

## Chapter 23

You set sail out onto the lake with Mira and Ronn. Getting the map out of your pocket, you check to see where you're going. The X points to the middle of the lake, so that's where you tell Ronn to head towards. You look out onto the lake, just enjoying the feeling of being out on the still water. The sky has almost completely cleared now, save for a few thin, white strips of clouds. Ronn is enjoying one of the ales you gave him as payment while he sails.

"I hope you know what you're doing, girls. There's nothing out here but water." Ronn says, looking out on the horizon. You and Mira look at each other. You have no clue, you have nothing to go on other than the map.

You sail for a while, and you soon start to see the edges of land in the distance. You spot the watermill from your trip to Bird's Tail and not far behind, the walls surrounding the town. "We've gone too far, we need to turn around," you say to Ronn. He'd been right though. You'd sailed right through the middle, and you hadn't even noticed.

"Is there any other clue at all on the map that we've overlooked?" Mira asks, peeking at the map, but she sees nothing you haven't seen before. She curses under her breath and folds her hands together, her elbows resting on her thighs.

You lean back and stare at the sky, thinking back to what he said that day. He'd said you must prove yourself, that he'd take away holiday joy, that you'd have to find him to get it back. You think back to what he did, the tone he said things in, to anything that might give a clue as to what you're supposed to do, but there's nothing. At least it's a nice day. You haven't had a nice day like this in days. Looking up at the few strips of clouds left, you finally notice something. There are three strips of clouds, all going in different directions, but they all intersect at the exact same spot. You tap Mira on the shoulder and show her what you found. She follows your finger, spots what you saw and smiles. "You're right. No one can convince me that's a coincidence," she says, looking back at you. Ronn also followed your finger, and you ask him to head towards the intersection.

It doesn't take long before the intersection is directly above you, and you look around excitedly. But this is where your lead ends. There's nothing around you, nothing under you as far as you can see, nothing above you apart from the clouds.

"So what now?" Mira asks, and you tell her you have no clue. Ronn kicks back, ale in his hand, and seems content with just relaxing as you try to figure out what to do next. Then you remember the gift Don gave you. You still have plenty left of the trailfinder, so you fish out the potion from your bag and pour a little bit out. The pink line of mist you saw back in the forest reappears and you feel a spark of hope. That is, until the mist goes

straight down and disappears under the water. You've already done your best to look under the boat and water, but you've seen nothing. You take another look, since that's where the trailfinder went.

"It can't mean that you have to go diving, right?" Mira says, looking over the edge of the boat. Neither of you see anything under there, and the water here is pretty clear.

"Hello?" you shout out. It's a shot in the dark, but you really don't feel like going for a swim right now. "Warlock?" You wait. No reply.

"Did he give you a name? Anything at all?" Mira asks, and you think back to what he called himself.

"Not really, just a few adjectives. He was very dramatic about it all. Very theatrical," you recall.

"Then maybe you have to be theatrical back? Something like," and she goes on to give a little example of what you could do.

Remembering what words he used to describe himself back then, you raise your arms to the sky, keeping them wide, and say, "Oh great and terrible, undefeated warlock! Hear my words and grant my plea. Reveal thyself so I may prove myself to thee!"

As you say the words, the sky rumbles. It starts with a small ripple in the water, the waves getting bigger and bigger as the water splits beneath you. The boat rocks dramatically as you drift with the water. A large snowy island ascends from the parted lake. Once the island has fully emerged, the water stills and the boat is now swaying softly next to the island. You'd think a large island emerging from the split water, now rejoined, would have a bigger effect on the waves. But the boat sits quietly, waiting for whatever's next. On the island stands a huge ice palace, with gorgeous ice crystals and pillars.

"I guess this is our stop," Mira says, looking at the island. You both get out of the boat, hearing the nice crunch of the snow underneath your boots.

"I'll stay here, keep watch," Ronn says, which you're sure means he'll stay there and enjoy the ale.

Around the island, ice blocks have been sculpted into various figures, such as different animals and mythical creatures. Scattered around are also several attempts at snowmen, some only have heads, others have crumbled. You also see snowmen that look perfect, and these look identical to each other. You're fairly certain this was someone trying to make them by hand, giving up, then made them by magic instead. After having looked around, you head to the palace.

"Do you think you can just melt down this entire palace with your powers? If he's in there, he'll be left exposed to us." Mira says.

“We’re not doing that.” Icy blue front steps lead up to a large blue door, intricate patterns line the frame. Carefully, you knock on the door and wait. Nothing happens.

“Maybe just try opening it?” Mira asks but makes no move to actually do what she suggested. The door doesn’t have any handles, so you place your palms on the door and gently push. It doesn’t budge, so you push harder, still no luck. You step back and study the door and its surroundings once more. Looking down, you notice you’re standing on a doormat, or the ice version of a doormat.

“Look,” you say, stepping off the doormat to reveal musical notes. “You don’t by any chance know how to read sheet music, do you?”

She looks at the notes. “Actually, I can.” Then she starts softly humming a tune, presumably what the notes read. You recognise the tune, it’s a well-known Christmas carol.

“He’s going to make us sing this song to open the door, isn’t he?” you say.

“Not us. You’re the one he wants to see.” She sees the look you give her, pleading for her to sing with you so you don’t have to sing alone. “But I suppose I can’t let you have all the fun.” So you both face the door and start singing the song. You hope he’s not judging you based on the actual singing.

Once you’ve finished the song, the door slowly opens, revealing an inside that is just as cold and icy blue as the outside. Everything inside is made of ice; the couch, the shelves, the throne at the back of the room. On the throne sits the hooded warlock who waves you in slowly. You take a hesitant step inside, and the warlock rises from the throne, slowly approaching you. He now stands a few metres away, his hands folded behind his back. Slowly, he looks up at you, his face still hidden by the shade of his hood. With a deep, gravelly voice different from before, he says, “I see you’ve made it.”