

A Thief's Shadow

1 – A Thief's Regret

Don't be too late, don't be too late. Please, don't be too late. Bax slammed open the doors to the inn and scurried up the stairs to Mama's room on the third floor, the tired innkeeper paying him little heed. He climbed the stairs hurriedly, vial of medicine in hand. He had stolen something from an herbalist in exchange for special medicine from Master Gin for Mama, but trouble with the guards caused a lot of precious time to be lost faster than fresh bread at a market stand.

Bax barged through the door, revealing a small room furnished with only a bed and a small desk, empty except for a handheld heat lamp. The room's only window was covered in frost, for the inn was further away from the lamps. Rooms further from the big lamps were always cheaper. The wooden walls were mildly grimy in the corners, and the bed sheets were untidy, giving the room a grimy, yet almost comfortable feeling. The bed had two thin sheets and was barely large enough to lay in comfortably. It was the only place they could afford, a permanent room bought at an inn.

Mama was frail. Bax didn't know what her sickness was, but she had almost no muscle, which made her look like a skeleton with its skin still attached. Today Bax knew she was bad, for her skin was whiter than he had ever seen it.

Mama didn't even flinch when Bax entered, but she did wake up.. She slowly tilted her head to him, giving him a feeble smile.

"Hello Bax." She said weakly. Mama was almost always rather positive, even with such a terrible sickness.

"Mama! I'm here, I brought you medicine. Drink it." Bax rushed up to Mama and knelt before her bed next to her head, taking the stopper off the small bottle.

"No." Mama said, slowly shaking her head. "I'm... no. Not anymore."

"No, Mama, drink it, I'll—" Bax replied urgently.

"No. I'm... done now, Bax. It won't... work"

"Why, Mama? Do you need something different now?"

Mama reached shakily to place her hand on Bax's arm holding the potion, guiding his hand downward. "No. I'm too... far. You... you need to live your own life, not one starving yourself... to feed me. I'm... leaving. Maybe I'll see Ahan. Maybe..." She trailed off, looking out the window.

"Just know," she continued, "that I will... be happy, and... want you to be..." She stopped, closing her eyes, turned to him and uttered two words:

"Live, Bax."

Bax didn't cry, but he wanted to. He didn't cry because he saw this day two years ago, when Ahan left. Instead, he knelt before his mother, remembering her name, whispering it in his mind dozens of times. *Deni... Deni... Deni... Mama...*

His shadow watched silently from behind him, offering no consolation for his loss.

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Bax walked past another beating.

It was a boy not three years older than Bax's, who was only ten. The boy was being beaten by someone not three years his own senior, Bax guessed. He also guessed the younger boy took some food from the older one, but he couldn't really say for sure, as he ran from the scene immediately when the knife was pulled out. You could get in trouble with the guards if you were near a knife scene.

Mama always said time can make anything better, which was exactly why he thought time hated the port city of Darkhalt. It didn't save Mama, it didn't bring his father, Ahan back, and it sure didn't seem to be helping with the violence between the too-many orphans wandering the streets. Beatings upon beatings had suddenly started happening on the streets, which did not count the guards, for they always beat troublemakers. This time it was only the orphans, for less and less guards had been patrolling as of late, so at that point it was up to the children to stand for themselves; some even began to band together to protect themselves, but it was more like kids hiding together. Bax began to wonder if there was a fairer punishment to orphans than just beating.

Now the lamps were bright in Darkhalt. The dozens of taverns on Topaz street were quieter than the usual roaring bustle at the darker side of the cycle, as many of their usual

inhabitants were off working in the docks, taking guard shifts, or whatever else it is they do, for Bax did not know.

They said during the light side of the lamp-cycle, it was sort of like a place people called day. It was a place where there was an enormous lamp in the sky, a thousand miles above their heads. They said not many people lived at day, for it was too warm there for many, which didn't make sense to Bax. How could anyone be too warm? They said the perfect place to live was Solstice, the grandest city in the world. That was where Ahan was.

Bax ran from the scene, clenching his teeth as the scream sounded behind him. He turned onto Emerald Street to escape the all too familiar horrors that followed behind. As he walked along the cobbled stone road, he felt regret banging its fist on the inside of his chest, threatening to break his ribs. Every hour he felt it, but now it was louder than usual.

The regret came from many things: he couldn't save Mama, he had never known Ahan, and he could never save the other orphans who did not know the streets like Bax. There were four rules on the streets: don't show your money, don't steal from other orphans, and share food you find if you want to sleep by the lamps (the latter of which he had learned recently, for in the past he slept curled at the foot of Mama's bed).

Also, stay away from the moths. The hooks on their legs could tear your skin if they got to you, and sometimes they bit. At least the size of two large loafs of bread placed next to each other, the moths were scary creatures. They were attracted to the small, flame-lit lamps, but seemed scared of the large ones, making it even safer to sleep by them. There was no fun in waking to see one of those things, crawling on your body. Other's didn't know the feeling, but Bax, unfortunately, did. There were still wounds from that occasion, most of the scars still painted his chest. It had hurt.

Bax took a left onto Market street, the only street not named after a gemstone. Bax had never seen one, but people said they were transparent like glass, and vibrantly colored. They said gemstones could buy you food for half a lifetime if you had one. It was probably worth so much that guards would beat him to death if he so much as even saw one. They say even orphans in Solstice had one. Lucky them.

Bax stopped and surveyed the bustling scene before him. The market was the most active part of Darkhalt during the work times. Colorful stands lined the street where single people or entire families worked to sell goods. Many sold clothing, some tools, some magically preserved fruits and vegetables from Solstice, others toys for children. Little girls sold bracelets woven from moth cocoon silk harvested by their parents who offered clothing of the same material. A few merchants even sold jewelry, but they never showed their wares in public, taking them in buildings or other private areas for negotiations.

Bax was here for none of those. He was here answering the call of a deliciously intoxicating aroma. It was sitting on a stand with blue and white stripes, where a middle-aged, portly woman worked. Fourteen loaves of golden ambrosia were stacked in a masterfully stacked triangle, and next to it a basket of similarly textured round buns. The bread was Bax's target. The fluffy rolls were richer than gold, to Bax at least.

He sat down against a wall and drew a strand of silk from his pocket. He took the string on both ends and began tying knots on it, trying to find interesting, new ones. To others he hopefully looked like a bored child whose mother had gone shopping. From there he waited, watching like a lighthouse over the sea.

It only took three knots.

Bax looked up as he heard a scream. He grinned, refraining with difficulty to break out into a fit of giggles. A rather large, brave moth had fluttered down from above and was wreaking havoc by a butcher's stand. Bax glanced over at the bread stand he had been watching. It was empty; his prey was exposed. Moving quieter than a shadow, he crept as quickly as he could to the stand and snatched a roll. He hesitated for a dangerous moment, considering his luck, then took another. He turned and ran from the commotion.

He turned a corner into an alley and inspected his prize. On his palms lay two golden-brown balls of pure deliciousness. They beckoned his tongue like a ship to a lighthouse, like a man to a siren. Unable to resist any longer, Bax took a ferocious bite on one of his rolls.

Bliss.

Despite the bun's firm outer shell, it was soft and fluffy on the inside. It was baked perfectly, Bax had made a good choice. He chewed slowly, savoring every moment, every

precious bite. He eyed the second roll, deciding to put it in his small satchel (he found it left alone in on the street), and began to go back home and give it to...

Right. Don't think about that. Mama was not here anymore. Neither was her husband. Neither were the friends Bax had only had for hours. Neither were –NO.

Keep walking.

Bax continued forward, now aimed nowhere in particular.

Just forget.

Bax looked down at his half-eaten roll as its flavor left his mouth. He pocketed it, unable to find the will to finish it.

Keep walking. Just forget.

Bax looked up at the inky void of the sky above him, imagining it leaking into his head. This always calmed him down. He began to fill his head with the nothingness, then a scream shattered the silence surrounding him.

Bax's head jerked forward. He knew that scream. It was a scream of breaking. Sobs followed, accompanied by fiery, blood-smeared shouts. The sounds were behind him, and close. Bax slowly turned around and crept down the alleyway to the source of the shouts. Peeking around the corner, he saw a brown-haired girl, no younger than Bax himself, and the same older boy as before. The girl's left arm dangled, broken at the forearm, less than useless at her side. Blood dripped down her nose, and tears fell beside them. He could tell this girl was no street-rat, for she did not wear the usual tattered rags the rest of them covered themselves with.

The girl was about average in height; she seemed like she would usually stand straight had she not been in her current predicament. The most peculiar thing about her was her clothing, barely seen in Darkhalt. She had likely come from Solstice, and alone. Coming here alone was dangerous.

Bax would have been sickened, had he not seen this so frequently. The boy leaned in, whispering, spitting words in her ear. The girl nodded, tearfully, pulling a small purse out of her pocket, gripping it in her hand, ready to give it up but unwilling to hand it over.

Bax winced and closed his eyes as he hit her again, and a whimper sounded from her. His mind told him to leave, but his body said to stay put and watch. His heart though, long neglected, told him to help. Bax wanted to follow his mind.

The regret returned. Bax remembered. Stealing from the poor alchemist... well, stealing from everyone, even the baker woman. He remembered Mama's death, when he failed to bring her medicine back home. He remembered the young boy who he did not help. He might be dead now, because Bax didn't help him. Mama would still be alive if Bax didn't fail so badly. The regret, the pain, it overwhelmed Bax. He screamed at it to leave. Its sharp claws gripped its mind, unwilling to let go. He then heard a whisper in his head:

Give him your pain, Bax.

Bax let out a mindless scream; of what, he did not know. Fear? Anger? Passion? He ran forward, startling the boy, causing him to look up, forgetting momentarily of the girl. Bax sprinted up to the boy, clutching his big arm in his small hands.

In that moment, Bax pushed the regret away from him, clutched it with his mind, thought of the boy he clutched,

And gave his regret to him.

All feeling vanished.

The alley stilled. Bax, the boy, the girl, all were silent. The hubbub in the street grew distant, as if separated from the three by a wall of water.

The boy was shaking. A single drop of Bax's remorse rolled down his cheek. He released the girl, and Bax in turn let go of him. His fists unraveled, one revealing a crumpled piece of paper and a silver necklace. He dropped it onto the paved stones, and its corner soaked in a small puddle. He turned around and began to hobble away with no injury. He did not go far until he slumped to the ground, curled up in a ball, and began to sob.

Bax continued to stand in a shocked silence at what he had done. Had he... had he just used magic? He quickly dropped the thought as the girl looked up again. Bax stooped to the ground to pick up the necklace and purse. He turned back to the girl, and held them out, the purse atop his palm, the necklace looped around his fingers. She weakly stretched out her hand, and he gingerly placed the items in her outspread fingers. She took both and clutched

them tightly in her good arm. She looked down, Bax realized it was at the slip of paper. He knelt to retrieve it, shook it lightly to dry it, and unfurl it.

It was a sketch. No, more than that, it looked real. As if someone took real life and slapped it on a piece of paper. The image depicted two people: one being the girl, the other an older man, likely her...

Father.

Bax remembered the sketch in his own pocket. He slowly pulled the slip of parchment with Mama and Ahan on it. Just before Bax was born; just before Ahan left. Both images depicted a man with a jovial gaze and messy hair. One of the faces was hidden behind a large, grizzled beard, years older, Bax's with a wide smile. Remembrance welled up in the sides of Bax's eyes. The girl looked like the one before him. Bax turned the picture toward her, then revealed his own.

"P...Papa?" He said quietly.

The girl hesitated, her eyes widening, then nodded. Bax gave her the paper, then grabbed her hand, giving it a brief, careful tug. She complied, and he helped her stand up on trembling legs. She tried to straighten herself after she fully stood, her legs shaky as a market tent in the westward wind. They looked at each other with twin green eyes and embraced. It was more like falling together, as the girl collapsed onto Bax, wrapping her arms around him, and he returned the gesture. Bax's parents may have been dead or absent, but not all his family was gone anymore. The lamp in Bax's heart lit back up, for the first time in far too long.

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2 – A Thief's Reunion

Bax sat silently in the alleyway that changed his world. It wasn't special, as nondescript as the rest of Darkhalt's alleys: shadowed, empty, full of trash... bloodstains. Most alleys had them, but these were special to Bax. Here he discovered he could use magic, or something like it at least; he could give his emotions to other people, somehow. He had heard stories of people far away who could move the earth or snow or turn things into fire. Could he do that with feelings?

This alley was also where he found the sister he never knew he had. They only had time to tell each other their names before she fell asleep. Her name was Kesi. She currently slept curled beside him fitfully, broken arm nestled in her belly. He found her here being beaten and robbed by a bully, and he used his magic to make him... stop. Somehow. That boy was gone now. He crawled away, trailing a river of tears behind him which almost made Bax feel bad. Almost. He was more shocked by his own reaction than the bully's. When he used his magic, all his feelings went away, and he felt absolutely nothing for a time. Even more so than that was how he had stood up against the bully.

He never stood against a beating; he always walked past and pretended it had never happened. He still felt incredibly guilty, and he couldn't deny it. Fights were one thing: evenly matched, both sides started it; Bax could easily ignore those. The problem, unfortunately, was that no one in Darkhalt fought. Why fight an even fight when all you need to do is find someone weaker or younger than you with a purse and punch them until they give it to you? Watching a helpless person get beaten made Bax feel worse than the time he fell in the ocean.

His shadow sat beside him, not behind him against the wall as it should have been. He learned to stop questioning how it moved, as apparently no one else could see it.

Kesi shifted in her sleep, then whimpered quietly in pain. Her eyes flickered open, then she squeezed them shut again.

"H...h-hurts." She groaned.

Bax did not respond. The question he asked himself half a dozen times before reentered his mind. Could I? No, no, I can't go back, not after... but what else can I do? Can I trust anyone else? No, I have to.

"Kesi, let's go. I know who can fix your arm."

Bax knocked on the wall for the first time in two years. He stepped back half a step, waiting the few moments he usually had to wait, but no one answered. He glanced at Kesi, who looked rather confused, then he knocked again, this time louder. As he lifted his hand to knock a third time, the hidden door swung back, revealing a man needed too badly to hate.

"I told you, I won't— oh," Master Gin snapped before he realized who he had snapped at. "Bax," he said, regaining his cool yet intimidating air. He then looked at Kesi, and a faint look of recognition flashed across his face. "Come in."

Bax nearly jumped in surprise at Master Gin's last two words. He never let other people into his home... if you could call it that. Bax had been inside once before, when he brought him here when he was unconscious on the street in his last job for the Master... but that was different. Other than that, no one else had ever been inside. Every time he did jobs for Master Gin, he gave him Mama's medicine on his hidden doorstep, right where he was standing. Nonetheless, Bax did as he was asked and followed him inside, Kesi right behind him. He led them through a short plaster hallway with five doors, two on each side, one on the end of the hall. Master Gin led them to the second on the right. Its walls gray, the only thing populating the rather boring chamber was a wooden table and two chairs with dark red cushions, dust coating one of them. Master Gin moved to sit on one, and Kesi dusted off and sat on the other. Bax remained standing.

After a short moment of silence, Master Gin said, "I assume now that either your mother is dead or was miraculously healed, the latter of which I am not at fault for." Bax heard a quickly stifled gasp from Kesi. She had not been informed yet. "Either way, you come back to me now."

Bax nodded. "She is. Dead, I mean. M-my sister, Kesi. She—I found her not long ago, and s-she's hurt."

"So I'd noticed. Deni never told me that both her twins survived, but I do not think I have what you need. Stay here." *Twins?* Bax thought. Master Gin stood up and left to another room, shutting the door behind him. Bax looked longingly at the empty chair yet was already terrified of Master Gin finding him in it when he returned. Kesi sat silently, looking down at her lap.

Master Gin returned with nothing except for a knife. Bax stepped back in a primal fear, assuring himself that it was not meant for him. "I do not have what you need, but I know where you can find some. On Ruby Street, there is a tavern, the third one on the left coming from Opal. It has a picture of a sword on it, called the Blade and Bottle. Behind it is a cellar door. Go

down there, and there should be a small storage room. On the left wall facing away from the hatch, there is a secret door leading to a place like my own. Find a box labeled... can you read?"

"I can" Kesi blurted while Bax shook his head. Both he and Master Gin stared at her as if she was offering them gemstones for free. Her cheeks flushed, and she averted her eyes, looking back down at her broken arm.

Master Gin quickly exited the room, returning with a small slip of parchment and a pencil. He scribbled on it and placed it on the table for Bax to view, "find a box labeled with something that looks like this." Picking it up, he inspected the strange scribbles, that meant about as much to him as a coin purse full of sand. "Also," Master Gin continued, setting the knife on the table, sliding it forward, "if you find anyone inside while you're there... kill them."

Fear forced itself into Bax's belly at the words. He then forced himself to nod, a quick succession of slight nods. He picked up the knife with a small sense of awe. He had never held one of these before. About eight inches in length, the blade was simple, curving to a point at the center of the tip. Its handle was wood and wrapped in hardened silk, with a small, simple, round cross guard separating it and the blade.

"Well? Your sister's wound may be infected soon, it's a wonder it hasn't been already. I suggest you go now." Master Gin said impatiently. Bax, shocked into action, then left with yet another job, his first in too long.

Finding the place was easy enough. Already quite familiar with Ruby Street, Bax found the Blade and Bottle's cellar quickly. Fortunately, most of Darkhalt's denizens were sleeping, and the cellar would likely be empty. As he opened the hatch, the small cellar below was revealed, a ladder leading down to it. At the bottom were stacks and piles of boxes and barrels, none of them of any importance to him. He climbed down and shut the hatch slowly over him. The dimly lit cellar plunged into darkness, Bax guided himself with his hands to the left wall and began feeling around the wall for the door. It only took a few moments until he felt a strange crack in the wall. Feeling along it, it went straight down to the floor, turning sideways further up. He pushed on the section of the wall, and it turned inward with the raucous sound of stone rubbing against stone. Bax winced as he opened it, hoping no one was inside.

The hallway inside was lit very dimly, with a layout identical to Master Gin's home, two doors on each side, one on the end. Taking a closer look, Bax noticed the strangeness in the light. There were no shadows, there was no source, it was just... there. Strange... Bax tried the end door first. He opened the door to a similarly lit room full of odd tools and vials; nothing that Bax needed. The next room he checked contained a heap of boxes and barrels. Perfect, it was probably here. He pulled the slip of paper, but it was too dark to read it, or anything else for that matter. He'd have to find a—

The door opened. Bax's heart slammed against his chest. Footsteps sounded in the hall, and every torch in the hall and each room flared to life after a small click. Bax scrambled to a corner, between a torch and the wall so his shadow would not be visible to whoever was here. If you find anyone inside, kill them. Bax drew Master Gin's knife, its small blade glinting in the light; he concealed it for that matter.

A man walked briskly down the hall, past the room Bax was hiding in. All he could see was a long, unkempt beard hanging on a head with no hair on top of it. Long robes similar to the ones Master Gin wore trailed behind the man. Bax guessed he was going to the room with the strange equipment. From in there he heard a slight creak then the bubbling noise of boiling liquid.

Taking a dangerous peek down the hall, Bax saw the man hunched obsessively over the tools, pouring and mixing various vials of strange and colorful liquid, as well as sprinkling shining yellow dust. Is he making a potion? What is it for? He concealed himself again as the potion began to scream in an unnervingly high-pitched manner. Suddenly a shatter sounded from the room, the shards of noise piercing Bax's ears. A wail of rage, pain, and failure trailed the sound. He then heard a grunt of pain, a thump, then a groan. Bax closed his eyes, took a deep breath to calm himself, then looked back down into the hall. The man was on the floor, curled up in a ball, limbs jerking slightly.

Kill him. Bax looked at the knife, then back at the man. He would not have hesitated before, but now... is this right? He is sick... he needs help. No, but Master Gin said... he crept toward the man, trying to justify his own actions. I'll just... end his suffering. He seems as sick as... Mama. No...

A scream, followed by the crash of toppling barrels, jerked Bax from his thoughts. The man suddenly stirred and scrambled to his knees and jumped as he noticed Bax. He quickly lifted his hand, and an invisible force slammed into Bax's wrists and ankles, pulling him forcibly onto the floor. As he impacted with the wooden floor, the air in his chest was driven out. He tried to breathe back in, and...

Nothing.

He couldn't breathe.

It was difficult to describe, as he could inhale, but nothing came in, the revitalization he usually felt did not arrive. He tried to lift himself, but the invisible chains that bound his limbs kept him pinned. The realization soon struck him: he was fighting an actual wizard. Master Gin could make medicine and potions like this man, but he... he could do magic. Bax tried to use his own magic and give his emotions to the man, but he still did not know how. He tried to imagine it, to just channel his sheer force of will he tried so hard, but nothing happened. He tried to gasp desperately for air, but still, nothing came in. He was growing weaker; his vision was beginning to fade to black around the edges. The man shakily stood back up, looking down at Bax, breathing heavily through gritted teeth, one hand grasping his stomach, the other supporting him on the wall.

The door creaked open once more behind them. Bax tried to turn his head to see who had entered, but he could not get his head to turn far enough. His vision continued to darken as he struggled for air.

"Bax!" A familiar voice shouted, "I'm here!" Fear squirmed in Bax's stomach, and his heart began to beat faster. Kesi... no. The man limped forward, weakly kicking Bax on the temple. The impact was not hard, but he jerked his head away nonetheless.

The chains vanished.

Bax breathed in.

Air.

He rolled over to his stomach, gulping in air like a tavern a tavern at dinnertime, and stood on to his knees. Kesi was down on her knees as well, good arm grasping at her throat,

mouth open in a silent, terrified scream. Bax dizzily looked up at the man, who now had one arm outstretched toward Kesi, the other holding the knife, pointing it at him.

“You...” he rasped, “stay out of... of my way.”

Bax’s body locked up in a fit of terrified shaking. He began to think, but he could not control them. The regret came crashing back down again. No, not again. No... no no NO! He knew he would not be able to save Kesi or himself. He’d fail Master Gin once again after not going back to him after two years the last time he failed. The pain... NO! It hurts...

That’s how.

Bax lunged forward suddenly, grabbing the man’s leg. As a searing pain was drawn along his back as the man reacted, he tried his magic again.

The emotional numbness returned. The man grew still. The knife dropped to the ground in front of him. Bax grasped it, then stood up, his back protesting in pain. The man was looking absently behind Bax, and he saw a storm behind his eyes, the rain seeping out of his eyelids. His mouth was hanging open slightly, moving as if it were trying to form words. Bax gripped the knife tighter in his hand, trying to decide his course of action far later than he should. The man’s eyes refocused on Bax, and his lip curled up in a furious snarl.

He then made his decision.

He plunged the knife into the man’s chest, striking fortunately, horribly, between his ribs. The man gasped, and slumped down to the floor, propped up against the wall, the knife still in his chest. His shadow nodded behind him, content.

“I... wasn’t...” the man rasped. He reached up to the knife, then fell limp, sighing into unconsciousness or death, Bax was not sure. He lowered his ear to the man’s mouth, listening for breathing. Nothing

He fell again to his knees, doubling over as bile rose to the back of his throat, and retched dryly. His thoughts became a storm again, and he tried in vain to sail through it. And just as quickly as if arrived, it dissipated. And finally, a tear dropped.

Bax had just killed someone.

A soft hand fell on his shoulder. Bax looked up to see Kesi standing next to him. He looked back down. She sat down next to him.

“Your back is wounded. We should probably go back to Gin” she said. Bax stared at the man, remaining still and silent. He didn’t feel any pain. Not on his back, at least. “Bax...”

“Why did you follow me?” Bax asked. Kesi seemed rather surprised at the question, as she did not answer immediately, calculating her response.

“I thought... I thought I could help. I thought that just because my arm is broken, I shouldn’t have to just wait for you to... well, maybe die. And considering that, I’m glad I did follow you. You could have died, Bax, if I didn’t come. Come on, let’s get what we need and go. We can treat my arm... and then go home” Kesi stood and went to the storage room, and Bax complied, too tired to ask what “home” meant.

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3 – A Thief’s Voyage

Bax awoke on a sailing ship. He was lying on a mattress-padded bed, a luxury he had never had in the past. He sat up and stretched, pulling the blankets off his legs and examining the room around him. His shadow slinked silently to the corner, murmuring distantly, indistinctly. The room was rather nondescript, but it already felt more comfortable than the other nondescript rooms he had previously awoken in. A small, circular window looked out into the rolling sea. A wardrobe was attached to the wall across from the bed, and an empty peg hung on the wall where a coat and hat would normally be hung. A chest also stood next to the wardrobe, shut by a small padlock.

Bax stepped out of the bed, feeling strangely refreshed, and went to the wardrobe, peering curiously inside. Within lay only a few short stacks of neatly folded clothes, and on the inside hung a small, round mirror. He had never seen a mirror before, and he was already entranced by the reflection of the wall he could see. He dragged the chest over to the wardrobe and climbed on top of it to look in it.

He almost fell off the chest at seeing his reflection. Steadying himself on the side of the wardrobe, he peered into himself once again. He knew he looked rather soiled, but it was worse than he expected. His hair looked like a moth had nested in it, and his clothes were tattered, soiled, and muddy. His eyes were incredibly bloodshot, more red than white, but the green in the center of his eyes were still vibrant, more so than he had seen in the puddles in

Darkhalt. Compared to the rest of his face they almost appeared to glow. He stood for a time, enthralled by his own reflection until protests arose from his stomach. Stumbling down from the chest and dragging it back into place, Bax realized how hungry he was. He closed the wardrobe and exited the room to a belowdecks hallway.

Following his nose and the clanging, raucous sound of food being cooked, he made his way to the kitchen. Slipping into the galley, he saw two people, a man and a woman, hastily preparing what seemed to be eggs and mutton. A few plates stacked with biscuits also sat on the counter. He stalked toward the plates and had his hand on a biscuit when one of the chefs turned to look at him. He froze for a moment, dropped the biscuit on the floor and scurried back to the doorway. The chef smiled, snorting briefly in amusement. "Go ahead, y'can take one. Jus' wait until we're done next time." Bax nodded and snatched the biscuit from the floor, walking up to the deck to a busy scene.

Workers moved around the deck, performing various tasks. Most seemed focused on the rigging and sails, ferrying various things indoors until the deck of the ship looked like a skeleton stripped free of all meat. The work was strangely muted aside from a few calls and commands. Bax looked out on the horizon and could make out clouds blocking out the stars. A storm was coming, it seemed, and as if to confirm his suspicion, the ship rocked, and Bax grabbed the railing to avoid falling. The crew seemed unaffected by the movement, continuing with their business as if nothing had happened.

Scanning the ship, he spotted Kesi sitting against the railing, looking up at the stars above. Her arm, fixed by Master Gin before they left, was carried in a thick cloth sling. He walked unsteadily toward her, sitting clumsily on the ground beside her. They sat in silence for a short moment, then Kesi said,

"You'll get used to it soon. Walking on the boat, I mean." Bax shrugged but didn't respond, taking a bite of his biscuit. Kesi glanced awkwardly at him and leaned her head back again. "This is the ship Papa sent me back on. He had business in Darkhalt and couldn't take me back with him, so he sent me to visit you and Deni before coming back on this ship. The captain let you sleep in his room; he's sleeping in the crew's bunks. It must feel nice to sleep in a real bed for once in a long time." Still, Bax didn't respond, finishing up his biscuit. Her gaze grew

distant, more distant than the stars, “I... I’m sorry Papa and I had to leave you and Deni behind in Darkhalt like that. I feel bad that I couldn’t get you after Deni died. I could’ve—”

“No,” Bax stopped her. “It wasn’t your fault, not Papa neither. You didn’t know I was there; Papa didn’t know Mama was gonna get sick and make things bad. I’m okay. I’ll be okay.

Kesi nodded, and the two stared at the stars above as the dark clouds slowly consumed them, leaning against each other for comfort. As rain began to patter lightly on the deck, one of the crew members approached. “Storm’s comin’. You two need to go belowdecks before the storm gets worse.”

Bax sat on the floor next to the bed in his room... well, the captain’s room, his shadow staring into him from the wall across from him. The occasional boom of thunder and flash of lightning pierced the perpetual sound of the rain, which seeped through the walls and floorboards of the ship, permeating it with a moist, brackish smell. The ship rocked more violently and more often now, and Bax had to hold on to the bedpost which was nailed to the ground to avoid losing his balance. He was beginning to grow slightly sick, but he fortunately had little to throw up if it did come to that.

Soon Kesi entered the room and sat beside him, seeming far less queasy than he, but still concerned. They did not speak but were content in each other’s company.

His shadow began to whisper again, discordantly inside his head. He squeezed his eyes shut, willing them to go away. He didn’t want them, not now, not ever. Suddenly, the whispers sighed collectively, then silenced. His shadow melted into the floor, back into himself. A single, masculine voice then rang in his head: *you wouldn’t leave me know, would you?*

Bax gasped and scrambled up onto the bed, and Kesi jumped up and watched him worriedly. She said something, but he couldn’t hear it, instead the voice continued to speak, *I’ve saved you, Bax, you and your sister.* The voice fluctuated between a single voice and hundreds, seeming like both at the same time.

“No... no... stop, stop, stop,” Bax said as he found himself stumbling out the door, his footsteps pounding silently down the hall up to the deck. The silence drowned the roar of the storm above as he staggered onto the deck. *You think you can simply leave me,* the voice said

as the rain pelted his face, *but I can abandon you*. Before he knew it, Bax found himself floundering in the endless, icy ocean.

Bax stood, watching himself drown from outside time. The fury of the ocean, still. The ship fighting that fury, still. The fear in Bax's dying eyes... still. He stood a good ten feet above the ocean, standing steadily on nothing. He felt empty, or some sort of twisted opposite of empty, like a bowl of soup, except there was no bowl. He felt he should feel something, but it felt as if something was keeping him from being able to feel.

As the voice spoke again Bax realized he was not alone, "We could have avoided this." The voice was the same as the one inside his head, but this one spoke from behind him instead. He turned to see a man who was quite the opposite from Bax in almost every way. He looked like a crow, a large man, bigger than any man should be, with an aged face and combed black hair with streaks of grey. He was dressed nicely in black and white clothing, standing in a nearly overwhelmingly confident posture, yet a slight lack of confidence stood out starkly against the rest of his form. A nearly invisible tether connected Bax and the voice, one which he could feel more than see. "It's good we finally meet face to face, Bax," the Voice continued. Bax said nothing, bewildered at the man who stood before him.

'I know what you are thinking, and yes, I am those voices. I understand you are afraid of them, but you do not yet understand. The voices make me stronger; they make *you* stronger. The most powerful rulers never took the throne without trial. That is what I am doing for you, laying the road of trials so we can become the strongest of both men and gods. I had already swayed the sea in our favor, you see." He paused and turned to view the ship, still frozen in the unmoving sea. "But," he continued, "it appears that is no longer a possibility. You rejected my power too many times, so I called for the sea to assist me with a... punishment. Here you will die, your soul will meld with my own, and your body will be left to the sea. I will find a new champion, one who deserves my power. Good-bye, Bax"

Bax sat down on the nothingness, then said, "so... everything that happened to me... you did?"

The Voice turned his head to face closer to Bax, not quite meeting his gaze, "I did pull some strings, yes."

"...Did you kill Mama?" Bax whispered.

The Voice was still for a moment before speaking, "It... was something that had to be done."

"Did you?" Bax said forcefully, standing up.

"I only hastened its—"

"*Did you?*" Bax repeated, voice just below a shout.

The Voice stiffened and sucked in a short breath. After a moment he released it in a small puff, "...yes."

Fury quickly devoured Bax's chest until all which remained was a writhing, boiling mass of sheer fury, which he released in a sorrow-laced scream. The anger coalesced around him in a nearly tangible flame, which warmed but did not burn Bax. He then grasped the ethereal tether and yanked it toward himself in a desperate, furious attempt to make this man feel his own pain. Surprisingly, the Voice stumbled toward Bax, who willed the fire surrounding him to burn the larger man. It seemed to comply, shooting away from him, engulfing the Voice, who let out a pained scream and fell to his knees. As this happened, the man seemed to grow smaller. After a few moments, Bax willed the flames to withdraw and disperse, then stared into the Voice's scorched face. "That's not even half of how much you hurt me. No... it's nothing. *Nothing* compared to how much you hurt me. Now, *put me back.*" He enunciated the last three words clearly and forcefully. The Voice took a shuddering breath and nodded.

Bax opened his eyes beneath the surface of the sea once more. Breath quickly escaped his lungs as he struggled to discern which way was up. He then felt a current pull him along with it, and quickly realized he was *above* the ocean, speeding toward the ship. The water crashed onto the deck, slamming Bax messily onto the deck. Unconsciousness claimed him once more.

"Bax. Bax, wake up, it's almost here," he heard Kesi say excitedly as she shook him awake. Oddly groggy, Bax rolled over to his back and sat up, rubbing his eyes. A dull ache throbbed in his head, and he raised his hands to his temples.

"Wh..." he groaned, "what's almost here?"

"The sun!"

Almost immediately Bax was throwing off the covers of his bed. He jumped up like a fish from the sea, falling back onto the bed as his head spun and his vision swam.

"Sorry," Kesi said, "I should have told you to slow down. You hit your head pretty hard, apparently."

"How?" Bax asked as Kesi helped him back up.

"Well, I didn't see it, but the sailors told me you *flew* onto the deck from the sea. I'm not exactly sure what to think about that, but I'll take their word for it unless you have something else to say."

The two made their way back onto the deck of the ship, which was still lit dimly by oil lanterns, but Bax could see better than he ever had. A glow emanated from a horizon he once could not see which lit the ship faintly. He stood straight, awestruck, and walked swiftly ahead of Kesi, slowing down as he stumbled over a small rope. The crew stopped for a moment and watched Bax silently, almost in awe, as they saw him emerge from below decks and walk past them, but shortly returned to their work after a call from the captain. Bax made it to the bow of the ship, bracing the railing in wonder.

Kesi caught up to him shortly thereafter, standing at the bow beside him. After a brief silence, she said, "you always worry me, Bax. You've nearly gotten yourself killed on multiple occasions, yet you come out of every situation with only a scratch. You're lucky you have your... abilities, your shadow, but even I don't know how you did that back there, getting out of the ocean like that. If I may ask... how?"

Bax didn't want to tell her that his shadow was what had caused all of his problems rather than solved them. He turned around, looking at his shadow cast faintly on the deck in front of him. It was his. Faint, but his own. It didn't stare inside of him, it didn't judge him, berate him or hurt him; he smiled, and it smiled back.

He shook his head and turned back to Kesi, “not yet. Maybe later, after we see Ahan.” She shrugged and turned back to the horizon.

Then something broke through the horizon, something so beautiful he couldn't look at it directly, so he shielded his eyes. Bax had heard the sun described as a massive lamp in the sky, but that barely began to describe its beauty. It was not a lamp, but a benevolent heart, shedding its love on everyone around it. Bax removed his hand from his eyes, closing them and bathing himself in its light. He hadn't felt safe since Mama left, but with the sun he felt safe again. For now.