

Chapter Twelve: The Day of Moon Bay

The rocking of Jubile's father's old air cruiser shook Evan from his daydreaming. He turned to his right and looked into the dreamiest, most beautiful eyes he had ever known. In her contentment, Reisa's heavy lids were lowered more than usual and covered half of her dark eyes, her small smile creasing the corners of her mouth. Evan quickly looked away, unable to hold her gaze.

His bare knee was brushed against Reisa's in the confines of the middle seats of the craft, which caused him to sweat more than the warm air warranted. In the twenty-four years he had known Reisa, he had never spent so much time being close to her like this. He was conscious of his red and sweaty face, which prevented him from interacting with her too much and drawing more attention to himself. But there was enough merry talk in the vehicle to avoid any awkward silences, anyway.

In the front passenger seat, Nat looked back over his broad shoulder. He was recalling a funny incident that happened to him a few days back. Jubile, flying the craft, added a comment or two, although it was clear Nat only wanted to be the one talking. Evan noted from Nat's darting eyes that he was mostly looking back to check on him and Reisa, and to keep the attention on himself. Nat loved the attention, almost as much as he loved the sound of his own voice.

Attempting to show Nat that he did not hold everyone's attention, Evan turned away and spared a look behind him. In the back seats, Marassy and Rikan studied the passing sandy hills and clear cream sky. Brilliant sunbursts reflected off the tall metal spires of farmland in the distance.

Even after half a day of travelling, there was an excited energy in the craft. A thrill that only the freedom of being away from adults could give.

And it was a glorious day.

Glorious, although today would have been even better if it had gone ahead like Evan had planned.

He had gone over the moment he'd asked Reisa to the beach with him many times, wondering where he went wrong. She had beamed with joy at the idea, but then frowned at the thought of her strict guardian, Molo, allowing her to go away with her friends. Evan's excitement dropped when he realised that she had thought they would be going with a group of friends, and not just the two of them. That was how she was, sometimes. He would suggest the two of them do something, and she would assume he meant as a group. It seemed to never occur to her to spend time alone with Evan. They were young, still, barely out of their Prime Years, but Evan knew how he felt about her. He'd known for some time.

He had been such an idiot, running around and hastily gathering his friends for an impromptu getaway. The gods favoured their retreat, it seemed, as Evan somehow managed to convince his parents to persuade Molo to allow Reisa to go, and his other friends had no trouble in leaving. It was a fitting end to their Voarn Life studies and the perfect start to the summer. At thirty seven years of age, Evan was finally beginning to feel like he was his own person. A real grown up.

Jubile landed the craft on the rocky shores of The Old Castle Beach. There they all rejoiced in the cool winds that soothed their hot and sweaty bodies. They made their way over the sun-singed rocks that led to the alcove of Moon's Bay.

"'Tis a day to be remembered, young friends," Nat cried out excitedly.

He lumbered about without a shirt, showing off his broad physique and the muscles that had become somewhat defined this past year. Evan made a mental note to start increasing his physical training if he was ever going to outgrow his scrawny physique. Nat had certainly drawn interested eyes from a few girls since he'd filled out.

"Come, come," Jubile called, ushering them forward, his dark curls bouncing with his excited steps. "The gods lead our way. I have heard their call."

Typical of him to call upon the gods, Evan thought. Many children claimed to have been given tasks or messages from the gods - adults too - and most were just tales to seek attention. But that never stopped Jubile and others from claiming their own divine interventions, even if in obvious jest.

Jubile took it upon himself to lead, even though none of them had been there before. The only one of them with an official license to fly a craft, he often saw himself as the natural leader of the group. Though Jubile was shorter and leaner than Evan, his tanned, smooth skin and perfect hair—a product of his Demerin heritage—was something that Evan also admired. He couldn't help but feel self conscious. Pale and small. Why would the girls look at him when they had greater, more worthy specimens to admire?

Reisa walked ahead with her closest friend, Marassy. Their bright swimsuits showed under their loose skirts that blew in the breeze. Evan blushed as he looked upon their exposed legs. Marassy was a little shorter than Reisa, and wider in the hips and thighs. Her wavy golden hair complimented her pale, smooth skin.

Nat jogged to catch up to the girls and join in the conversation. Evan shied back and preferred to internally enjoy the moment, savouring the glorious sunshine and warm air. He wouldn't know what to say to them, anyway. It seemed easier for Nat, he would just talk about anything.

Just over the rocks ahead, the glistening waves of the blue-green ocean could be seen, and the sight gave Evan excited chills.

Shifting his heavy shoulder-bag, careful not to drop the rolled towel draped over the top, Evan tried once again not to look at Reisa—her flowing dark hair or her swaying hips—and willed himself to focus elsewhere. Seeing that Rikan was walking near him, Evan moved closer.

"A blessed day if I have ever seen one," Evan remarked, nodding to the sky.

Rikan nodded, shaking the long streak of green hair he had tied back. His tilted eyes—too far apart, Evan had always thought—shone in the sunlight when he regarded Evan. "So much nicer than Northfall, for sure."

Evan had to agree that The Old Castle Beach was far more picturesque than their usual days out by the lake north of the city.

Rikan's focus shifted to the ocean ahead. "They say that Lord Imupius enjoys bathing in the ocean on days like this."

Evan smiled. "The Sea-Lord is not so easily spotted, like some Queen Whales lounging on the surface." He could not have imagined that, just a few years later, he would actually meet Imupius in person, and that the god would be in his debt.

Rikan fell silent as he studied the landscape. He had always been short on words, which made him good company and easy to get along with.

Nat threw his head back with barks of laughter, and the girls giggled either side of him. He was making a funny voice and acting boisterously imbecilic. And the girls seemed to enjoy it. Evan wondered what they were talking about, wishing that he could make the girls laugh like that.

They came to a cliff edge and were finally able to see the soft sandy beach of Moon's Bay several spans below them. The bulging ocean stretched out as far as they could see, with the land to their right curling outwards and fading into the hazy mist of the horizon.

Along a short pier, indistinct figures stood with wooden bows cocked towards the waters. One of them released a sharpened arrow, uncoiling the string attached as it plunged into the water. Farther along the pier, another fisherman reeled his bow string from the ocean and revealed a skewered fish on the end.

Ahead, Reisa lost her footing on loose stones. Nat came to her side in an instant and caught her with both hands.

"M'lady must watch her delicate feet," Nat said as he helped her up.

Reisa placed a hand on Nat's chest as she thanked him, flustered from the near fall. "My delicate feet thank you," she said.

Evan frowned at the sight, wishing he were the one to have caught Reisa. In his mind he saw it better, him diving over a rock to catch her right before her head hit the rocks, holding her close to him, and their eyes would lock. It would have been a powerful moment for the two of them.

Jubile attempted to impress them by taking a shorter path with larger gaps between the rocks. Aside from Nat, he was the most athletic of them all, and always enjoyed showing that. He began singing an old show song as he jumped between each rock.

Step, step, step on the road, *Jubile sang, lightening his voice to sound more childish.* Step on the road, see where your heart leads. Step, step, step on the road. And when you find what you must do... there'll be no stopping you!

They came to a wide hole in the sun-singed rocks, which lowered in stepped layers that reached into a dull darkness. Making their way through the shadows of the inner rock formations, Jubile continued to sing, with Nat joining in a low baritone voice for the accompanying parts.

Step, step, step on the road, *Jubile went on.*

Keep on stepping, *Nat drawled.*

But wait, but wait, you fool, be wary of all you see.

Keep on stepping.

Keep your head up high and step, step, step on the road, and see where your heart leads.

Keep on stepping.

And when you find what you must do... there'll be no stopping you!

Rikan paused to take in the view of the beach below. Nat came from behind and shoved him forward, adding, *keep on stepping*, in his song voice. This drew laughs from the others.

Evan smiled as he made his way down the rocks. He focused on his movements, careful not to slip and make a fool of himself, and become the source of Nat's or Jubile's jokes for the rest of the trip. At the same time he stayed close to Reisa and Marassy, prepared to lend the girls a helping hand if they appeared to struggle or asked for assistance.

Under the boys' singing, the soft lapping of waves could be heard. They reached the coarse sand and came out of the rocks into the brilliant sunlight. Gritty red pebbles gave way to a beach of pale white sand. The tall rocks curved around the beach and reached into the water several hundred yards on either side, enclosing them in their own private beach. On their right side, shrubs and bushes gave way to a dense collection of tall trees.

"What a wonder the Sea-Lord has kept from us," Nat called out, spreading his arms and lifting his face to the sun.

"Let us feel her warm embrace!" Jubile added.

He and Rikan broke into a run towards the blue-green water, dropping their bags on the sand and hopping as they removed their sandals and over-shirts. Jubile stumbled as he pulled off his shirt and rolled onto the sand, before scrambling back to his feet. Nat guffawed and danced around excitedly as he joined the boys. The girls were more composed, walking barefoot and speaking close together, letting the boys play while they took in the scenery.

Evan was in no rush to jump into the water, and took the opportunity to help the girls set up the camp.

"Not going in?" Marassy asked him. She had a shine in her eyes, the mischievous way she looked when she meant more than she spoke.

"I will get settled here first," Evan said. "You girls go in, if you like, and I will look after the bags."

He noticed the look that Reisa and Marassy shared, and their small smiles. Evan reeled internally at their strange look, wondering if there was a joke he missed.

The sunlight bounced off of Reisa's dark hair as she flicked a strand behind her neck, making the long hair appear brighter, almost as if it glowed.

"We are okay here," Marassy told him. "If you want to go in."

"He said he wanted to help out," Reisa interjected in a light tone. "I say we let him do all the work while we lay in the sun." Her smile was playful, and Evan played along with the joke.

"Oh, aye," he said, "allow the prince to ready a camp fit for royalty."

Marassy laughed and bent to tend to her towel.

A shrill cry rang in the air, rustling nearby trees. Reisa yelped as a dark object fluttered high overhead; a long-necked bird leaving the trees with a loud caw. Several small birds sprang away from the cover of the trees.

Reisa had jumped and she now stood beside Evan. They looked down to see she held a hand in his. In her fright she must have grabbed hold of him. Evan's heart raced. He looked up to see Reisa was also composing herself. She smiled; a large grin that accentuated her upper teeth. Evan melted. He could look at her dreamy eyes all day. Some, like Rikan, had commented how Reisa's large eyes were odd; the slanted way her heavy lids were usually lowered. But to Evan, they were the most captivating, enthralling eyes he had ever known. He held his gaze for longer than he should have, and it was usually Reisa that looked away

first. But now, at this moment, she held his gaze, and her smile, for what felt like an eternity. Evan's heart felt like it had stopped, frozen along with time.

"You know," Reisa said. She looked down sheepishly and finally released her hand. "There is something about being away from the hometown. Something... freeing, about being out in the open air. Away from everyone."

Evan tried to understand what she was saying, and simply nodded.

"It is as though out here, we can be new people. Whoever we want to be. Do you think?" Her small smile was so inviting, Evan almost felt like he were falling towards her.

He had to clear his throat before speaking. "I believe that we can be whoever we want to be, at any moment."

"Moments define us," she said, quoting a line from a philosopher they had studied recently.

"And we define our moments," Evan finished the quote, and smiled.

They remained with their eyes locked for some time, before Marassy called back to them for help with the camp.

The three of them laid down the blankets and bags, and put the fire equipment and utilities out to one side for when it got colder later. They would need to keep warm when the famous floating rocks appeared.

When Evan was satisfied he had helped enough—wanting to be clear that he would take leave of his own choosing, and not because Marassy had asked him if he wanted to leave—Evan joined the boys in the sea.

The cool waters soothed his soul and washed away all the fears and insecurities of youth. He splashed with the boys and had swimming races to rock markers in the sea, and pointed out the local sights around them. He would submerge himself for as long as he could, and rejoice in the freedom of the world below the surface.

Eventually the girls joined them, and they all laughed and played and splashed each other. Something had changed within Reisa lately. Or so he thought. She had become more receptive to him, as if she had decided that they were now good friends, and she would tease him and draw attention to him, and whenever he looked over at her he would find her eyes on him. It was a strange thing to behold, but it made his heart dance in his chest.

He just wished he could have spent more time with her like this.

The children spent the rest of the day on the beach. Occasionally they would take time to themselves to explore the rocks or lay on the sandy shore, or read a book. They spoke about anything and everything, no subject off limits. The boundaries of social protocol and

formal politeness no longer existed in this world. They danced and sang and told stories, enjoying the best time that Evan could recall having.

It was a glorious day. One he would never forget.