “He was broken free. I don’t suppose he mentioned the names of his accomplices?”

“No,” I lie, not sure if he knows about Malina’s role in it.

“And his apprentice?” Adil asks softly.

“What apprentice?” I answer blankly.

He waves that away and says, “We were always going to break you, but this will proceed more smoothly with the help of your master.”

Adil turns to leave.

“You’re making a mistake,” I stop him. “Leave Winston out of this.”

“No,” he says. “I never miss a chance to settle an old score. He and his allies killed people close to me. I’ll see him pay for his crimes.”

“It’s no crime to stand against an evil tyrant,” I shout.

Adil blinks, surprised by the directness of my insult. Then he mockingly inclines his head towards me and turns for the door once more.

“Please,” I moan. “Winston trusted me. He gave me a home. Don’t turn me into a traitor. Leave him alone.”

“Why should I?” Adil asks, then looks back when I don’t answer, sensing a cruel opportunity. “Why?” he snarls, and the excitement in his voice is clear.

“If you let him be,” I mumble, “I’ll tell you... whatever you want to know.”

“How do I know you won’t lie?” he asks.

“Kerwin can verify the truth,” I say bitterly.

“You’ll open yourself to him?” Adil presses. “No more fighting? You’ll grant him access to your memories and answer all my questions?”

I gulp, then nod reluctantly.

“In that case...” the king starts to crow.

“There’s one condition,” I stop him.

He grows wary. “What?” he snaps suspiciously.

“I want you to take me to the wrap zone, so that I can tell Winston to go find a new home.”

“Do you take me for a fool?” the king barks. “This is a clumsy attempt to escape. You’ll have to come up with a more cunning plan than that, foolish pup.”

“There’s no plan,” I say quietly. “I’m sure you have people who can ensure my cooperation, who can still my tongue and make me march to your tune. I won’t ask you to trust me. You can place whatever restraints on me you want.”

Adil stares at me silently, thinking it over.

“I just want to ensure Winston’s freedom,” I continue, “to tell him that the wrap zone’s no longer a secret. Once I’ve done that, you’ll let him go, so he can search for somewhere else to live.”

“What if I promise not to target him, so that he can remain in the wrap zone?” Adil asks.

I shake my head. “I need to see him walk away, to be sure he’s safe.” I reach for Kerwin’s hand, and to his surprise I lay the puckered fingers on my forehead. I take a deep breath, getting the words clear inside my head before I voice them, being very careful with how I phrase this. “Once I’ve seen Winston walk away from the wrap zone, I’ll stop blocking Kerwin and answer every question you put to me.”

Adil looks to Kerwin, who nods, then removes his hand. “He’s telling the truth.”

The king smiles thinly. “I’m tempted, Archie,” he says, dropping the more formal sounding Archibald now that he’s broken me, “but I already possess you, and I can have Winston here too, in a matter of hours, so…”

“Are you forgetting the locks?” I bark. “Kerwin saw them. You can take your best locksmiths, but it will take them ages to gain entrance to the wrap zone. Winston will be long gone by the time you force your way in.”

“Then why cut a deal with me?” Adil counters. “If you’re that sure of his escape, why not let things play out as they will?”

“Because this would afford me certainty,” I answer. Then I lower my gaze and say more softly, “And because I want to say goodbye.”

“You don’t think you’ll see him again?” Adil asks.

I look up. “Will I ever see any of my friends again?”

Adil sighs and gives it more thought. “I’d need assurances,” he says in the end. “You’d have to let Kerwin into your thoughts, as you did just now, and answer some questions, so that I can be sure we wouldn’t be walking into a trap.”

“I’ll agree to that,” I nod.

“If you try to escape...” he says.

“I know.”

He grimaces. “Very well, Archie, you have a deal.”

“One last thing,” I add, and when he looks at me cagily, I force a sweet smile. “Only my friends get to call me Archie. You can call me Archibald.”

25

As Kerwin grips my head and monitors my responses, Adil asks me if there’s anyone in the wrap zone with Winston.

“There’s no one else in the wrap zone,” I answer truthfully.

“Will you zizz your allies while you’re in the Born?” he presses. “Call them to help you escape?”

“I won’t zizz anyone to help me in the Born,” I reply, phrasing it carefully. “All my friends are in the Merge, and I won’t summon any of them to London.”

If Adil knew about my unique zizzing abilities, he’d ask me different questions, and I wouldn’t be able to hide my intent, but he assumes I’m the same as everyone else, tied by the limits that they are, so it never crosses his mind that I might be fishing for assistance after my trip to the Born.

When the king's confident that I won't be leading him into a trap, he takes Kerwin and leaves me alone for a while. Kerwin returns a few minutes later with a chair, which he sets in the centre of the room, a reward for my cooperation. If I wasn't so exhausted and sick of the ice, I'd tell him to stuff it, but I'm too weary to defy him, so I shuffle across and sit, staring at the wall in silence.

I assumed Adil would bring a team of musclemen to ensure I play ball, but when he returns, there's only one person by his side, a beautiful woman whose hair, eyes and freckles are all a bewitching shade of purple.

"Skeen?" I gasp.

"I'm sorry we have to meet like this, Archie," she says sadly.

"So you were in on my kidnapping too," I snarl.

"I'm afraid so," she says with an apologetic grimace. "I hope Kerwin hasn't done too much damage. It must be so distressing. If there's anything I can do to help ease your pain..."

"Go throw yourself into the fires of release," I grunt.

Skeen laughs. "At least I don't have to pretend to be nice to you any longer," she says, ditching the warm-hearted act. "You're a dull creature, Archibald. It's been a drag, wasting time in your company. I don't know what my king sees in you."

"Oh, there's more to Archibald than meets the eye," Adil clucks. "You shouldn't be so disrespectful. You might be taking orders from him one day."

Skeen and I both look at the king with astonishment.

"I meant what I said a while back," he says to me. "I hope to bring you on board as a partner."

"Never," I say weakly.

“I didn’t realise,” Skeen mutters, looking worried. “You should have told me he was a potential ally.”

“I’m not,” I shout.

Adil ignores me and glares at Skeen. “Are you telling me I have to justify myself to you?”

“Of course not,” Skeen says swiftly. “I didn’t mean it to sound that way. Please accept my apologies, sire.”

“I will,” the king huffs, “but don’t make such a mistake again.”

Skeen gulps, then steps behind me and rests a hand on my back. After a few seconds I feel a warmth. It’s pleasant at first, but then it grows heated and I gasp as flames seem to lick at my heart. I try to pull away from Skeen but can’t — it’s like her hand is glued to my back. Then the heat diminishes and becomes a pleasing glow again.

“We’re joined now,” Skeen says. “You can’t break free until I release you. If Adil gives the word, I’ll burn your heart to a cinder in seconds.”

“An insurance policy,” Adil murmurs, “as you suggested, Archibald.”

“Fine,” I sniff, and glance back at Skeen. “That’s a wicked talent.”

“It’s how I first met Noah,” she says. “I was his chief assassin. It helps keep him in line. He’d never cheat on me, because he knows what I’d do if I found out.”

“True love,” I deadpan, and there’s a quick flare of heat in my chest, as an angry Skeen warns me without words not to push her too far.

“I was going to bring guards to subdue Winston,” Adil says, “so that he wouldn’t make a break for freedom before you have a chance to tell him he doesn’t need to run. Then I decided not to bother. If he stands his ground when we show up, you can tell him of our deal and that he’s free to look for new lodgings.”

“And if he runs?” I ask, knowing that isn’t on the agenda, since Winston isn’t in the wrap zone, but putting on an act to make it look convincing.

“Then you don’t get to say anything to him,” Adil says stiffly. “Let him flee like a cur and shake with fear for the rest of his days, thinking my people are a few steps behind him.”

“That’s cruel,” I note.

Adil shrugs, then taps my chest with a finger. “Don’t forget, Archibald, if you try to play me for a fool...”

“I’ll burn,” I whisper.

Adil sighs. “I hope we don’t have to go down that route. I believe we can be great friends if we get through this, but if you force my hand...”

He leaves the threat hanging and goes to rap on the door. It opens instantly and we march out of the cell in file, Adil leading the way, Skeen as tight to my back as my shadow.

We walk along a few icy corridors, nothing to see except some closed doors, and enter a room with several boreholes. Adil steps through one and we follow, ending up in another room, only framed by brick walls instead of ice. There are lots of boreholes here and they all look the same. The king doesn’t seem confused though, and leads us to a borehole far over to the right.

We pass through another two similar rooms until we step out onto a small bridge in a park. It’s late afternoon but the park’s busy and lots of people are stopping on the bridge to take photos. A quick look left reveals Buckingham Palace, and when I glance right, I spot the top of the London Eye, and instantly know where I am.

“St James’ Park,” I smile. I’ve often spent a happy few hours here, feeding nuts to the squirrels, admiring its many different wild birds, mingling with tourists and listening to their stories.

“We’re lucky the entrance to the wrap zone is in such a prominent city,” Adil says. “I often come to London when I’m required to visit the Born, which is why I have a short route to this spot mapped out.”

“Why don’t we pop into Buck Palace, so you can say hello to your fellow royals?” I smile.

“We don’t mix with the likes of them,” Adil says dismissively. “Family members are chosen by a higher force to be bearers of a great responsibility, whereas Born royals simply fought or bought their way into power.”

“They get cool crowns and palaces,” I note.

Adil shrugs. “ We get to do work that truly matters. Enough. Big Ben awaits. You can lead from here, Archibald.”

I trudge through the park, saying nothing, trying to look as if I’m enjoying the sights and smells, pausing every so often to stare at a bird or sniff a flower. In fact my thoughts are elsewhere, as I recall the oddly shaped vine in my cell and transmit a mental photograph of it out into the ether, no idea if I’m doing this right or if it will lead to anything, just flying by the seat of my pants, following the plan that my inner voice laid out to me back in the cell.

I buy myself as much time as I can, but I don’t want to go too slowly, in case the king grows suspicious. It’s a short walk to the base of Big Ben when we exit the park, and we’re there within minutes.

“I can’t see anything,” Skeen says, looking up at the world-famous clock.

“Of course not,” Adil replies. “Wrap zones only reveal themselves once you enter. I assume that’s the borehole?” He points to a blue panel of light in the fence which separates the Houses of Parliament from the general public.

“Yes,” I confirm.

“After you,” the king says, and I step forward into the little lobby area on the other side of the borehole, then climb the stairs to Winston’s rooms.

Skeen whistles when we hit a point two-thirds up. This is the first spot where you can see vines stretching across the sky, and some of the wrap zone's neighbouring landmarks, such as the Great Pyramid of Egypt and Machu Picchu.

Adil pays no attention to the stunning sight. He's focused on his meeting with Winston. His fingers are twitching and I get the sense that part of him is sorry he struck a deal with me. That part would rather get its hands on the old locksmith, so that the king could finish what he started all those decades ago.

We come to the door at the top of the stairs. It's locked, but although I told the truth about the king's locksmiths needing hours or longer to prise it open, the lock yields to my touch in a matter of seconds.

It's like coming home when I step back into the rooms of locks and cuckoo clocks, but I feel only sadness, as this is surely my final visit. Even if my wild plan pans out, Adil knows about this wrap zone now. He'll station some of his people here, to keep an eye on the place, meaning it's forever off limits to myself and Winston.

I really hope I'm doing the right thing, or else I'll have driven Winston from his home for no good reason. Even worse – and this has only just struck me – if my plan fails, he'll have no idea that I've told Adil about his base, meaning he'll return after the Tourney and walk into a trap.

I close my eyes and gulp, wishing I'd thought this through in more detail back in my cell. But there wasn't time. I had to take a wild gamble. I just have to hope that it doesn't land Winston in as much trouble as I am. It's going to be a heavy cross to carry if it does.

Opening my eyes, I clear my throat and call out, "Winston? It's me, Archie."

There's no answer, since Winston's holed up in the Maze of Ash back in Topaz, but I feign surprise and call his name again. "Winston? Are you home?"

“Where is he?” the king hisses.

“I don’t know,” I frown. “Let’s look around. It’s not a big place. It won’t take us very long.”

We quickly search the rooms, and look out on the landing which hooks up with the vines. We see lots of clocks and locks inside, and lots of famous buildings and monuments outside, but no Winston.

“What’s going on?” Adil growls. “Where’s he hiding?”

“There’s nowhere to hide,” I say. “You saw all the rooms.”

“You tipped him off,” the king snarls. “Warned him we were coming. Told him to flee before we got here.”

“How?” I snort. “And even if I could, why would I? He has to leave this place no matter what, now that you know about it. Why would I damn myself just to give him a few extra minutes of a head start?”

Adil stares at me suspiciously. He knows on a gut level that something isn’t right, but he can’t think what it might be, as everything I just said rings true.

“Do you want me to turn up the heat?” Skeen asks, giggling at her little pun.

He considers letting Skeen torment me, then shakes his head. “If he’s telling the truth, we’ll gain nothing by torturing him. And if he’s somehow outfoxed Kerwin, he’d have no trouble doing it to you too.”

“Don’t be so sure of that,” Skeen says angrily. “Mind readers are afforded too much respect. Brute force often works far more effectively.”

“Perhaps,” the king says, “but we’re not going to fall back on those ways just yet. Archibald, have you truly no idea where Winston is or when he’ll return?”

“No,” I lie. “All I can think is that he popped down the shops for a pint of milk.”

Adil doesn't laugh. If he was wary of me before, I can tell he's sure now that I'm toying with him. I should have kept my mouth shut and played dumb.

"What about your promise?" Adil snarls. "To answer my questions truthfully?"

I fake a sigh. "If you recall, I only promised to do that if I saw Winston walking away safely. Since he's not here, I can't tell him that you've found out about the wrap zone, so I can't ensure his safety — you could send a team here to capture him when he returns. It's no fault of yours, but the terms of our deal haven't been met, so I'm going to have to withdraw my offer of cooperation."

Adil's face blackens with rage. "Let's get out of here," he snaps. "He tricked us."

"How?" Skeen says.

"I don't know," the king snarls, "but we need to leave swiftly."

"What about Winston?" she asks.

"Forget him. Let's get this boy back to his cell, where Kerwin can go to work on him." The king pauses. "If you think you've suffered dreadfully, Archibald, you're sorely mistaken. The real torment only begins now."

And with that terrifying promise hanging in the air, I'm frogmarched back to St James' Park, where I take one final look at the Born before we cross, and pray that it's not the last time I set foot here.

26

Kerwin lashes into me over the next few sessions. Adil gave him a pass to assault me freely when we returned — "He lied about cooperating, so throw everything you have at him," was his curt command — and the interrogator's relishing it.

I've re-established the barriers which kept Kerwin from my inner thoughts for so long. That perplexed him at first – he assumed he'd broken me, that it would be a simple process now – until it occurred to him that I might have faked the slip.

“You're full of surprises, aren't you?” he snarls, getting right in front of me so that his bizarre blue eyes are all I can see, while his curved front fangs brush against my lips. “But why did you do it? Did you just want to breathe fresh air again before you succumb, or did you hope to escape?”

I don't answer. I'm afraid, if I open my mouth, Kerwin's fangs will snag my lower lip, and the last thing I want is to end up locked in a weird kiss with him.

Kerwin keeps his face close as his fingers creep across my scalp, searching for a spot to settle. When he finds it, he jabs at my brain again, causing me to cry out. It's been like this ever since I returned, very few questions, just a constant pounding and piercing. It's like he's sticking daggers into my head. At the moment he's not interested in information, just in drawing screams from me.

The really scary thing is that if my plan's failed, this is all I have to look forward to for the next few days or weeks or however long it takes before I snap. Adil had Kerwin on a leash before, careful not to do too much damage to my brain, as he had the crazy idea in his head that we could one day be allies. Now he doesn't seem to care. If Kerwin pushes me too far and destroys me in the process, the king might regret it later, but right now, tricked and furious, he just wants me broken.

I start losing track of time again. It feels like days unspool, then weeks, and my dreams of rescue sickeningly evaporate. If my scheme had worked, my friends would have surely come for me by now, so it must have sunk in the waters of faint hope. I'm stranded, alone with Kerwin until he rips my secrets from me and hands the wreckage of my body to his master, to dispose of as he pleases.

I consider surrender. Why let the torment drag out? It'd be better to give Kerwin and his king whatever they want. They're going to squeeze my

memories out of me no matter what. If I played ball, there'd be no more pain, and maybe Adil would look on me more favourably afterwards.

Kerwin senses me mulling it over and eases off, taking a few steps back. He waits until my screams subside, then crouches beside me as I lie shivering and weeping on the ice. (The chair was swiftly removed when they returned me to the cell.)

“That’s right,” he croaks in his toadlike voice, stroking my hair with his cephalopodic fingers. “Give us what we want, and this can be the end of the pain. Let me find the answers I seek. When I’m done, we’ll take you somewhere warm, treat you to a feast, nurse you back to a full recovery.”

My mouth opens and closes. I’m staring at the 5-shaped vine in the upper corner of the room. It held hope for me at one point. Now I despise it, because that hope has come to nothing.

“What do you say, Archibald?” Kerwin asks, as kindly as he can.

“I say... I say...”

“Yes?” he growls earthily.

I grimace at the vine, hating myself for what I’m about to say next, but unable to say anything else, because it’s who I am, and surrender isn’t in me.

“I say... go lick Adil’s shoes, and when you’ve licked your way through to his toes, then we’ll talk.”

Kerwin’s face reddens. “You swine,” he hisses.

“Oink oink,” I snort, laughing and crying at the same time.

“Why do you continue to fight?” Kerwin roars.

“Because you’re bad,” I answer simply. “I’ll always fight the bad guys. That’s what life’s about, not letting the monsters have a free run of things. You won’t win by killing me, only by turning me, so I won’t let that

happen. Grind me down, tear me apart, destroy my mind... but I'll never give you what you want."

"A fine speech," Kerwin sneers, rising slowly and flexing his fingers.

"I'm pretty proud of it," I chuckle, still weeping.

"It's condemned you," he notes.

"I'd rather be condemned by goodness than saved by wickedness," I reply.

Kerwin blinks, momentarily thrown. For just a second I think I've touched a nerve somewhere deep inside him, reminded him that the world doesn't have to be a dark, brutal place. Then his expression stiffens and I see him push the doubts away. This is what he's chosen and he's damned to stick with it.

"Come on then," I sigh. "Let's get it over with."

"Oh, it won't be quick," Kerwin gurgles, bending towards me, his horrible sucker-lined fingers outstretched. "I'll make you suffer like no one's ever suffered, and I'll make it last as long as —"

"Wait," I stop him.

"What now?" he snaps. "More speeches?"

"No," I whisper. "I just want you to confirm what I'm seeing is real. I'm worried I might be hallucinating."

"What are you talking about?" Kerwin grumbles.

I point at the vine in the ceiling, and when Kerwin turns, his jaw drops.

A knife is cutting a hole in the lowest part of the vine. It's slicing a neat, curving line, and as we watch, it comes full circle and a round chunk of vine drops out. A figure pushes through the hole and tumbles gracefully to the floor, spinning mid-air so that it lands with its feet on either side of the chunk of fallen vine.

“What... who...?” Kerwin wheezes.

The figure raises its face and reveals itself to be a thin, dirty boy, with a fiery scowl that almost melts the ice around us.

“Hello, Archie,” the boy says.

“Hello, Pol,” I reply weakly.

Pol cocks his head at the vine above him. “He’s here,” he calls.

In answer, huge hands rip at the hole and swiftly extend it, then a large man sticks his feet through and drops to the floor, landing with a loud thump.

“ You ,” Cal growls, pointing a finger at the gobsmacked Kerwin. “You stole my friend.” Cal cracks his knuckles and the life drains from Kerwin’s features as he falls to his knees and whimpers while the huge, furious man closes in on him.

Cal’s almost upon the mind reader when Kerwin remembers that there’s someone outside the cell, manning the door. “Guard!” he cries. “Help!”

At his call, the door’s hastily thrown open and a man rushes into the room. He takes in the scene in an instant and hurls himself at Cal. He’s not as big as the ginger gropster, but manages to knock him sideways and scrambles on top, hoping to pin him to the floor.

As the guard grapples with Cal, Kerwin staggers to his feet and lurches for the corridor, to raise the alarm. Before he can, someone else slips through the hole in the vine and darts in front of him, blocking his way. It’s Hugo, in his Logu disguise. “Going somewhere?” Hugo says, shutting the door to keep in the noises.

“Get out of my way or I’ll twist your mind,” Kerwin hisses, thrusting a clawed hand in Hugo’s direction.

“Try it,” Hugo grunts. “I’ll snap those fingers into tiny pieces before they get anywhere near my skull.”

Kerwin hesitates, instinctively drawing his hands in close to his chest. While he's weighing up his options, two more people drop from inside the vine, and both hurry to my side.

"Archie!" Inez cries, wrapping her arms around me.

"My boy," Winston moans, stretching a hand towards me in much the same way that Kerwin often has these past months, but there's nothing threatening in the old locksmith's gesture.

I weep into Inez's shoulder as she hugs me, and grab Winston's hand with both of mine, looping my fingers through his.

Behind Inez and Winston, Cal wriggles out from beneath the guard and twists him over onto his stomach. The guard bellows for help, but not for long, because Cal starts slamming his head into the icy floor. The guard gasps the first two times, then falls silent. Cal continues slamming the unconscious guard's head into the ice, his expression dark with rage and hatred.

"No," I groan, pushing Inez and Winston away. "Cal... stop."

He pauses and stares at me, still holding the guard's head, ready to slam it into the floor again.

"Don't kill him," I croak. "That isn't what we do. It mustn't be what we do."

Cal's eyes widen. "I wasn't going to..." he protests, then stares at his hands and the guard's bleeding head. He gulps and carefully lowers the guard's head, turning it sideways so that he can breathe freely. "Sorry," he whispers, then stands and rubs his hands together. "Thank you, Archibald."

"Don't be silly," I grin. "I'm the one who has to thank you. All of you."

I look around the room at my friends, Cal and Inez, Winston and Hugo, and the vine rat, Pol, who owed me nothing, but on whom I pinned all my hopes. I open my mouth to say something, then two more heads pop out of

the hole in the vine. One's a girl with blonde hair, knotted into braids. The other's a boy with spiky pink hair. They're dirty children like Pol, with hooks on their hands.

"This the guy?" the girl asks.

"Yeah," Pol says.

"He'll have to pay us back," the boy says.

"He owes us big," the girl agrees.

"Archie knows," Pol sniffs. "He'll repay the favour any way he can, any time you ask."

The rats look satisfied with that, and glance eagerly at the cowering Kerwin.

"Are you gonna kill him?" the girl asks.

"Can we help?" the boy says chirpily.

"I've something else in mind," Winston growls, striding over to where Kerwin is wringing his hands. "If Archie's been damaged..." he says, then looks back at me.

"I'll be fine," I say wearily, "but I had to take them to Big Ben and reveal your wrap zone to Adil. It was the only way I could get to the Born, to zizz Pol."

"We wondered how you'd managed that," Inez says. She's holding my hand and beaming, though a few tears have trickled down her cheeks. "I understood what had happened when Pol came to us. I knew you must have zizzed him with an image of where you were being held, but I didn't know how you'd got out of the Merge."

"I almost didn't respond," Pol says. "I didn't know what was happening when I got a distress call from you and a picture of a vine shaped like a

number 5. I thought I was going mad. I nearly said nothing and waited for my head to clear.”

“But he asked the Mischief about it instead,” the girl rat says. “That’s what we call our leaders.”

“Archie knows all about Mischiefs,” Pol grunts.

“I recalled you guys telling me you explored every vine that you could,” I smile at him. “I couldn’t know for sure if a rat had ever been through here, but hoped one had, and that the vine’s unusual shape would have been noted. It was a long shot, but the only shot I had.”

“Those numbskulls in the Mischief hadn’t a clue,” the boy with the pink, spiky hair laughs, “but they asked the rest of us. Jacinta and I had scurved this way a long time ago and we recalled it — there’s a series of rooms here, all with vines twisted into different numbers.”

“I remembered,” Jacinta snorts. “Jarlath didn’t.”

“I did remember,” Jarlath pouts. “I just wasn’t sure it was the same vine that Pol had described.”

“Anyway,” Pol says, “once Jacinta and Jarlath agreed to guide me, I went to tell your friends, as I figured they’d want to help.”

Winston takes up the story. “We were in the training complex. Hugo had come to inform me of your kidnapping, and I’d returned with him. I couldn’t sit this out.”

“Kurtis betrayed us,” I tell Inez.

“I know,” she says emotionlessly. “Poppy was leaving in one of the sleighs when I got to the bottom of the slide, and the other sleigh was gone — I reckon the handler had been told to take it to the bottom of one of the other slides, to pick up Dai and Kurtis. I roared at Poppy as she fled, then went on a loop of the mountain, expecting to find you, thinking it was a nasty joke. I didn’t suspect anything worse than that when there was no sign of you. I

guessed you were circling the mountain too, in search of me, so I stopped and waited, but when you didn't show, and when I couldn't find you later, after another couple of circuits..."

"I told you we couldn't trust him," I say accusingly, and Inez winces.

"You think I haven't cursed myself for not seeing through him?" she asks. "You think I haven't lain awake every night, crying?"

"Go easy on yourself," Cal says. "The SubMerged are skilled deceivers. You're not the first to fall for their charms. Don't blame her, Archibald. This should be a joyous occasion."

"I wasn't blaming you," I tell Inez. "Even I never expected this of him. I didn't think he'd hand me over to someone like..." I nod my head at Kerwin.

"I don't understand why they targeted you," Hugo frowns. "Was it revenge for what you did in Sapphire? If so, why didn't they take Inez too?"

"That doesn't matter," Winston says quickly. "I doubt we'll learn anything from this wretched mind reader." He raises an eyebrow at Kerwin, who flushes and shakes his head. "So, unless we resort to their deplorable tactics and try to squeeze answers from him, we'll just have to go on wondering."

"What are we going to do with him?" Cal asks, glaring at Kerwin. "Knock him out like the guard?"

"I hardly think that will be punishment enough," Winston says softly. "Bind him good and tight, Cal, and leave the rest to me and Logu. I have the perfect sentence in mind for a man of his refined skills."

"You don't scare me," Kerwin says defiantly. "If you hurt me, Adil will have your head."

"We'll be long gone by the time your king finds out what's happened," Winston says. "Now, no more talk. Let's flee this place before someone notices the guard's absence. Cal, how are you getting on?"

“Nearly done,” Cal says, tying Kerwin’s hands behind his back.

“Logu and I will take Kerwin, if Jacinta and Jarlath will guide us,” Winston says.

“No problem,” Jacinta says.

“I’ve nothing better to be doing,” Jarlath sniffs.

“Pol will lead the rest of you back to your room,” Winston says to me, and smiles encouragingly. “As someone who’s gone through this himself, trust me when I say you’ll need a lot of rest.”

“Tell me about it,” I whisper. “But Winston... where are you going to take him?”

“Yes, where?” Kerwin snarls. “The fires of release? A river of blood?”

“Nowhere so comforting,” Winston says. “If you’d killed Archie or destroyed his mind, I’d have taken you to one of your fellow mind readers and put you through all that you’d inflicted on him. But since Archie looks as if he’s going to recover...”

“I will,” I smile.

“...I’ve something else lined up.” Winston’s eyes sparkle, and he asks Kerwin with all the sweetness he can muster, “Have you ever explored the lower levels of the Maze of Ash?”

Kerwin crumples. “No,” he whimpers. “Not the maze. Anything but that.”

“Be careful,” Winston growls, “or you’ll tempt me to think of something more deadly. You’ll wander for decades in the maze, which will give you plenty of time to reflect on what you’ve done, but as long as your mind holds, you’ll eventually solve its mysteries and emerge alive. That’s more than you deserve, and if you say anything to infuriate me, I’ll reconsider, and you won’t like what I come up with.”

Kerwin nods miserably. I can tell by the way he's shaking that he's dreading the dark, lonely, wandering years to come, but I can't say I feel sorry for him.

“Now, get out of here and go sleep,” Winston says to me.

Without any further ado, I let myself be lifted by Cal up towards the vine, where Jacinta and Jarlath are waiting to haul me into sticky darkness and lead me on the long but welcome crawl home.

Archibald Lox and the Slides of Bon Repell is book 2 of 3 of the second volume of the Archibald Lox series...

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