



SOUND
OF SIRENS

JEN MINKMAN

~tales of skylge~

Sound of Sirens
Tales of Skylge, Book 1

Jen Minkman

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Das Lied ist aus, die Melodie verklungen Nichts blieb von der Musik zurück Ein Echo nur von Liebe ————— The song is over, the melody fading And nothing is left of the music, Just an echo of love.

—————

(From the Marlene Dietrich song 'Frag Nicht Warum Ich Gehe' – Don't Ask Me Why I'm Leaving)

Note From The Author

The setting of 'Tales of Skylge' is loosely based on the Dutch island of Terschelling, or Schylge in the island's dialect. The Frisian and Skylgian languages really exist, and might sound strange to foreign ears, so here is a short pronunciation guide.

Enna's brother's name, Sytse, is pronounced 'see-tzuh'.

The Skylgian word for 'father' is *heit*, pronounced like 'height'.

All names ending in -e (such as Omme and Alke) are pronounced with an 'uh' sound at the end, not a sharp 'e'.

Although the names and places in this book will look very familiar to people living on or having visited the island, the characters and events are, of course, entirely fictitious in nature.

Have fun reading 'Sound of Sirens'!

1.

It's the cry of the albatross that rouses me in the morning.

The bird has been coming to my bedroom window for a few months now, always just after sunrise. When I open my curtain, it is there, on the windowsill, cocking its head and looking at me curiously. Meaningfully, even.

The elderly people on the island of Skylge might have told me that an albatross is a pure, human soul taking flight on earthly wings after death, but I'm not so sure I believe that. Mostly, they just pick fights with the gulls on the beach at low tide, trying to grab the best food once the rocks littered with mussels rise above the brine. Doesn't look very pure to me.

But this bird is different. It seems to want to talk to me. *Enna, how are you?* I can hear my mother's melodic voice in my mind. *It is me.*

But of course it can't be her. She was taken by the sea. By *them*. Or rather, she walked into the water willingly, looking for an end to suffering. Even though she had Sytse, Dad and me. We weren't enough for her to resist the call of the Nixen. The seductive sound of blissful freedom.

Freedom.

It is strange to think that anyone could feel boxed in on this little island. The land of Skylge is flat, flat, flat as far as the eye can see, running into the endless sea on all sides. The infinite sky is never out of reach, though it's often overcast with dark-gray, rolling clouds bringing rain, thunder, and lightning to the Skylgers. It's the only time the Currents cannot stop us from experiencing electricity – I have been told that those fire bolts in the sky are caused by the same force they use to power up their homes, their cars, and their mysterious appliances. And the Brandaris Tower jutting out of the even landscape on the west side of the island is where they keep their patron saint's holy fire. He traveled from afar and came to the

island to protect us from the Nixen, the priests say. But St. Brandan's clerics seem to overlook the fact that the only people truly protected from the merfolk waiting for us in the treacherous waves of the Wadden Sea are the Currents.

If Brandan had come here to protect all of us, the Nixen would never have taken my mother.

I fling back my blanket and get up. Slowly, I get dressed in my simple jeans and white tank top. I brush my long brown hair and pull it back in a ponytail. The cracked mirror shows me the faint rings of exhaustion under my eyes, but I ignore them. I have to – there is no time to linger on my fatigue. I will have to fix breakfast before going to school, and the nets don't cast themselves, unfortunately.

My stomach rumbles. I wouldn't mind a nice, fresh piece of herring with some cut-up onion right now, on a fat slice of white, fluffy bread. No such luck, though. The fishermen out for herring won't be back until tonight, and all I ever catch are small, hardly palatable fish.

"You want some herring?" I mutter to the bird still watching me attentively. "Is that what you want?"

Of course, I get no response. Anyway, I don't think that's why it's here. As I said, this tross has been my faithful visitor for months on end, and I've never given it food. Maybe it just wants to be friends. I've heard Sytse talk about albatrosses accompanying the rickety sailing ships he travels on to get to the Frisian traders on the mainland. "They're here to protect us," his captain always tells him.

Well, our sailors need it. Traveling on those ships is a precarious business. And yet, I envy Sytse sometimes. My brother may run the risk of being attacked by mermaids and ending up in a watery grave every time he sails out, but at least he gets to see a bit more of the world. The traders in Harns treat him kindly, even though he is just a lowly Skylger. Money talks, I guess – without the Skylger sailors risking their lives to sail to and from our island, the traders would be dependent on the Currents' ferry servicing the Harns harbor only once every two months. And they simply love our sheeps' wool. The Baeles-Weards – which is what the priests of Brandan call themselves – don't favor trade with outsiders. They say St. Brandan provides the Currents with everything they could possibly need. But

the Skelta, our wise man, doesn't mind. He wants us to keep an open mind. After all, the Frisian gods are our gods, too.

When I get outside, Dad is already up. He is sitting in his chair by the edge of the yard, his eyes squinted against the rising sun as he stares out over the road running alongside the dyke. His tanned, leathery hands are gripping his knees as though he needs to stop himself from getting up and running toward the sea.

He might be thinking of jumping in and following in my mother's wake sometimes, but he is still with us. I think he loves me and my brother too much.

"Good morning, Enna," he says with a slight smile. "I hope I didn't wake you up with my banging around in the kitchen."

"No worries, Dad. I had to get up anyway." Quickly, I pull on my old rubber boots to do some low tide fishing. "I'm meeting Dani at eight so we can cycle to school together. And I'd like some breakfast before I go."

His face falls. Ever since the fevers came a few years back and ravaged his body, the only thing he can still make me in the morning is hot herbal tea. He's too weak to go fishing.

"Hey, why don't you make the three of us some pancakes for tonight?" I rush on, giving him a sunny smile. "There's still some flour and one egg in the cupboard. And I'm sure Eida can spare us some milk." Our neighbor has a flock of sheep that could feed the entire village.

"Three?" my father echoes in confusion.

"Sytse is coming home today," I clarify. "It's the sixteenth of May, Dad. St. Brandan's Day. The entire island is waiting with baited breath for our ships to return."

His eyes light up with joy. "Is that so?" he mumbles. "Oh, my. I should really keep a better eye on that calendar. I had no idea." He scrambles to his feet and hugs me briefly. "He will stay home until the festival is over, won't he?"

"You bet," I grin. Sytse wouldn't miss it for the world. During the month of Oorol, we celebrate the arts in all kinds of ways. Open-air theaters are filled to the brim with spectators and our most talented actors, stages are put up on the corner of every street to host

musicians, and the scent of freshly baked gingerbread fills the capital city of Brandaris.

Thinking of gingerbread makes my stomach rumble. I pull a face as my tummy loudly begs for fuel. "I'll be back soon," I promise, watching my father as he carefully shuffles toward the back door to go back to the kitchen.

The sun is bright and hot today, making me sweat a little as I make my way across the dyke and to the beach. Unusual for this time of year, but you won't hear me complain. We don't get a lot of light on our island as it is, so I'll take anything the orb of fire in the sky sends my way.

Anything to keep the melancholy at bay.

I start to whistle a tune to distract myself from thinking of Mom again. At the same time, I clap my hands and stamp my feet, turning my morning walk into an impromptu dance. I probably look like an idiot, but I don't care. Eida's sheep are the only ones watching me here, and I give the white, woolly animals a friendly wave before I hit the beach and my rubber boots sink into the wet sand sucking at my feet.

The small net I'm carrying around my neck chafes my skin, the ropes rough and frayed from the brine. Before I can take it off and cast it to try and get myself some much-needed breakfast, though, I pause.

There, on some rocks jutting out from a clump of seaweed, are two gigantic gull eggs. The speckled things seem to smile up at me in the morning sun. I have no idea why a seagull would deposit eggs here instead of building a proper nest, but frankly I don't care. Maybe it was in a hurry. Well, so am I. With a broad grin, I scoop up the eggs and carefully stuff them in my fishing bag. It's time to get out of here before that untraditional bird comes back.

2.

“Enna!” my friend bellows as I cycle up the path leading to the Stortum Dyke. She’s waiting for me, punctual as ever, her bike resting against her hip as she’s tying up her white-blond hair for the windy trip ahead. “We’re gonna be late!”

“Sorry,” I pant, coming to a stop in front of her. “I stumbled upon a lovely breakfast and I just couldn’t help taking my time, savoring the taste of my omelet.”

Dani always meets me here by the water’s edge at eight o’clock sharp. We both live in Kinnum, which boasts a population of one hundred souls. It’s a twenty-minute bike ride away from Brandaris, our capital city, where we go to school.

If we were allowed to ride the Current bus to school, the trip would only take six minutes. But we aren’t – and it’s not like the bus stops in Kinnum anyway. Our village is a pure-blood community inhabited by Skylgers. The Currents, who once came from across the sea and pronounced themselves the ruling class on our island, are not welcome here.

“You’ll regret that big breakfast in a minute,” Dani warns me with a giggle. “Last time you had a heavy meal you couldn’t cycle very fast, remember?”

“Well, maybe we should knock a Current on the head and steal his ID card,” I mutter sourly. “So we can hitch a ride on the Brandan Bandwagon.”

Dani sucks in a scandalized breath. “A lowly Skylger girl riding a Current bus? Feeling brave today?” Her brown eyes, just as dark as mine, sparkle with mischief.

“Come on, let’s go,” I just say. “We only have a few classes in the morning, so they’ll be extra strict with tardy passes today.”

“Long live St. Brandan,” Dani chuckles. “Thanks to him we’re off by noontime. You going to the harbor after classes?”

“Of course. Sytse is coming back. I hope he’s bringing us lots of new records.”

“Oh, yeah! That’d be awesome.”

Dani and I both love music. My friend can’t sing worth a flip, but she plays the guitar like a pro, and I accompany her with my vocals, which aren’t half bad. Also, my family owns a wind-up gramophone and I try to hoard as many shellac records as I can. New music is brought in from the mainland all the time, but those recordings are usually sold to the rich people. Which means they’re on LPs – and can only be played by the electronic devices owned by the Current class. Sytse knows there is a high demand for mainland 78-records among Skylgers, though, so he always makes sure he and his friends bring in whole crates of them whenever he comes home. And he keeps a few aside for me because he knows my favorite artists by now. Marlene Dietrich and Kathleen Ferrier never fail to tug at my heartstrings.

“Drink to me only with thine eyes,” I start to sing on our way to Brandaris. “And I will pledge with mine.” It used to be one of Mom’s favorites.

Dani listens to me with a smile on her face. “I wish we could just stay out on the dyke all day and stare out at sea and make music,” she says longingly. “First period is history with Mr. Buma. Yawn. He’s just going to harp on about the mistakes of our ancestors anyway. St. Brandan’s Day is the perfect opportunity for that.”

I roll my eyes. Dani is right – Buma is a sell-out fawning all over the Current elitists. “Be reminded, children, of our neighboring lands, the sunken islands of Amelan and Flylan,” I intone. “Taken by the waves and the merfolk because they wouldn’t submit to Brandan’s guidance and protection. Smitten because they worshipped Freda and Fosta. Punished because they wanted to disturb the natural order of things.”

And the natural order of things means that the Skylgers stand mostly defenseless when the sea attacks. The Currents hole up in their fortified high-rise apartment buildings in the middle of the island while we watch helplessly as the seasonal floods bring the Nixen to our coastal towns. When the merfolk call to us in the darkness of winter, the Currents drown out the sound with their loud, electronic

music, booming from the gigantic speakers in their gaudy night clubs. Their territory is equipped with a loudspeaker system warning them of a Siren attack with a high-pitched beep which they, ironically, call a siren. Go figure – they named their warning signal after the devious creatures luring humans out to sea.

But we are forbidden to use electricity, reaping only the dubious benefits of being protected by their patron saint of coastal light, St. Brandan. His tower stands proud in the middle of Old Brandaris, repelling the Sirens with its bright, electric light, chasing away the darkness filled with mer-song that threatens to overtake so many islanders prone to melancholy.

Sometimes, I am truly scared I am too much like my mom. One day I might walk into the sea and never look back. And not my family's love or Dani's friendship will be enough to stop me from harkening to the sound of sirens.

3.

“Miss Buwalda,” a stern voice addresses me when I slip into the hallway ten minutes before noontime. “Where do you think you’re going?”

I look around and meet the caretaker’s eye. Old Olger has the ‘strict janitor’ act down to a tee, but we all know he has a heart of gold. Plus, he’s an old friend of my dad’s, so he cuts me some slack every now and then.

“Toilets,” I say, flashing him my hall pass.

“You couldn’t wait for a few more minutes?”

I give him a deliberately awkward smile. “It’s that time of the month.”

Olger grimaces. “Never mind. Off you go. I don’t want to know.”

Smiling to myself, I head for the restrooms. Works every time. I just want to be the first one out the door to get down to the harbor. The ships are coming – I can sense it. A quiet buzz runs through the entire town of Brandaris, as though the electricity powering the rich homes sparked a current in all of its residents.

I slip inside and wait until Olger has strutted off before I come back out again and make a run for the main doors. If no one else sees me, I’ll be the luckiest girl on the island today.

I let out a sigh of relief once I’m off the school grounds. Dani will have to forgive me for sneaking out without her. Two girls with hall passes at the same time would have set off the Sirens for sure, so to speak.

Mounting my bike, I hoist my backpack onto my shoulders. The sea wind is calling to me with an excited cry of freedom and the salty tang of the Wadden Sea tickles my nostrils. I speed along passing my own school, down the street, zipping past the Current high school that’s only a stone’s throw away from ours. When I once wondered out loud why they built it next to the Skylger School in our sector of

Brandaris, Sytse told me that the Currents just like to rub it in – the fact that their institute is far superior. St. Brandan High has artificially-heated classrooms, flashy audio equipment, and special evening classes under electric light.

Personally, I like reading books better. And I quite enjoy the fact that classes are canceled when the weather gets too severe. Long live the impractical fireplaces in our building.

When I arrive at the Kom, our main harbor, a group of Currents has already gathered on the quay. With eager, grabby hands, they await the ships and the goods our traders are bringing home. No matter how much their own priests frown upon acquiring merchandise from the mainland, there's always a few who feel they stand above their own laws because they're just too damn rich to be bossed around by anybody.

One of those people is Royce Bolton. Partial heir to the Bolton Industries fortune. His great-grandfather invented and produced the Siren system, so his family is loaded. Royce is the youngest of three brothers and he's about Sytse's age. As I get off my bike, I secretly observe him. His piercing, blue eyes scan the horizon and a slight frown of anticipation creases the skin between his jet-black eyebrows. The few girls clustered around him look up at him in admiration, but he doesn't seem to notice. Instead, he focuses his attention on the sea, waiting for the Skylger ships to come in.

"Why so anxious, Royce?" I want to ask him. "Afraid you won't get any toys to play with this week?"

Everybody on the island knows who Royce is. Apart from being a rich, spoilt brat, he also happens to be a gifted musician. He always plays the piano during the Oorol festival, usually accompanied by one of his gushing girlfriends singing along. It's not fair that such an insufferable person is so talented, in my humble opinion. I wish I could hate the guy, but after hearing him play, I honestly can't. His music is heartrendingly beautiful. If his songs were ever pressed in shellac, I'd buy them in a heartbeat. I'd probably cover my tracks out of embarrassment, but still.

Before they can spot me or ask me why I'm here this early, I scurry away like a frightened crab and sit down on the sand, my back leaned against a mooring post, my chin braced upon my raised knees, and my arms circling my legs. If anyone were to draw my portrait now – or snapped a picture of me with my dad's clunky, old-fashioned camera – the result would be called 'Girl In Contemplation', I bet. I wonder if the uncrowned prince of Brandaris and his minions ever stare at the sea with such a mixture of fear and reverence.

My grandmother says that we were born of the sea. Our ancient, pre-Brandan legends teach us that the Frisian gods cast us upon the land when we started to grow legs instead of fins and tails. Our ancestors are the Nixen, who still call for us, imploring us to come home. But this is our home now – and we can never go back. Yet, we silently worship the sea out of respect for what it has given us, and is still giving us now. Life. Sustenance. Water to desalinate and fish to catch in our nets. And we have our own rituals to appease the merfolk. Once a year, during Oorol, we sing to them. The Baeles-Wearde priests would ban our songs of old if they knew. When the Skylge Choir gets up on stage and performs the old hymns, the choir members' voices carry these spellbinding melodies to acknowledge their existence, and to warn them off at the same time.

"We stand as still as stone
while the mermaid sings
and her melody rings
like a memory calling us home," I sing, almost inaudibly.

Of course, we don't sing this in the Currents' language. As per the Skelta's instructions, the choir chants it in the old Skylger tongue, which is slowly disappearing. Anglian has replaced our own language. Grandma Antje, my mom's mom, still know how to speak Skylgian fluently, though, and she taught me the language too. This means I understand the songs our choir sings every year. She also told me what my name, Enna, stands for. I was named after Grandpa Enno, whose name means fear or terror because it derives from an ancient word meaning 'the edge of a sword'.

The name may have fit my grandfather, but I am not nearly brave enough to carry it with pride. I don't think I'll live to see the day I

strike terror into anyone's heart.

My eyes widen when I see dots on the horizon. The Skylger fleet – it's back! Relief floods my body. As much as I love my big brother being part of our marines, I'm always afraid something will happen to him. No amount of exotic presents will make up for missing Sytse.

I get up and make my way to the waterfront. Very soon, a multitude of Skylgers outnumbering the Currents has gathered around me on the quay, and I feel safe once more. I blend into the crowd, becoming invisible.

Not to my brother, though. As soon as the largest ship docks, he makes his way off the gangway while fixing me with a large grin on his face. His hazel eyes sparkle and his blond hair shines in the sunlight. He's clutching a big, burlap sack in his hand. Filled with gifts for Dad and me, no doubt.

I push my way through the throng and end up hugging my brother for a longer time than I planned.

"How have you been?" he says, breaking our embrace at last and holding me at arm's length to take a good look at me. "You've lost some weight. Have you suffered from the Sadness again?"

"I'm all right," I brush off his concern. "They can call me all they want, but the Nixen won't get me. I belong on the land."

If I say it out loud often enough, it'll be true.

"Well, I brought something to cheer you up anyway," Sytse continues, opening his bag so I can sneak a peek inside. My heart trips when I spot at least five new records. "Here, why don't you hold on to these things for now? I have to help the crew. There's lots of unloading to do, and I bet those Currents hovering around the harbor want to inspect the goods as soon as they can." He winks.

I grin. "I won't unpack this until we get home," I promise.

"Good girl," Sytse says with a sunny smile. "But I want to show you one thing now. I brought it especially for you. Here, wait." He snatches the sack from my hands again and digs up a flat, square cardboard sleeve with a picture on it. A Long Play record?

"These women sing like the Nixen," Sytse tells me. "The lead singer's name is Jyoti. You'll love her music. She plays the piano like she's putting a spell on the keys, and her partner Maya plays the cello. Unbelievably beautiful. I heard these songs outside a brown

café near the Krummhorn harbor and I knew I had to get this for you.”

The two red-haired women depicted on the front chasing a fiery bird stare at the animal with wide, slightly slanted eyes. They look mesmerizing; almost witch-like. I’m intrigued, but Sytse’s gift makes me painfully aware of the things we can never have.

“How will I ever listen to this?” I say, sounding disheartened.

“We’ll figure out a way,” he replies, resting his hand on my shoulder. “Who knows, you might win a day’s supply of electricity this year during Oorol. Don’t give up hope.”

I shoot him a small smile before he rushes off. Sytse is a dreamer. No one in our family has ever won the day’s supply of Current power, and if I did, I wouldn’t waste it on listening to this Jyoti woman. I know what I’d do if I ever won – I’d get someone to drive us around the island in a Current car for the entire day. Ever since the illness took his strength away, Dad hasn’t left Kinnum because he can’t walk very far. And I know he longs to see the salt marshes in the east once more. The wild dunes and the unblemished sands of Osterend where he grew up. He wants to listen to the quiet birdsong in the woods of Hornsebos. He deserves to go there at least one more time, but he can’t sit on the baggage rack of my bike for very long because of the pain in his joints, so I can’t take him. I go to these places on the weekend and take photos with his camera sometimes so I can show him what it looks like, but the resulting black-and-white pictures don’t truly convey the beauty of Eastern Skylge.

“Hey, you!” Dani suddenly pops up next to me. “Left without me? I will never forgive you. Never.” She pulls a mock-insulted face and I start to giggle.

“Of course you will,” I object. “Because you love me.”

“Don’t be so sure.” Dani cranes her neck to look at the crates the sailors are now carrying onto the jetty. “Ooh, I wonder what’s in there. Did Sytse mention any shellac records, besides the ones he’s kept aside for you?”

I shake my head. “You should go take a look. You can listen to mine, of course. But I know you like Victor Silvester the best.”

“True, true.” My friend flashes a smile at me. “Will you be okay on your own?”

“Sure. I’ll just wait for you and Sytse to finish so we can all go home together.”

As Dani skips off to check out what our sailors have brought in from Fryslan, Grins, and Nethersaxony, the wind picks up, making me shiver all of a sudden. The sound of the waves rushes in, carrying wistful voices filled with longing and hunger. The Nixen – or the Sirens, as the Currents call them – are never really quiet. I can always hear them, just like my mother.

I close my eyes and wait until the feeling goes away. The only thing that goes away, though, is the sun hitting my cheeks. When I open my eyes again to see who’s casting a shadow across my face, I am staring into two piercing eyes that are blue like the cloudless skies.

4.

It's Royce.

What the heck is he doing here? I blink up at him in confusion. Am I in his way? Has he mistaken me for someone else?

"Hi," he says, his deep voice melodic like his music.

Why is he *talking* to me?

"Hello," I reply stiffly. "Ehm... can I help you with something?"

"Actually, yes." He smiles, and I hate myself for staring at him. He's gorgeous, in an old, Frisian-god-kind-of-way. "I always come here to pick up the latest music from the mainland, and I think one of the LPs I've been waiting for has accidentally ended up with that sailor's record haul."

I follow his gaze when he stares pointedly at my hand still clutching the useless LP.

"You – but this is mine," I say. "Sytse got it for me. As a special gift."

"Ah." The worried frown I spotted before creases his forehead again. "Well – okay. That's unfortunate."

"What's so unfortunate about getting a present?" I snip.

Royce stares at me for a second and then laughs, his eyes lighting up. "Nothing. I'm happy your boyfriend is bringing you gifts, of course."

"My brother," I mumble, blushing when I realize I feel the need to point that out, somehow.

"Fine. Your brother. I mean it's unfortunate for me. Since that is the only copy the ships seem to have brought in."

Royce looks at me expectantly, as though I should fall down to my knees and prostrate while offering him the much-coveted LP. I narrow my eyes at him and stubbornly cross my arms.

"So..." he continues when I don't say anything back. "How much do you want for it?" His hand drifts down to his back pocket, probably

to whip out his fat, loaded wallet.

I gasp. The arrogance – the sheer impudence of presuming everything is for sale, even gifts meant for others. I take a step back and glare at him. “I don’t want anything for it. I intend to keep it myself.”

I know it’s ridiculous, and I know *he* knows that. I will never listen to this LP in my lifetime. The best thing to do is to make him pay through the nose for it and do something awesome with all his cash. But I don’t feel like being reasonable. I want him to feel like me for once. Like a have-not.

Royce blinks in surprise. “Why?”

“Because Sytse picked it out for me especially,” I say. “He said it was the most beautiful music he’d ever heard and I would love it too. He knows my taste in music. Besides, why would I sell a gift? That’s really ungrateful.”

The dark-haired Current boy bites his lip, seemingly to stop himself from smiling. “Well, you have a point there,” he admits. “But you can’t listen to it. Unless you have a secret LP player stashed away somewhere.” His eyes bore into mine as though he’s expecting me to actually confess to something like that.

“I don’t.” I roll my eyes. “And if I did I wouldn’t tell *you*.”

Royce chuckles. “Well. This looks like a stalemate to me. I want to listen to the LP, but I can’t because you have it. You want to listen to the record, but you can’t because you have no equipment. That’s pretty messed up. Now nobody gets to enjoy it.”

“I’m not selling it,” I repeat, staring him down with as much courage as I can muster. I don’t know what he’ll do. Maybe he will call his lackeys to have me mugged on my way home. Maybe he’ll do it himself, even. He looks really strong. I never really noticed how muscular he actually is.

Royce doesn’t look away. He seems to be contemplating something. When he finally speaks, he says something I don’t understand at all.

“You know the abandoned village of Stortum?”

Everyone does. It’s a settlement north-west of Kinnum, destroyed by a storm surge in the time of my grandparents. It was never built back up again.

I nod. "I do. Why?"

"Because my grandparents used to own a cottage there. On the High Land."

"And?"

"And now it's mine. I repaired it and use it as a sort of retreat. There's an electric piano there so I can practice without being disturbed by people. I – need to clear my head sometimes, and Brandaris is just too crowded for that."

"Sounds great," I say a bit sullenly, but my words are sincere. Royce sounds like he doesn't enjoy the Current lifestyle all that much. I understand why he would want to seek solitude.

"Meet me there," he continues, lowering his voice. "But don't let anybody see you."

"Uhm – *why*?" I ask, sarcasm lacing my voice. "Why would I want to sneak away to your little love nest slash music studio?"

"Sshh," Royce urges me, looking around him furtively. Then, he shoots me an incredulous look. "You got the wrong idea. Trust me, my intentions are honorable." An amused glint in his eyes makes me blush again. Of *course* his intentions are honorable. No Current would touch a Skylger girl like me with a ten-foot pole. I don't even know why that comment about his 'love nest' slipped out. Somehow, his musical retreat center morphed into something quite different in my perverted mind. Maybe because of the way he asked me to meet him there. I could kick myself.

"So what are your intentions?"

He inches closer and whispers: "I have an electronic turntable there. So we can both listen to the LP. We'll share it. Okay?"

I blink up at him owlshly. I hate to admit it, but that's actually a pretty brilliant idea. And very considerate of him – I bet he could force me to give up Sytse's gift if he really wanted to.

"Uhm, okay," I stammer. "When?"

"Tonight. Six?"

"No." I shake my head. "I'll be having dinner with my dad and brother. Eight o'clock."

He nods. "Eight it is. I'll leave the light on outside so you can find me."

"Good." I take a step back and bite my lip. "See you."

“Soon,” Royce says, smiling faintly.

I turn around and dash off into the crowd, trying to catch up with Dani and Sytse. I find that the Jyoti LP fits perfectly in my backpack.

5.

That afternoon, we gather in the living room. Dad has splashed out and made enough pancakes to last us through lunch and dinner, because Eida donated some eggs to us too, the sweetheart. Dani joins us for tea and cookies. Sytse has brought our favorite, waffles filled with the sweetest syrup in all of Fryslan. I get the portable gramophone from my room so we can put it on the coffee table and listen to the new music my brother brought home. Dani bought a few Victor Silvester records from an old sailor she knows through her grandpa, and she's brought those too.

The first song we play is called *My Secret Love Affair*. It's Dani's pick. A slight smile graces her face as we listen to the dance band playing a somewhat mournful tune with a beautiful violin solo. The majority of this orchestra's recordings don't feature vocals, and I feel the urge to start singing and add some lyrics about a couple sneaking off to meet up in secret.

Dani used to date a guy from Meslons who kept their relationship a secret. Hank didn't want to tell his parents because they expected him to 'do better'. They're rich, stuck-up snobs who are tragically deluded because they think Hank will marry a Current girl one day. No mixed-heritage couple on this island will ever tie the knot. It just doesn't work that way.

Dani broke up with him a few months ago because she got tired of being Hank's clandestine lover, but I know it still stings her. She really liked him. This kind of music reminds her of what she's lost.

Next up is my latest Kathleen Ferrier acquisition – a record featuring the songs *What is Life* and *Art Thou Troubled?* I pick the first song and we listen in silence. Kathleen's dark, contralto voice fills the room. Dad closes his eyes and savors the music. It reminds him of Mom and the happier times when she was still alive. He once told me how much he loved me playing Kathleen Ferrier's music in

the quiet afternoon hours while doing homework, invoking bitter-sweet memories.

After the song is finished, Sytse volunteers to wind up the gramophone for the next round of records. The crank is getting a bit squeaky, but the machine is still working properly. I stand next to him to replace the steel needle and shoot Dani a wicked grin when she walks over holding up a Bob Scobey record. “Want me to put in a loud needle?” I ask.

“Of course,” Dani replies. “The Frisco Band needs to be played at maximum volume.”

Last time we did that, Eida came over to check out what all the noise was about and ended up jazz-dancing in the living room with us. She’s a feisty old woman, just like my grandmother Antje.

“Okay, here we go,” Sytse says. He carefully places the needle in the outer groove and the soundbox comes to life with a crackling noise – a bit too buzzy to my taste. I asked him to look around for a new mica diaphragm, but they are hard to come by these days.

We dance and sing along to the new records until dinner time. “Are you dropping by tonight to study for the German test together?” Dani inquires as I see her out.

“I can’t,” I say. “I promised Sytse to help him with something.”

“Okay. If you’re too busy to study I’ll fill you in during our ride to school tomorrow!” she grins.

I feel guilty for lying to her, but I don’t want to tell her about Royce’s strange proposal. Yet. Of course I *will* tell her, eventually – once Royce has grown tired of me and my LP and goes back to the harbor to pick out his next new and shiny thing, I’ll tell her all about how I forced a Current guy to hang out with me. The Jyoti LP makes me feel powerful. The title of the record is *Phoenix*, and that’s exactly what I feel like. Indestructible. Rising like a newborn from the flames.

By the time I sneak out of the house – I told my family I’d be studying in my room until bedtime – it is almost dark outside. Royce promised to leave a light on outside the cottage, which is a good thing. I thought I could take the bike to Stortum, but I can’t risk veering off

the narrow track in the darkness. I don't have headlights like the Current vehicles, after all. It's a new moon tonight, so the sky will be pitch-dark later. I will have to walk.

Humming a tune to myself, I go on my way. Actually, I don't feel that upbeat. I'm mostly singing to myself to calm my nerves. The more I think about it, the more outrageous this whole plan seems to me. I am going to sit down in some obscure cottage with a Current celebrity so we can share an LP. What will we talk about? How am I supposed to behave? He will look at me as if I'm some desperate, Skylger electro-wannabe. Maybe it's a trap and he's invited all his friends so they can all mock me for being so gullible.

I freeze mid-stride. Oh, by Freda and Fosta – that must be it. I sink down on a bench by the roadside and rest my head in my hands. The LP drops into my lap. Royce is a sadistic bully and he's trying to set me up. It's St. Brandan's Day – why would he want to meet up with me instead of spending time partying in town with his buddies?

It takes me another ten minutes to pull myself together and continue my walk to Stortum. Because I still want to know. I'll tiptoe to the window and look inside to see if I'm right. If I am, I get the hell out of there. If I'm wrong about Royce... well, that means I'll have an exciting, nerve-wracking evening ahead of me.

By the time I march up to the front door, it's completely dark. I found my way all right because there's an electric light bulb above it which casts a faint light across the wooden exterior of the little house. The light doesn't look too inviting. I prefer candlelight and the light of the gas lanterns that our island guards keep burning along the main roads in the small Skylger towns and villages.

I hold my breath as I creep up to the window on the right. The curtains are partly drawn, and I can still peer through the crack.

Royce is sitting in a lazy chair facing the door. He looks like he's a bit nervous, too. And it also looks like he's completely alone. By some miraculous turn of events, this guy seems sincere in his wish to share Miss Jyoti's latest work with me.

I slink back into the shadows and stare ponderingly at the dimly-lit entrance. Do I really want to go in there?

My hand apparently decides I do, because the next thing I know I am rapping at the door. Within seconds, Royce opens it and stares down at me with that strangely piercing gaze in his blue eyes.

“Hey,” he says.

“Hi,” I respond, giving a half-hearted wave with my hand holding the LP.

“Come in, please.” He steps aside to let me in.

My heart skips a beat as I comply with his request. There, I did it – I showed up for a secret date with a hot Current boy. If only Dani knew, she’d laugh her ass off. Or slap my stupid face.

“Nice place,” I comment, surveying the room. The two couches and the lazy chair are all burgundy-colored velvet. The coffee table in the center is made of heavy, dark-brown wood. There are some old family tintypes above the fireplace, and in the far right corner is a piano that doesn’t seem to have a soundboard. It must be electric, then. It’s almost like magic.

The cottage is really cozy, apart from the strangely-looking appliances lining the left wall. One of those things must be the LP player he mentioned. I inch toward it. To my surprise, it looks really similar to a gramophone upon closer inspection.

“You like my turntable?” Royce says, his low voice breaking the silence so suddenly that I give a weird little jump. Whipping around, I take a quick step back since he is closer than I expected. I feel flustered by his presence – not just because it is somehow imposing, but because he seems to make my skin glow.

“Turntable?” I repeat dumbly.

“Yeah. The modern version of the phonograph.” That’s what the Currents call our mechanical music players – I remember now.

“It’s weird.” I take a hesitant step closer, as though the turntable could leap up and maul my leg at any minute. “Where is the soundbox? That tone arm looks so fragile.”

“The tone arm uses an amp,” Royce replies. “And the needle is made of diamond, so it basically lasts forever. It can play both vinyl and shellac.”

It’s like he speaks an advanced form of German I never studied. His words make no sense to me, but I nod seriously, keeping my

eyes on the device. “I didn’t know Currents listened to shellac records, too.”

“Well, only collectors,” he says. “Most people buy LPs these days. But I like 78 RPMs. I kept my grandfather’s records when he died.”

My gaze gingerly swerves to his face again. “What kind of music did he like?”

“Glenn Miller. The Andrew Sisters. Marlene Dietrich.”

My eyes widen when I hear the name of one of my favorite artists. For a split second, I feel weirdly jealous because Royce knows her too. Her music should be something I can keep for just me, but I guess in the spirit of sharing music on this weird kind-of-date, I shouldn’t grumble about it.

“So... shall we listen to this?” I suggest, handing him the *Phoenix* album.

“What a great idea.” He shoots me a lopsided little grin before turning around and pressing a button on the device underneath the turntable. “Have a seat,” he then says, gesturing at the sitting area.

I pick the couch furthest away from the lazy chair, since I suspect he’s going to sit there. My hands feel clammy as I run them over the velvet of the cushions.

When Royce walks over, he slides the LP sleeve across the coffee table and nods at it. “You can pick which side we listen to first.”

“Oh.” I stare blankly at the sleeve, my eyes skimming all the song titles. Wow - I thought there were only two songs on the disc, as usual, but from the long list of titles I conclude that this record is chock-full of songs. Fourteen in total – seven on each side. That’s as many songs as I care to play in one afternoon before my arm starts to hurt from operating the crank. “Uhm... I want to hear *Field of Night*.”

Royce brushes a strand of black hair from his forehead. “Okay, side A it is.” He smiles.

I lean back into the couch cushions and fix my gaze on the strange devices instead of him. I’m afraid I’ll stare otherwise.

He reaches out and presses a few buttons to start the music. The fragile arm is lifted and the record starts to spin slowly – much more

slowly than I'm used to. And then, the first tones drift out of invisible speakers that seem to surround the entire sitting area.

6.

My heart stops.

The sound is so clean. So *smooth*. Nothing like my scratchy record player. The piano music envelops me like sweet honey and a warm blanket, cascading over me like a gracious waterfall. The cello kicks in and then the woman starts to sing an evocative, melancholy song. I understand, even though the words don't really make sense sometimes.

We abandon the sinking ship of this reality. Let the sounds of the deep blue silent ocean take us where we are no more than ourselves.

Sytse was right. She does sing like the Sirens. Her haunting voice resonates with me as though I'm listening to the Nixen singing of times long gone, echoing a deep and hungry longing.

I bite my lip to stop myself from welling up. This is the most fragile and delicate song I've ever heard, and it seems to go on forever. Just this one song is longer than a regular 78-record.

When I cautiously glance over at Royce, I notice that he's closed his eyes. Like this, he looks as vulnerable as the song sounds. No wonder he was willing to mingle with Skylgers to listen to this LP – it's so much like the music he composes himself. And for the first time, I wonder where he draws his inspiration from. How does someone manage to create something this beautiful?

When the song ends and segues into another, neither of us moves. Instead, we envelop ourselves with more sweet sounds of angelic voices, cello, and piano, filling the late hours of night. But inevitably, the record has to end at some point. After the tone arm clicks off automatically, we sit there in silence for quite a while.

"Wow," I finally say, but the word sounds flimsy and shallow. It makes me hate myself for breaking this reverent silence.

Royce opens his eyes and shoots me a wan smile. "I know." He takes a deep breath, then rushes on: "This is as close as I can get to listening to Siren song without going crazy, you know."

"Why would you willingly listen to the Nixen?" I say, taken aback.

"Because they infuse me with a sense of..." He pauses, lost for words. "Wonder," he then adds.

I scoff. Wonder? Does this guy even understand how dangerous the merfolk is to people like me – inhabitants of coastal towns who can't fight the Sadness any longer?

"Some artists in my family used to seek them out," Royce relates in a soft voice. "I did too, sometimes. Their song inspires me to write my own music. But it's easy to get lost in the sound of Sirens. That is why we Currents have ways to raise the alarm and shield ourselves off."

"Yeah. You drown yourselves in electronic beats while pulling away the shutters from the top of your precious tower to blast the seas with Brandan's Fire," I say sarcastically. "And you don't care what happens to us living in the middle and the east."

Royce frowns. "The Skylgers are welcome to live closer to Brandaris."

"So we can all be your serfs? No, thank you."

"You should be grateful that the Baeles-Weards are willing to protect your people," he points out huffily. "Without them, many more men and women might have been lost."

"Grateful?" My voice cracks. "Why? Because you keep all the good stuff to yourselves? Because you took away our gods and our language? Because your priests and their sacred fire failed to protect my mother?"

That shuts him up. "We're sharing what we can," he mumbles at last. "What happened to your mom?"

I stare at my hands. "The Nixen took her."

"Mine too." His voice is rough.

My eyes flash to his. "They did?"

"Yeah." He rakes a hand through his hair. "She always heard them. She couldn't shut them out. And by the end, she was addicted to listening to their harmonies. Said it helped her create her paintings."

I inhale deeply. "She walked into the sea?"

"Yes. She left me." He sounds like a little boy, not like an entitled heir to the Bolton kingdom.

"And then you stopped listening to the merfolk?" I add gingerly.

His mouth is set in a grim line now. "Yes. And once I finish college I'm going to design a security system that will keep them away from our island forever. No matter how wonderful they make me feel. No matter how tempting their voices are."

Sounds like he's fighting an addiction. The thought of affluent, pampered Currents getting their fix from the call of dangerous creatures of the sea makes my stomach turn. If they feel so empty inside, maybe they should grow a heart and help their neighbors instead.

"I suppose you could do that," I mutter.

Royce shoots me a puzzled look, as though he expected more encouragement or admiration. Well, I'm not giving him either.

"So why did your mother listen to them?" he inquires when I don't volunteer any more comments.

"Because..." I fall silent. "She was just not very happy. Prone to melancholy. We call it the Sadness. People in coastal towns suffer from it. Our Skelta says it's because they're so close to the world of the Nixen. My dad put my mom on a strictly fish-free diet to try and alleviate the symptoms, but it didn't work in the end."

"I didn't know about your sickness."

"I bet there's an awful lot you don't know about us," I snip.

He sighs. "You're probably right. I mean, look at me – I haven't even asked you what your name is."

I shrug as though I don't mind. "Who cares? I'm just the girl with the LP that you want."

"Well, I *should* care. What's your name?" His face breaks into a friendly, genuine smile, and it trips up my heart. Despite his infuriating superiority, I want him to like me. I want him to smile at me like he cares.

"Enna," I say.

"Nice to meet you, Enna," he says formally, extending his hand so I can shake it. "I'm Royce."

"Yeah, I know that," I laugh. "Everyone knows that."

He grins a bit awkwardly. “Well, I hope they say nice things about me.”

I blush, suddenly feeling guilty for gossiping about him with Dani and the other girls at school. We always thought he was so arrogant, but we didn’t really know that much about him. “My best friend and I love your music,” I confess. “We never miss your recitals at Oorol.”

“So you like piano music?”

I nod mutely. His concerts have always been a joy to the ears. And eyes, admittedly – but I’d rather drop dead than divulge that information. I never even told Dani about ogling Royce on stage.

“Let’s listen to some more music,” he says, his voice and eyes eager. “I’m going to play side B, okay?”

“Sure.”

As we sit there and listen to *Heroes of Bones*, *Broken Mirror*, and *Labyrinth*, it dawns on me how bizarre and impossible this situation truly is. In equal parts, I’ve admired and hated this guy from afar for such a long time. And now I’m here, and we’re connecting and bickering and sharing a passion. And I know I’m screwed, because I haven’t felt this exhilarated in a long time.

7.

By the time we call it a night, it is way past my usual bedtime on weekdays. I'll be intolerable to be around tomorrow morning, but right now, I couldn't care less. I spent an evening with the most handsome guy on Skylge and I heard the most beautiful songs ever. And he's okay with sharing the mythical power of electricity with me. We've even agreed to a second 'musical date' on Friday afternoon before dinner time.

"Will you be all right?" Royce inquires as he gets into his car. "It's pretty dark out."

I cock an eyebrow. "Care to drop me off in Kinnum and draw out the entire village with your motorized vehicle?"

He looks away. "Just asking."

"Yes, I'll be fine." I raise my hand to my forehead in a mock-salute. "Will report for LP duty on Friday. No worries."

"Good." Royce waves once more, then slams the car door shut and drives off into the night, the high beams of his car illuminating the tall grass on either side of the road.

I wait until he's gone before I start walking. My eyes need to get adjusted to the darkness once more. I spent hours under artificial lights and it feels like my retinas are burned because I'm not used to such bright light at such a late hour.

Just when I reach the edge of the abandoned village, I hear a sound. Someone is talking, and another voice is responding, but the second voice sounds strange, as though it is coming from a tin can. Both are male. The voices seem to be coming from an old shack close to my left.

A shiver down my spine makes me tremble. This smells fishy. If people are out at this hour and hanging around in an ancient, uninhabited village, they are probably up to no good.

I clench my hands into fists and stop in my tracks, ducking down when the door of the shack suddenly swings open on squeaky hinges. Oh Fosta – what will I do if these guys catch me here?

To my relief, the shadowy figure coming out of the old hut doesn't even glance my way. Instead, the man – his friend must still be in the house – makes his way across the fields in the direction of Kinnun. My heart is tapping in my throat as I scramble up again and carefully follow him with my eyes, sticking to the cracked pavement of the old road on my way back. I stop breathing entirely, though, when the mysterious figure reaches the Main Road illuminated by gas lamps.

It's my brother.

What is Sytse doing out this late? What's more, what was he doing in Stortum? Could it be he saw me when I snuck out earlier? But if so, why would he hide in a shack instead of barging into Royce's cottage to confront me with my lies?

I stop again, making sure Sytse can't see me if he decides to look back now, and wait until he's completely out of view. My brother is hiding something, and I wonder what it is.

By the time I get home, I'm dead beat from all the walking and the elation of the entire evening, but I still have trouble falling asleep. When I finally do, I dream about Sirens calling my brother out into the waves as Royce plays his strange, electric piano at the seaside. And I just stand there and watch, frozen in time.



The next morning, I'm actually glad to be woken early by my faithful albatross. Since we still have leftover pancakes, I won't have to worry about breakfast, so I might have some time to cycle back to Stortum and take a closer look at the mysterious hut Sytse was hanging around in.

"Hi there," I say softly. The bird, now perched on the table next to our front door, cocks its head and observes me with its yellow eyes. When I extend my hand to offer the animal a bit of pancake, it hops backward and lets out a soft screech, almost as if to say: "Really?"

"Fine. Go catch some fish, then," I reply, stuffing the rest of the pancake into my mouth.

The albatross lifts off and swoops around the house in a majestic circle before taking off in the direction of Stortum. My destination before I go to school.

By daylight, I feel much more confident on my way to the old village. If I bump into someone I don't trust, I'll just dish up some story about doing research for a history project. In fact, Mr. Buma still needs me to pick a topic. I might just as well do my essay about Stortum so I'll have a reason to hang around here all the time.

I get off my bike next to the hut and swallow down my nerves.

From the outside, the shack looks as though it has fallen into disrepair, but when I gently push the door open and peer inside, it's totally different. Neat and modern – very Current. I see a strange device on the table that is clearly electric, and my eyes linger on the two shelves lining the walls next. The books on them are antique. Is this some kind of secret library? And what's with that thing on the dinner table?

No sign of anyone living here. Sytse's mysterious friend must have left after him. I take a few hesitant steps inside and gawk at the book spines. These volumes were printed a long time ago. Some of them even seem to be hand-written. A leather tome with gilded lettering on the spine catches my eye. "From A Watery Grave," it reads in the old Skylger tongue. I pull out the book and almost drop it because it is far heavier than I expected. I don't think this is paper. The pages are more like the old parchment I saw once, at the museum in Brandaris.

When I open the book, I see that the handwriting looks ancient, too. This old-fashioned alphabet is no longer used by anyone. The Skylgian text in this tome must be at least three hundred years old, if not older.

A tiny tremor of excitement runs through me. I want this book. Just like I want to listen to the forbidden LP and hang out with a boy that's out of my league. I want to be brave.

With trembling hands, I slip the book into my school bag and hoist it onto my back. Wincing, I wriggle my shoulders to make the weight more comfortable, but that's pointless. The best thing would be to drop it off at home before going to school, but I'm running out

of time. I'll have to drag it with me to Brandaris and hide it in my room later.

"So, did you study your vocabulary lists?" Dani inquires when I hit the brakes and stop next to her. She's eating an apple while balancing a German textbook on the left handle bar of her bike. Her forehead is creased with worry. "I think I'm gonna flunk this one."

Great. I haven't even opened the book last night, so that means I'm going to get a bad grade too. "Well, I tried," I half-heartedly lie.

Dani shoots me a sideward glance. "Why are you blushing?" she inquires, perceptive as ever. Sometimes I hate my best friend.

I look away. "I'm not."

"Yes, you are!" She stares at me and I feel the red on my cheeks intensify. "What's up? Enna! Did you brush me off for a date without telling me?"

I shake my head. "It wasn't a date."

"Then what?"

My voice catches in my throat. The book in my bag suddenly seems to weigh a ton. "Promise me you won't tell anyone," I whisper at last, even though there's no one around to overhear.

"Of course." Dani's eyes widen with eager anticipation. She *loves* gossip and secrets, but she's true to her word – if she says she won't tell, she'll keep her mouth shut. That's why she's my best friend.

"You know Royce?"

She nods gingerly, her brown eyes suddenly alarmed. "Duh. Did you... don't tell me..."

"He wanted Sytse's gift," I interrupt her. "I didn't tell you, but Sytse brought me an LP. Because he loved the music on it, and he said I might have an opportunity to listen to it some day. And that opportunity knocked sooner than I could have dreamed. Royce Bolton wanted to buy it off me, but I refused."

Dani giggles. "What? You refused the unofficial prince of Brandaris?"

"Well – yeah." I shoot her a grin. "I told him where he could stuff his wallet. But then he suggested listening to it together instead, so we could share it. In secret."

Dani's bug-eyed stare makes me shift uncomfortably.

"You went to his house?" she squeaks.

“No, no.” My hand dismissively waves her anxiety away. “He owns a cottage in Stortum where he goes if he wants peace and quiet. He’s got an LP player there. So he invited me to go there and enjoy my present with him.”

Dani has turned pale. “He could have reported you,” she hisses. “The Baeles-Weards will arrest you for this.”

“Of course he’s not going to report me.” I roll my eyes. “Come on, he offered. If he rats on me, he’s going down with me. He’s not supposed to share electricity outside the Current community.”

“Okay.” Dani breathes out slowly. “That’s true. But holy Fosta – Enna, what did you guys do all evening? I mean, wasn’t it majorly awkward?”

“We just enjoyed the music,” I shrug. “It was magical. I can see where Royce gets his inspiration from. We didn’t talk much, but we talked some. About his family and mine, mainly. He’s not that bad once you get to know him.”

“But you’re not supposed to get to know him,” Dani says firmly. “A guy like that is going to hurt you sooner or later. You know what happened with me and Hank. Imagine what would happen if you and Royce – you know.”

“No, I don’t know,” I say grumpily. “We’re just music buddies. That’s all.”

Dani cocks her eyebrow skeptically. “Uhm, yeah. I can totally see how you can be platonic besties with a drop-dead gorgeous guy like that.”

I don’t respond. Instead, I get on my bike and point at the dyke. “We should go. If not we’ll be late.” Without waiting for her answer, I hit the pedals and take off.

“Hey, wait! Enna!” She follows me and catches up with me after a minute. “Don’t be upset. I just wanted to help.”

“If you want to be useful, you can help me memorize some German words now,” I say a bit snappily.

“Okay.” She shakes her head almost imperceptibly before droning: “*Das Fenster*. The window. *Das Meer*. The sea.”

By the time we get to school, the words are stuck in my head. I suspect I have a knack for German because I listen to Marlene Dietrich a lot. The words sound familiar – and of course they're also similar to Skjalgian.

"I'll help you out if you get stuck," Dani says under her breath as we both slip into our chairs at the front of the classroom. We already figured out a long time ago that these are the best seats for tests we haven't studied for. Mrs. Atsma always paces around in the back of the room during tests because that's where the slackers are. It pays off to have an impeccable track record.

One of our fellow pupils hands out the test papers, and silence descends in the room. Quietly, I try to concentrate on the words and sentences I need to write down, prompted by Dani every now and then when she sees me hesitate. I am done fairly quickly because I unfortunately don't remember that much after all, so I use the extra time to slyly observe the other students in the room.

To my left is Alke. He's a repeater – he failed his exams last year, and most teachers use him as an example whenever someone is found out not having done their homework assignments. "You want to end up like Alke?" they'll say. It's pretty mean. A good thing Alke doesn't care that much. He goes his own way and doesn't mingle with the other students much. He's eighteen now, so he probably feels much too grown-up to hang with them. I dated him for a few months last school year after having been friends for ages, but we were still mostly just friends. I didn't feel that kind of click with him.

Not like with Royce.

The unbidden thought makes me blush. What is wrong with me? I'm making stuff up because he's hot, I know that. I mean, I didn't exactly *bond* with Royce. I was angry with him half of the time we were talking. He's so infuriatingly above all of us. So different from me.

The best thing would be to stand him up on Friday, but I know I'll be back in Stortum. I can't wait to listen to Jyoti again. Maybe I'll even bring some of my own records so I can play them on that fancy turntable of his.

"Well, I'm glad that's over," Dani sighs when the bell rings and our teacher picks up the tests. "Come on, let's hurry so I can grab a

sandwich before second period. I kind of skipped breakfast.”

Fortunately, the canteen is still quiet at this hour. With a groan, I drop my bag onto the floor next to the counter, almost squishing Dani’s toe.

“Ouch!” she cries indignantly. “What the hell is in your bag? Bricks?”

“No, just books.”

“Ah. You got the Book of Brandan in there?”

I bite back a giggle. “No.” I edge closer and continue more quietly: “I found a book in Stortum this morning. Something ancient.”

Dani’s brown eyes light up with interest. “For real? Can I see?”

“Not here.” I watch as she shuffles forward to pay the kitchen lady for her food. “Maybe after school?”

“Count me in.” She takes a bite of sandwich and pulls me along to our next class.

The rest of the day goes by without any trouble. No pop quizzes, no angry teachers punishing me for sneaking out early yesterday. I pitch my Stortum idea to Mr. Buma and he loves it. I bet I can really milk it if I go for the ‘punished-by-being-flooded’ angle in my essay. I wouldn’t be surprised if I really found out that the people of Stortum weren’t the decent, Brandan-fearing people they were supposed to be.

I’m still thinking about Stortum by the time school’s out. If I’m not mistaken, the Skelta’s ancestors came from that settlement too. There might have been a rebel streak to the villagers – much like us Kinnumers aren’t so eager to please the Currents. Brandaris is actually the only place where Skylgers and Currents live side by side, and even that isn’t entirely true. The richest Brandarisian neighborhood isn’t even really part of the capital city and harbor. It is miles away, built upon the highest hill of the island, connected to the city center by the Longway running from south to north. I’ve been as far as Dead Men’s Caskets, the lake that marks the border between Lower and Upper Brandaris, but I’ve never ventured beyond. There’s nothing for me there.

“Are you okay?” Dani interrupts my musings. “You look so pensive.”

“I’m thinking about Stortum.”

“Yeah, about that.” She turns to me as we cycle away. “How did you find that book? Was it in Royce’s cottage? It looks like an antique.” She snuck a quick peek at it during lunch break.

“No.” I stop. Should I tell Dani about Sytse? Maybe I should wait until I’ve confronted him. If I ever scrounge up the courage to do that, even. It might be best to leave it alone for now. “After Royce left, I looked around in the village a bit longer and stumbled upon a house with lots of books and some weird, Current device on the table.”

“You think it belongs to Royce’s family too?”

“I don’t think so. If so he would have mentioned it.”

Dani cocks an eyebrow. “Oh, yeah? You really think he’s that open with you?”

“Well.” I shrug, but wince as I hunch my shoulders. “Ugh. This bag is killing me,” I grumble.

“Why don’t I take it for a while? You carried it on our way to school too, you poor darling,” Dani coos at me with a wink. Before I can protest, she stops her bike and motions for me to do the same. I feel a bit guilty when she grabs my bag and slings it over her shoulders, but not guilty enough to refuse. I smile at her.

“Thanks,” I say.

We ride on against the wind. It’s so strong it takes our breaths away, so we cycle back home in silence. It gives me time to think about possible reasons why Sytse would meet up with some mystery guy in a Stortumer cottage. Maybe he’s interested in the books on those shelves, but there’s an even better reason to come to Stortum – it must somehow be connected to the Grid. If not, Royce wouldn’t be able to make his electric appliances work in that village. Which means Sytse knows too much for his own good, and he’s playing with fire by using a Current device for Freda knows what.

8.

“How was school, sweetheart?” my dad inquires in his ever-gentle voice. “You need help with anything?”

“It was fine,” I reply. “I’m going to prepare for history class with Dani in my room, okay? But I’d really like it if you could help me with math homework after dinner.”

“Of course.” A pleased smile spreads across his face. My dad longs to feel useful around me and Sytse every day, and helping me with mathematics and calculus is one of the ways he can still feel like he matters.

“Great!” I look around. “What’s for dinner tonight?”

“Oh, Sytse is bringing home some fresh herring from the market,” Dad replies. “And he asked you to get some large potatoes and white bread from the grocery store in Baydunen. He left money on the counter.”

“Will do.” I quickly pour us three mugs of tea and put two on a tray to bring with me to my bedroom. I suddenly can’t wait to take a closer look at the ancient Skylgian book, and I’m happy I decided to share it with Dani. Two sets of eyes see more than one.

When I kick the door closed, Dani is already sitting on my bed and pulling out the heavy tome with eager hands. “Let’s see what this is all about,” she muses, opening the book and scanning the first page. “Wow, those ink drawings are quite something.”

I plop down beside her and we put the book on my lap. I’ve put the mugs of tea on the small table next to my bed. No way am I going to allow hot liquids anywhere near this volume.

“1623,” I mumble softly, my eyes lingering on the date underneath the biggest drawing. “Unbelievable. Is this a book from *before* St. Brandan landed on our shores?”

Everybody on the island knows he came here in 1666. The fleet brought the Holy Fire and the Baeles-Wearde built the Brandaris

Tower to safeguard Brandan's Light, our only protection against the Nixen.

"Maybe it's a reproduction?" Dani suggests. "The date on the title page says 1715. See?" She flips back and shows me.

"So it might be an anthology of old island lore." I go back to the illustration dating back to 1623 and stare at the depicted scene. A violent storm rages over the island. The churning waves have capsized a schooner, and sailors are spilling out of the wreckage. It sends a chill down my spine when I spot a few Nixen in the waves, their tails glistening in the eerie light of – what? My eyes flash to the harbor in the background and widen. St. Brandan's Tower is there, shining in the darkness. Except it can't be Brandan's Fire up there, because the Anglians weren't even here yet, in 1623. How is it that the tower is already there?

"Enna," Dani says with a tremor in her voice. "Do you see that?"

"You mean the tower?"

"No." She points to the merfolk swimming around the drowning men in the sea. "Those mermaids – I don't think they're pulling them under."

"What?" My voice shoots up an octave in disbelief. "What do you mean?"

"Well, it looks like..." Dani's voice trails off uncertainly. "It's almost as if they're trying to save them."

"That's impossible." I yank the book toward me and almost touch the page with my nose in an attempt to take a closer look. Under my scrutiny, the small, ink-drawn Sirens sadly don't become any clearer. Dani could be right – but she could also be wrong. It's very hard to tell. "Why would they save those men? You know the Nixen kill us. They tempt us out to sea and then they steal our souls and eat our flesh." My voice cracks on the last word. I don't want to think about what they did to my mother, but I can't help it.

"I don't know," Dani admits helplessly. "But isn't it true that the religion of old says the Nixen were once our friends and allies?"

"You mean before the sea spat us out?" I shake my head. "Well, if that's true, what the hell went wrong for things to end up like this?"

"I don't know," my friend repeats. "But I intend to find out."

“And that’s not the only thing that’s strange about this picture,” I pitch in. “Have you seen the tower in the distance? How can it be there, back in 1623?”

Dani gasps in surprise. “You’re right. What does that mean?”

It can only mean one thing. “It wasn’t made by the Baeles-Weards,” I whisper.

We turn the next few pages, looking for more pictures. We haven’t even gotten around to reading the text yet and already I am baffled beyond belief. This anthology is a treasure trove of secret information about the island, our history and origins. I wonder why it was stashed away in that old house in Stortum – and whether anybody is going to miss it soon.

We spend a full hour looking through the book. The tea has gotten cold on my nightstand by the time we find the oldest picture in the book – a reproduction of an old wood carving. I feel like I’ve ended up in some mad fairytale. The image, dating from 1323, shows how people in traditional Skylger clothes are building the tower that we’ve always believed to belong to the Currents.

“We have to show this to the Skelta,” I mumble. “He’ll know what to do with this book.”

Dani bites her lip. “Well, shouldn’t we read the stories in it first and do more research?” she says, obviously reluctant to give it up so soon. To be honest, I’m not ready to part ways with this book either, but I want to do the right thing. The knowledge contained in these pages won’t do anybody on the island much good if we keep it hidden. On the other hand, that’s what Sytse was doing, too. I wonder how he’s involved in all of this.

“Maybe,” I mumble.

“Let’s give it one more afternoon, then. I’ll drop by tomorrow,” Dani offers. “We’ll contact the Skelta on Saturday when the Oorol Festival kicks off. He’ll be in Brandaris for his yearly speech.”

I open my mouth to agree, then shake my head. “Actually, I can’t meet up tomorrow. I’m seeing Royce.”

Dani shoots me a disbelieving glare. “Honestly? You’d choose a Current boy and his music over our historical research?”

“I already promised I’d be there,” I throw back.

My best friend raises her hands in exasperation. “Okay, fine. But please don’t take this away from me. Let me take the book home and read more on Friday afternoon while you’re cozying up with Prince Bolton. I’ll report back to you and we can go to the Skelta together on Saturday to tell him what we found out.”

“Sure.” I hand her the book and she stuffs it into her messenger bag. “But please be careful with it. We can’t lose it.”

“I’ll bring it back Friday evening, I promise. And I’ll let you know what I find out.”

With a pang of regret, I dig up my actual homework and try to focus on tomorrow’s assignment. I’d rather spend the rest of my time with the anthology, but I can’t – I have to keep up my grades for history and I still need to run errands for Dad.

That night, after eating dinner and doing my math homework with my father, I go outside for an evening stroll. The sun has already set and the May sky is peppered with bright stars glittering like precious stones. I take a deep breath and feel how the fresh air expands my lungs. Far away, in the distance, I hear the cry of a lonely seagull. Even further still, I can hear the incessant, alluring melody of the Nixen, like a faint memory of a whisper.

On Saturday, the festival will start. Both Currents and Skylgers perform during Oorol. Boundaries fade away, although we are never allowed to witness the light shows they organize in Upper Brandaris. All the people on stage will sing, dance, act, and make music without the help of electricity. This festival is ancient – it used to belong to just us. In the old language, Oorol means ‘everywhere’. This entire island has been turned into a giant theater for ten wonderful days since the days of yore.

“We circle around like holy clouds, round and round we drift our ways,” I whisper, remembering the lyrics to one of the songs we listened to yesterday. I can’t wait to hear the LP again.

I can’t wait to see Royce again.

“Hey, Enna.” My brother’s voice jolts me from my daydream. When I look over my shoulder, I see Sytse climbing the slope of the

dyke protecting our small village from the sea water. “You okay out here?”

“Sure.” I can see in his eyes that he’s seeing something in mine. “I’m not sad today.”

Sytse cocks his head a little. “There’s something different about you.”

No shit. I’m secretly seeing a Current guy and I found a book that turned my life upside down in one single afternoon.

“Just looking forward to the festival, I guess,” I mumble evasively.

“Me too,” he nods. “Did I tell you that the Skelta invited some Frisian artists from the mainland?”

“Really?” My mouth falls open. No foreigners ever come to our shores – we always sail out to meet them instead. “How?”

“Just...” Sytse pauses, an expression crossing his face that I can’t quite interpret. “He asked our captain to relay a message.”

“Well, that’s fantastic!” I enthuse, smiling up at him. “What will they do? Acting? Dancing?”

“Singing, mostly.” He smiles back. “It’s going to be a memorable performance, I promise you that.”

Together, we stare out over the sea. The stillness of the moment almost convinces me to ask Sytse what he was doing out there, in Stortum. But something is holding me back. Maybe it’s the fact that I have things to hide of my own, lately.

“I’m going to bed,” I finally say when a pale barely-there sliver of moon rises above the horizon. “I have an early start tomorrow.”

“Sweet dreams,” Sytse says, pulling me into a hug before I turn around and walk down to our little house full of big secrets.

9.

The next day at school, I am strangely withdrawn. Not that I am usually the biggest chatterbox in all of Brandaris, but even the teachers seem to notice that I'm abnormally quiet. But I can't help it – my stomach feels like a bunched-up bundle of nerves and my heart flutters like an anxious bird.

I've never felt like this before. And the stupid thing is that I don't even really like Royce that much as a person. What's more, I don't trust him either. But the fact that he wants to meet up with me again and his genuine worry about me walking back home in the dark two nights ago make me forget all of that. I feel special because of him, and I haven't felt like that in a very long time. I think the last time was when I sang one of my own songs for my mom and it drove her to tears. Yeah, I enjoy making people cry. I am such a freak, right? But I knew back then that my mother's tears were different from her usual Sadness-induced crying – I deeply touched her heart. And I realize I want to do the same thing to Royce. To feel alive and powerful again.

All through calculus, I go through the impending secret date in my mind. What will I say? What can I bring with me? Should I play him some of my own records? I wonder what he'll think of them. Maybe he won't even be there after all – he has to prepare for the festival this weekend. He's playing several gigs, and the first recital will be on Monday.

As background chatter to my main concern of the day is a voice repeating one number over and over again in my head. 1323 – the year in which the Tower was built. Irrefutable proof that the wrong history was written by the victors. I wonder what Dani will discover once she goes home to read in the book after school. She didn't have time to read more than a few pages before bed last night and it's been driving her crazy.

“I’ll drop by after eight, okay?” she says once we leave the building. “We can spend all night talking. Oorol doesn’t start until noon, so we can sleep in.”

“I’ll be waiting,” I reply. We won’t be cycling home together today, because I need to wait for Alke. I promised to help him with his German. He has a re-sit at four o’clock, together with all the others who failed their preliminaries in April.

Just as I’m sitting down on a bench in the schoolyard to unwrap some cookies I brought as a snack, Alke pops up behind me.

“Hey, Enna.” He takes a seat next to me, his textbook in his hand. “How’s life? You excited about the festival?”

“Of course,” I reply with a smile. “I’m a lover of the arts, you know that.”

Alke grins. “I picked Oorol as a topic for my oral exam. Maybe we can talk about it in German?”

“*Klar!*” I nod, and start asking him questions in my best German. I sound different from Mrs. Atsma – she learned the German language of Nethersaxony, but I mostly learned it from listening to Marlene Dietrich. I hope it won’t ruin Alke’s pronunciation, but quite frankly, there’s not that much to ruin in the first place. His German is pretty horrible.

“*Und Twarres ist auch dabei,*” he mentions at some point. “*Am Montag.*”

I blink in surprise. “A band called Twarres is coming on Monday?” I repeat in Anglian. “That’s the first time I’ve heard of them. Who are they?”

“Oh.” Alke looks a little bit caught. “They’re a Frisian band. I own a couple of their records.”

He’s talking about the band from the mainland – the same one Sytse mentioned to me. “How do you know about that?” I inquire with a frown.

“Someone mentioned it,” Alke replies vaguely, his eyes guarded.

“Someone,” I repeat flatly. Why does Alke look as though he’s spilled the beans? “Well, cool. It must be quite a talented bunch if the Skelta invited them personally.”

That makes Alke look even more shocked. “Hey, I should probably go,” he says all of a sudden, looking at an imaginary watch

on his wrist. “I don’t want to be late. Thanks again, you’re the best.”

“Don’t mention it.” I stare after him in utter surprise as he starts across the school yard. Well, that was weird. I can’t wait till Monday to actually see those Frisians play. But first things first – I’m due home to pick up my Jyoti LP for my appointment in Stortum.

It feels different to be out in broad daylight on the deserted road leading to the abandoned village. I have the LP in a shopping bag dangling from the left handlebar and slowly peddle toward Royce’s cottage while looking around furtively. No one’s here – no curious classmates who followed me to see what I’m up to, and no Sytse or any shady friends of his. If I do bump into someone, I have my excuse ready – I’m doing research for my history project.

A small sigh of relief escapes my lips when I spot Royce’s car tucked away behind a row of bushes next to the cottage. Up till this point I was afraid he’d be a no-show, but he’s here, and he’s waiting for me. Or at the very least, he’s waiting for my LP.

I lock my bike and knock on the door. It takes quite a while for Royce to answer the door, and when he does, I see he’s only wearing old, low-slung jeans and a sleeveless white shirt. Trying not to gawk at the strong muscles in his arms too much, I peer up into his blue eyes and say: “Hi. Were you busy?”

He chuckles. It makes his lips curl up in a smile that makes me blush a little. “Kind of. What makes you say that?”

“Oh, I don’t know. You’re dressed as though you were busy with a paint job or something.” I walk past him when he steps aside and drop the bag on the couch.

“This is my off-time outfit,” he says, still with that seductive, tiny smirk around his lips. “Are you disappointed that I’m not impeccably dressed to exude the Bolton grandeur?”

“Hah.” He sounds like he doesn’t take his own family tradition that seriously. “No. Just surprised. Don’t let me cramp your style, please.”

Royce gestures at the piano. Little lights are blinking on top of the case. “Actually, I was busy composing.”

“Oh? I didn’t hear any music when I was outside.”

He holds up a black item that, to me, looks like a set of earmuffs. "Headphones. They help me to lose myself in the music."

I follow the rope dangling from the black ear warmers with my eyes. It's plugged into a hole at the front of the electric piano. "You can hear the piano through those things?" I say in awe.

"Yeah. You can plug them into the amp, too. That's how I usually listen to LPs when I'm alone."

"Ah." I feel a tiny pang of sadness in my heart. "So you can't really lose yourself in Jyoti's music with me around?"

Royce puts the headphones down and shakes his head. "It's no problem. I like sharing her music with someone who gets her."

His words truly make me blush this time, so I quickly turn around to make my way to the turntable. "Your friends don't? Get her, I mean?"

"They're more into trance music. You know. Local stuff." He walks over to me and I can feel my skin tingle as he stands next to me to put the record on the player. "My mother introduced me to Jyoti's and Maya's music, and now she's gone and this is all I have left of her, in a way. She'll never hear these new songs."

For the first time, I don't see his attempt to get his hands on my LP as just the whim of some spoilt, Current brat. These two artists form a link to his mother, much like Kathleen Ferrier will forever remind me of my mom. And I'd probably go through as much trouble as Royce to own all of her music, too.

"Maybe she does listen," I offer softly. "Don't you believe in a life after death?"

Royce hesitates for a moment before his mouth sets into a grim line. "We call Brandan a saint because his Light saved us from death by the Sirens," he answers. "If someone is so preoccupied with averting death and making earthly life as comfortable as possible, I can't believe he took life after death very seriously."

"You don't pray to him?"

"No. I have nothing to say to him. He's gone. His Light is all that remains, and the Baeles-Weards want us to honor St. Brandan's Fire to safeguard our life on the island, not to make sure we go somewhere nice after we die."

I swallow. He sounds so lost and so convinced about the truth at the same time. "Our people believe that the streams and the trees and the sea are inhabited by a spiritual presence," I say, my voice small but steady. "And the people we love will become a part of that spirit when life is over. Freda and Fosta are the male and female principle in nature. Our God and Goddess. But when the Nixen take one of us, that person is lost forever, because they take our bodies as well as our souls."

"Well, that settles it then," Royce says, his voice flat. "My mom was taken by the Sirens. She's gone. And so is yours."

Tears well up in my eyes. "Don't say that," I whisper, sounding choked.

His hand gently slips around my upper arm and he turns me sideways to face him. His blue eyes are dark with pain and regret. "I'm sorry," he mumbles. "That was uncalled for. I didn't mean to make you cry."

I look up at him, shyly taking a quick step back when he raises his hand to wipe my tears away. That's just way too intimate. This whole discussion is, in fact. "Let's just listen to the LP, okay?"

Royce hesitates for a few seconds, then nods. "Yeah, let's."

We sit down on the couch. This time, I don't try to scoot away from him as far as possible. I don't feel the need to. As the first song starts to play, I close my eyes and imagine my mother sitting by the seaside, her brown eyes forever sad and her blonde hair dancing in the wind. In this moment, she is here with me. She's not lost forever, and she is watching over me as a winged creature of the Heavens, sent down by Freda. Maybe the Nixen have allowed her to come back to me as the faithful albatross that visits me so often. Maybe we don't know what the real truth is, because the strange book we found showed me that we might have been wrong about other things, too.

"What else did you bring?" Royce's smooth voice breaks the silence enveloping us after side B has spun to an end.

My eyes flutter open. "W-what?" I stutter dumbly.

He points to the shopping bag. "Looks like there's more music in there."

"Ah, yes." I suddenly feel nervous about bringing my own stuff. Why would Royce want to listen to music I picked? "Well, I was just

curious what Kathleen Ferrier would sound like on your equipment.”

He smiles, and his eyes no longer seem hard like iron. The songs have brought him peace. I think music is his religion, in a way. “Go ahead. Put your record on,” he says invitingly.

I comply. While fiddling with the controls to change the speed to 78, I already start humming *Ye Banks and Braes*. I push the button that start the turntable and lifts the arm, and then I wait.

When Kathleen’s voice floods the room, I stand there in awe. The sound is still crackly, but the usual buzz of the diaphragm is strangely absent. Kathleen doesn’t sound tinny or harsh when she sings loudly – it’s as if she is standing right in the room with me.

Slowly, I shuffle back to the couch, sitting down on the cushions very quietly. When I shoot a sideward glance at Royce, he looks mesmerized. He likes it – he likes ‘my’ music too. It makes me glow inside, and I no longer care why.

“I want to hear you play,” I say abruptly once the song is over. Somehow, I want to stop him from commenting on the record. Maybe a part of me is still afraid he won’t get it, or he’ll say the wrong thing.

“You’ll hear me play on Monday,” he says with an indulgent smile. “At Oorol.”

Stubbornly, I shake my head. “I want to hear what you were working on before I came here.”

Royce frowns, looking a bit taken aback. “Well, I’m not done yet. I’m still working on stuff.”

I smirk. “Do I detect a hint of perfectionism in your refusal?”

He bursts out laughing. The sound echoes off the walls as he gives me a surprised little smile. “Someone ever told you that you’re too cheeky for your own good, Enna?”

“Well – yeah. They have, in fact.” I bite my lip.

Royce rakes a hand through his floppy, black hair before patting me on the knee with it. “You’re cute,” he says.

It’s impossible to hear whether he means cute in a little sister kind-of-way or cute in a sort-of-hot-kind-of-way, but his warm hand on my knee makes me go so horribly red that he can’t possibly miss what I am hoping his words mean. Paralyzed, I stare into his blue eyes and wish the ground would open up and swallow me whole.

“Maybe I should go,” I squeak before he can say anything. “It’s getting late.”

“Yeah.” His voice sounds a bit rough. “Maybe you should.”

Avoiding his inquisitive eyes, I jump up from the couch and rush toward the turntable to take my records. With trembling fingers, I fix my gaze on the door and dump Kathleen and Jyoti in my bag.

“See you later,” I mumble, chancing a quick look in Royce’s direction.

He’s standing in the middle of the room, watching me with a mixture of amusement and keen interest. “When?” he inquires softly.

I panic when he takes a step closer to me. “Tomorrow,” I blurt out. “Evening.”

Royce cocks an eyebrow. “After the opening of Oorol?”

Crap, that’s actually quite late. “Yeah,” I say, not willing to back down. “Ten or so?”

“I’ll be here.”

“Good. Bye now.” I storm out the door and slam it so hard that I’m afraid I’ll rouse the spirits of dead Stortumers.

What the *hell* am I doing? In fact, what am I even thinking? I should stop deluding myself into thinking that Royce could possibly be interested in me *that* way. He’s twenty and I am only seventeen. He’s in college. He’s a Current celebrity. And I am a stupid little Skylger girl for agreeing to meet up with him yet again.

10.

When I get home, I'm afraid Dad or Sytse will be able to see it in my eyes – how flustered and confused and revved-up I am. But if so, they don't comment. They're both sitting in the kitchen peeling potatoes and cutting vegetables.

"Can you pour us a mug too?" my brother pipes up when I walk over to the stove to make some tea. "You're home late."

"Yeah, I was helping Alke with his German test," I lie. "So I was busy. Dani is dropping by tonight so we can work on my own assignments, though."

"Relax," Sytse grins. "You have all weekend to do your homework. I'm not going to play the evil big brother and scold you or anything."

This is the bad thing about lying – you always want to make the lie sound too perfect so you end up saying too much. "Thanks," I mutter, lighting the gas stove and watching the kettle as it heats up.

When Dani shows up here after dinner, I will have to focus on the anthology and nothing else. No more daydreaming about Royce. I don't even want to tell my best friend how silly I'm being – she already warned me before.

As I sip from my hot tea and stare out the window, I see storm clouds drifting in. Let's hope the rain will fall during the night, not tomorrow afternoon during the opening ceremony. The Currents are always seated under a big tarp covering the main bleachers, while we are gathered on the town square, out in the open. That's just the way of the world.

Once we sit down for dinner, the mashed potatoes, onions, and carrots topped with mackerel feel like a brick in my stomach. I can't eat more than a few bites before giving up. "I'll save it for later," I mumble when I see my father's worried look. "I'm not that hungry yet."

“Eida has offered to take Dad and Grandma Antje to Brandaris tomorrow,” Sytse announces cheerfully. “She’s bringing the cow-drawn carriage to town, so they can hitch a ride.”

Our neighbor is a darling. This way, my grandmother won’t have to walk and I won’t have to worry about transporting my dad by bike, running the risk of making the pain in his joints unbearable for the rest of the day. “That’s great,” I say with a smile.

After Sytse and Dad are done eating, I clear the table and put on another kettle to boil some water for the washing-up. No dessert tonight, so I have it easy. I just have to scrub the pots and wash some plates, cups, and silverware. I sing softly to myself as my hands dip into the hot, soapy water to rinse the forks.

“What’s that?”

Sytse suddenly pops up next to me. I hadn’t even heard him get up from his seat at the kitchen table – I thought he was reading the paper.

“What is what?” I say, looking up at him in confusion.

He narrows his eyes at me. “That tune you were humming.” When it still doesn’t click, he adds: “Enna, you were singing one of the songs from *Phoenix*. That LP.”

Oh, crap. He’s right. One particular song has been stuck in my head ever since I left the cottage a few hours ago. *Weaving Web*.

“N-no,” I stammer, groping around for a plausible excuse. “I just – came up with that melody today. I...”

I start when Sytse slams his fist on the counter. “Don’t lie to me,” he growls. I’ve never heard my brother speak to me like that. All of a sudden, he feels like a stranger with a secret side I should never have found out about.

“Okay,” I squeak.

“So. You listened to that record. How? When?”

My jaw tenses. “Who are you to interrogate me like this?” I throw back. “It’s none of your business.”

His face falls just a little bit. My words hurt him. We used to be so close before he left to work at sea. “Enna, it *is* my business,” he insists. “I gave you that record. Now, I want to know how you managed to listen to it. I didn’t mean to put you in any danger. Come on – I hate it when you lie to me.”

“Well, I’m not the only one keeping secrets,” I fume, my voice rising a notch. “What about your nightly visits to Stortum? When were you planning on telling me about those?”

“What the...” Sytse staggers back, then grabs my upper arm and forcefully shoves me away from the sink and out of the kitchen without saying anything else. He marches me into his room, kicks the door shut, and sits me down on the bed.

“Okay. Now tell me everything.”

His stern look makes me draw up a blank as I contemplate lying to him. Sure, I could tell him I saw him sneaking out of the house so I decided to follow him, but that still wouldn’t explain how I know about the music on my new record.

“Royce Bolton came up to me at the harbor,” I mumble. “Said he wanted the LP you gave to me. I refused. So we struck a deal – he said I could use his electric turntable if I agreed to listen to it together.”

Sytse lets out an incredulous sigh. “Enna, that’s dangerous,” he groans. “What if his family finds out? What if his mother barges into his room when you’re visiting?”

“I didn’t go to his house,” I argue. “He owns an old cottage in Stortum that used to belong to his grandparents. And he doesn’t have a mother anymore.”

“Stortum,” my brother echoes.

“Yeah. That’s how I found out about you. I was there two nights ago.”

Sytse shakes his head and sits down heavily in his desk chair. When he fixes his gaze on me again, his next words shock me.

“Was it you who stole the book from the house?”

I can feel the blood drain from my face. So he knows. The anthology must have been important to him if he noticed it’s missing so soon.

“It was,” I admit softly. “I just – I was looking around and I saw all these books, and they seemed so old. I was intrigued.”

“Is it in your room?”

I shake my head. When Sytse’s eyes widen in alarm, I quickly add: “It’s with Dani because she wanted to read in it some more.”

She's bringing it back tonight, okay? We didn't intend to keep it. We wanted to give it to the Skelta tomorrow."

A tired little smile pulls at his lips. "Well, that's laudable. Since it belongs to the Skelta in the first place."

"Huh?" I stare at him in amazement.

Sytse's dark eyes lock onto mine. "That entire house does," he continues. "And all the stuff in it. Including the radio."

What the hell is a radio? "I – I don't understand."

"Once Dani gets here, I'll explain it to you both," he says. "But you have to promise me you won't tell a soul."

"Of course," I say indignantly. "Your secret's safe with me. With us."

"You don't even know what it is yet." He smiles wistfully.

"Well, I do know that you can trust me. Don't you?"

"Yeah." Sytse frowns. "I do. But for the love of Fosta, please stop seeing that Current guy. He's my age. Royce shouldn't be hanging around with young girls like you."

My jaw tenses. I'm not *that* young – I'm almost old enough to get my own house. At the same time, my blood runs deliciously hot at the thought of Royce wanting to hang out with me despite the age gap. The allure of the forbidden makes me feel desired.

"Sure," I grumble, not meaning it. "If you think that's best..."

Sytse unexpectedly pulls me into a hug and holds me tight. "How did you grow up so fast?" he muses a bit forlornly.

"It just happened. While you were at sea." I add a bit venomously: "While you decided to become some sort of spy for the Skelta."

He scoffs. "Don't be ridiculous." Rubbing his face, he continues: "I just want to help my own people. And if that involves breaking the rules and stirring up a shit-storm of trouble, I don't care. Who made those rules anyway?"

Right at that moment, I hear voices outside Sytse's window. My dad is sitting in the front garden smoking his pipe and talking to someone, so I guess Dani's here.

"Enna!" he bellows. "You have a visitor."

"Coming," I call back. Quickly, I get up and bump into Dani in the kitchen. She's just putting her bag on the table to take out the old book.

“Hey, Enna,” she says, her breath hitching when Sytse enters the room after me. “Oh, uhm – let’s go to your room, shall we?”

“Whatever you need to discuss can be discussed here,” my brother states calmly.

Dani blinks up at him in surprise.

“He knows about the book,” I clarify.

“Oh.” My friend shoots me a bewildered look. “Okay. But *why*?”

I don’t reply. Instead, Sytse gestures at the comfortable couch in the corner, inviting us both to sit down. He takes a seat across from us in my dad’s lazy chair. Gingerly, Dani puts the old leather tome on the table, as though she’s still not sure Sytse is allowed to see it.

“A few years ago,” Sytse starts out, “I befriended the Skelta’s son, Omme. He was part of the same debate team in high school. When I told him of my plans to become a sailor and merchant, he told me that his father was looking for trustworthy people sympathetic to the Skylger cause who could be liaisons between him and important people on the mainland. Fryslan, mostly, but other countries too. People who were fed up with being the Currents’ doormats.”

“But the Currents have protected us for centuries,” Dani interrupts him. “I don’t like being a second-class citizen any more than you do, but the ruling class isn’t just at the top of the hierarchy because they are bullies. They actually help us.”

“The Skelta thinks their claims are exaggerated.” Sytse points to the book on the table. “If the two of you have taken the time to look at the illustrations in that book, you will have learned by now that the Brandaris Tower was never built by the Current invaders. It is *our* tower.”

We both nod silently.

“I have learned something else,” Dani says, almost inaudibly. “There’s an old legend about Dead Men’s Casket Lake – and it flies in the face of everything we’ve been taught about the place.”

I turn around to face her. “What have you found out?”

Dani bites her lip. “The Current legend states that some of the Nixen’s victims washed up on our beach a long time ago, after the sea decided to give back the bodies to the grieving Skylger and Current families. And the deceased were placed in coffins to be

buried at the bottom of the lake, to honor the earth and the water at the same time. Hence the name Dead Men's Caskets. But the older, Skylger legend in this book says that the Nixen brought those bodies to us willingly, after a violent storm had destroyed one of our sailing ships and killed scores of sailors. It was an act of friendship." Her voice turns rough. "The story claims that we weren't enemies once."

"But..." I am lost for words. My eyes search Sytse, who is nodding solemnly.

"There are quite some legends in that book that tell a different story from today's generally-accepted history," he says. "Everything in it was painstakingly collected by a former Skelta, almost three hundred years ago, so people wouldn't forget the truth. But the book fell into obscurity because it went missing. Our present Skelta found it in one of the museums. Knowledge about the book was passed down through many Skelta generations. He suspects the Currents got their hands on it at some point and misinterpreted it as a fairytale book written by our ancestors."

"Who's to say it isn't exactly that?" I object. "Maybe none of the stories in it are true." Yesterday our discovery excited me, but today I realize that believing these stories has caused Sytse to walk a dangerous path, and I'm not sure I'm a big fan of his decisions.

"Or maybe none of the stories the Current rulers have told us are true," Sytse counters. "If I have a choice, I'd rather believe in our own fairytales than in their fabrications."

In the silence that follows, my father comes back inside now that the sun has set. "Does *he* know about your second job?" I sneer, motioning toward him. "About the risk you're taking, meeting up with strange men in Stortum in the dead of night?"

"Of course he does," Sytse replies unflappably. "He was the first person I consulted when I got the offer to work for the Skelta."

I stare up at my father, half-expecting him to deny Sytse's words, but he just stands there and nods quietly. His eyes are calm, my mind a storm by comparison. Something snaps inside of me like a brittle twig when I realize I am just a child to them. A child not worth confiding in.

"But what do we really know?" I say, my voice faltering. "That history accounts might have been altered? Does it change anything

about the fact that we're still at war with the Nixen and the Currents are in possession of the only weapon against them?"

"We might be able to fight back more effectively if we were allowed to use electricity," Sytse replies.

"It's a Current privilege. That's never going to happen," Dani mutters.

Sytse looks from her to me. And then he says: "What if it weren't any longer?"

11.

His words punch me in the gut. “What?” I croak hoarsely.

Sytse remains quiet for a while, clearly debating with himself how much he should tell us. When he finally opens his mouth, a calm resignation softens his features. “I guess there is no point pretending you’re too young to absorb this.” He leans forward in his chair. “Enna, the Anglians have had a monopoly on electric power for centuries. Nobody knows how they generate it – not the original Skylgers and not the Anglian colonists in the Hanze cities. But the indigenous inhabitants of Fryslan, Grins, and Nethersaxony have banded together to tweak Current devices and invent a power source of their own. With success, I might add.”

My mouth falls open in complete, utter astonishment. Is Sytse saying that the Currents’ power is not some form of magic? Might we be able to build *our own* Grid?

“How?” Dani gasps. “Without Brandan’s Fire, how could they possibly?”

“I don’t know the specifics,” my brother confesses. “I’m not a scientist, after all. But I do know that Mr. Westhaus from Saxony and Mr. Tesla from Fryslan have developed a working system that could light the homes of hundreds of people if they had the means to solely devote themselves to research. And they’d be the homes of common people, not Anglians.” He lowers his voice. “What’s more, Tesla is willing to give it away for free. The Currents would lose their position of power if they’re no longer the sole supplier of electricity to the Anglians on the mainland. Some Anglians in coastal cities are even eager to work together with Tesla. They wouldn’t be dependent on Current headquarters in Brandaris any longer.”

My head is spinning with all the new info. “So – that is why you travel to the mainland? To consult these Westhaus and Tesla guys?”

“Among other things. But I talk to Tesla’s assistant even when I’m here, on Skylge. That’s why I go to the secret headquarters in Stortum – the Skelta put a radio there because it needs electricity, and he knows Stortum is connected to the Grid. It’s a Current device, designed to transport human voices across great distances. To broadcast them – that’s the word they use.”

“It’s like magic,” Dani whispers.

“And yet it’s a part of everyday life for the Currents,” my dad speaks up. “With the Skelta’s help, it might not be beyond our grasp, either. Imagine what it would be like to hear news from the mainland firsthand and not read about it in old newspapers. Our world wouldn’t be quite so small anymore.”

The longing in my father’s voice brings tears to my eyes, but before I can comment on his words Sytse gets up and grabs the old book. “I’m going to bring this back to Stortum right now. I’ll let the Skelta know his missing book has popped up again tomorrow.”

“Sorry for causing trouble,” Dani mumbles.

I nod along, although regret is not the main emotion bothering me. It’s *anger* – unadulterated fury about the fact that my family has kept me in the dark for so long. When Sytse walks outside and Dani trails behind him to apologize some more, I pin my father with a dark gaze full of resentment.

“Why did you allow Sytse to risk his life like that?” I spit. “And why didn’t you tell me anything?”

“Enna.” His eyes fill with a dull pain. “I was just trying to protect you. You’re too much like your mother – too emotional, and far too prone to Sadness. So susceptible to the Nixen’s call. I was afraid that all this knowledge about the injustice in our world would cause you to snap and do irresponsible things.”

“But Sytse is doing them,” I point out in frustration.

He shakes his head and the lines around his mouth harden. “No. Your brother is far too level-headed to be reckless. If I could still walk properly, sweetheart, I would have joined the resistance too and fought for my wife and for our people so we could live in a better world some day. Nothing would have made me more content after your mom’s horrible death. But I can’t. Sytse is my eyes and ears. He walks this path for me.”

That shuts me up. This, too, is a way for my dad to feel like he still matters. We all cope differently with death and disease and misfortune.

“I’m not reckless,” I mutter stubbornly.

“Yes, you are. You let your heart run ahead of itself. You don’t think things through.” He smiles. “It’s what I love about you, Enna. You’re like the fire warming this house inside and out. The beating heart of our family – but sometimes, it makes you unstable.”

I bite my lip. “Thank you.”

“*Ik hab dy jeaf*, Enna,” he says in Skylgian.

“I love you too, *Heit*,” I tell him. “Sorry I got mad.”

At that moment, Dani comes back in and our conversation is over. It would have been anyway - neither of us likes to waste too much time on saying we’re sorry or openly expressing our love. In that respect, we are very much alike.

“Shall we sit down?” she proposes gingerly. “So we can look at the Oorol program? I brought a flyer.” She waves it in the air.

“Sure.” I smile faintly. Now that Sytse is gone with the book, there’s no point talking about all the new things we’ve learned. It will only bring up a ton of questions that nobody can answer – yet.

We look at tomorrow’s line-up. Of course, Mayor Edison will kick off the festival with a long-winded speech about the precious unity between Currents and Skylgers and how Oorol symbolizes our friendship, yada yada. The Skelta is up next. He usually keeps things short, giving way to the Skylger Choir singing the ancient songs to honor our ancestors and the creatures of the sea. Afterwards, there’s an appearance of the Maidens of Brandan from the convent belonging to the Baeles-Weards on the main stage, and some folk singers from both sides on the two smaller stages near the park.

“I think I’m going to stick with Adrian Lymes,” I say, pointing at the announcement for the concert in the park. “I liked his songs last year. Remember you learned how to play his songs on guitar so you could play them at my birthday?” Dani has an uncanny memory for melodies. Maybe she developed that skill in the absence of shellac records featuring the latest songs composed by Current artists on the island. They never bother to sell their songs to us. A wasted opportunity, if you ask me.

“Lymes it is,” Dani agrees. “Oh, look, there’s an after party. You going?”

“Nah.” I’m meeting up with Royce at ten, but I’m not telling her that. She’ll assume the worst, but she doesn’t need to worry. All I want is to show him I’m not scared of him.

“And your music buddy is taking center stage on Monday, see?” Dani teases me light-heartedly, though with a slightly accusatory undertone. “Hey, you know that band performing after him?”

“Twarres,” I read out loud. “Not yet, but Sytse says they’re from Fryslan, so that’s a pretty big deal. Alke knows them too.”

Dani’s eyes start to glisten. “Musicians from the mainland? Wow. You think they have anything out on shellac?”

“They should. Alke said he owns a few records.”

“And they sing in Frisian?”

I frown. “No idea. It’s not all Anglian and German these days anymore, though. I can’t wait to see their show.”

We babble on about the festival until it gets dark outside. That’s when Sytse returns from Stortum. He’s taken a while – probably been talking on that radio thing. Dad comes back to the living room and makes us all some tea and cookies. “Will you be all right going home by yourself?” he asks Dani, casting a look outside.

“I’ll walk you,” Sytse offers before Dani can reply. “I need to visit someone on your street anyway.”

“Thanks.” Dani shyly smiles at my brother. She looks flattered – a bit nervous, even. That’s when I remember she used to have a thing for Sytse before he joined the fleet. Well, he made it perfectly clear what he thinks about age difference. Guys like him shouldn’t be hanging with young girls like Dani, according to him. I’m sure he means nothing by it.

After my friend is gone, I tell my father I’ll be out for a while to watch the stars. In order to drown out the call of the Nixen, I usually take my record player with me.

The portable device built into the leather suitcase is heavy. The handle cuts into my hand as I clamber up the dyke, but I don’t mind. I need some music to accompany me in my secret hideaway.

Nobody knows where I take refuge whenever I sit at the seaside, not even Dani. There’s a small cave tucked away between two large

boulders sticking out into the sea five minutes from here. It's impossible to go into the cave when the tide is high, but when the sea retreats I can go down the steps I found in the woodlands near the beach and safely get inside via a tunnel.

It was truly exciting when I found it by accident a few years ago. Since our island is so flat and sandy, I suspect the entire cave was man-made. It's more like a grotto, because the interior is decorated with shells and mosaic in all shades of green and blue. If I didn't know better, I'd say it's a shrine for the sea gods, but to my knowledge we never worshipped them in temples or sanctuaries. If this place once belonged to someone who built it to honor the Nixen, I'm sure he or she quickly abandoned it after they turned against us.

Fortunately, the acoustics in my private cave are outstanding. Playing my records here boosts the volume at least twofold, if not more. In here, I like to listen to classical music by Chopin, Debussy, and Rachmaninov by soft candlelight while gazing at the stars outside.

The alcove I used to hide my big candle in has kept it safe and dry. As I touch the match to the wick, a soft breeze stirs my hair and makes the flame flicker. I can't stay too long or I'll be washed away by the sea – the waters are already rising. But I needed to get out of the house and away from all the shocking revelations floating through the air and my mind. I've always felt that our world wasn't entirely fair as it was, but I never dared to dream that it might be changed – that we stand a chance of turning things around for ourselves.

Could I live to see a day in which I'd be allowed to befriend a Current guy? Show my dad the island in an electric car? Listen to my favorite music without being punished?

I play my old records and close my eyes for a while, wishing for time to speed up and life to change around me as though I were an old, gnarly tree seeing the years flash by in the blink of an eye. So I can escape the Sadness and fast-forward to a bright future.

But then I push those melancholy thoughts aside. I want to be a part of this change. I want to join the fight, in my own, small way, and I know exactly how to do it.

I am not going to give up my secret friendship with Royce.

12.

The next morning we all sleep in. By the time I get up, the albatross is nowhere to be found near the house. It probably gave up on me today. I smile to myself in the mirror as I get dressed in my cobalt blue, short-sleeved blouse and flared black pants. It might be a bit too cold outside to wear short sleeves, but I don't care. I want to look different than usual.

I touch some lip gloss to my lips and accentuate my brown eyes with a bit of dark-green eyeliner and mascara. Then, I braid my dark hair and stick little white flowers into the end. As a finishing touch, I spray on some rose perfume. And all the while, I am humming a Jyoti tune, trying to deny that I'm sort of wondering whether Royce will like the way I look. Thinking back to our strange and awkward goodbye two nights ago makes my stomach lurch a little bit.

"Wow, don't you look dashing today!" Sytse exclaims when I step into the kitchen. "All tarted up for the Oorol opening, are you?"

I grin amicably. "Only happens once a year, so I've gone all out."

"Go big or go home," Sytse agrees with an even wider grin. "What do you think of my new suit?"

The neat brown jacket and pants turn him into a different person, too. "It looks good on you," I reply. "You almost look like..."

I stop. To look like a Current is a thing some people aim for – even if they're not willing to admit it – but I'm sure Sytse aspires to no such thing.

"Like a married man," I finish lamely. "You know, all grown up and stuff."

He smiles faintly. "Not ready to tie the knot just yet," he replies softly. "If I marry someone, I'd like for her to build a life with me in a world without injustice and discrimination."

"Yeah, I get that." A little bit subdued, I walk over to the counter and turn on the stove to fry some eggs and sausages for breakfast.

There's still some smoked mackerel left from last night, so I dump some of that on my plate too. By the time Dad comes out in his best suit, the kitchen is filled with mouth-watering smells of food and sweet herbal tea.

"So, are you going to tell the Skelta that it was me who stole his book?" I inquire a bit anxiously once we're all sitting down for breakfast.

Sytse shakes his head. "I'll tell him Alke borrowed it and it was a misunderstanding. I don't want you involved."

My mouth drops open. "Alke?" I manage to utter.

He shrugs. "Yeah. He's a part of our organization, too. I trust you can keep that secret."

Well, that explains the flustered look on Alke's face when I mentioned Twarres to him. "Of course."

"And I expect you to stay away from that Bolton guy from now on," Sytse continues, his face darkening. "The arrogant prick. Lording his wealth over you by letting you use his LP player. If anything, he should be thankful to *you*."

I register the shocked look on my father's face. "Thanks, bro," I grumble, violently stabbing my sausage with a fork. "I really wanted *Heit* to know that." Plus, it's not even true. Royce never boasted his riches in front of me. And he had been grateful for my presence.

"So?" Sytse prompts me when I don't say anything else.

"So, what?"

"Will you keep your distance?"

"Yeah, yeah." I roll my eyes at him. "I guess Alke is off-limits too, huh? Because of his involvement with the resistance? Maybe you'd like to make me a list of people I *can* be friends with."

Sytse glares at me. "Don't get fresh with me, Enna. I don't want you to befriend someone who runs in a completely different circle. Now that you know my secret, you might let something slip."

"Oh, of course, because I'm a complete idiot," I snide. "Besides, what could I possibly blurt out by accident? You haven't even told me what you guys are up to, and you've taken the damn book back."

The look in Sytse's eyes softens. "Look, I'm sorry. I never wanted you to get mixed up in this. But now that you are, I want to keep you safe."

“I can take care of myself,” I mutter.

“Okay. I trust you.” He smiles, and I give him a half-hearted smile back. I feel just a little bit guilty for lying to him – but only slightly. I don’t need to give up seeing Royce, because I know what I’m doing.

After breakfast, Grandma Antje shows up in her best dress and she and my father make their way to the neighbors’ house to hitch a ride on the carriage. Sytse, Dani, and I cycle to Brandaris, chatting about the upcoming performances all the way to town. There’s supposed to be a collaboration of local Skylger artists on Sunday, but that will take place in Osterend, not the capital.

“Are you going?” Dani wants to know when Sytse brings it up.

“Of course. I prefer Osterend to Brandaris any day.”

“What about you?” Dani turns her head to look at me.

I hesitate. Normally speaking, I’d trawl the smaller venues on the island with her during the weekend. “Maybe I should stay in,” I reply. “I still haven’t done any work on that history assignment, and Buma wanted to see my outline on Monday.”

Dani chuckles. “So diligent.”

“Yeah. I shouldn’t have wasted all that time on reading a book I couldn’t quote as a source anyway,” I add, sounding a bit sour on purpose.

“You got that right,” Sytse says. “Whatever you do, don’t mention the book to Buma. He’s a true Current in the rough.”

He sounds so contemptuous that I raise my eyebrows at him. “You got a bone to pick with your former teacher?”

He shrugs. “Nothing personal. I just happened to know he used to work closely with the Skelta until he was recruited into the Currents’ army of historical revisionism. One minute he believed the Skelta was right about historical accounts being altered, and the next he was perpetuating the Brandaris Tower myth to the entire school. Guess who lives in a luxurious house close to Upper Brandaris now? Rumor has it he’s even connected to the Grid once every week, to buy his loyalty.”

“Really?” I give him a bug-eyed stare.

“Well, it’s a rumor. But there’s always a kernel of truth in those.”

Sytse’s words are still running through my head by the time we park our bikes next to the town hall. A gigantic stage has been erected next to the Brandaris Tower and a large crowd has gathered to attend the opening. I see kids from school, some teachers, neighbors from Kinum and the nearby village of Baydunen. Further up, I see some Current journalists positioned right in front of the stage to take pictures of the mayor and the Skelta during their speeches. As expected, a huge number of Currents are seated on the bleachers to the left, under the big tarp that is presently blocking the sunlight instead of raindrops. Their loss.

I defiantly turn my face to the sun to soak up the energy that’s freely available to everybody, regardless of their background. Who knows – if Tesla ever got the means and resources to do proper research, maybe he’d find out how to harness the power of the sun one day so we could all equally benefit from that blazing fire in the sky.

When I open my eyes and stare at the Current grandstand once more, my eyes zoom in on a familiar dark-haired guy standing there, looking out over the stage. He is swarmed by pretty girls who are all flicking their hair, trying so hard to get him to notice them that it makes me feel angry with jealousy and deflated all at once.

How can he *not* like all that attention? Why does he flee to Stortum to sit there in solitude when he could have a fan club of drop-dead gorgeous girls to tend to his every whim? I don’t get it. I don’t believe that could be the truth. I should turn my attention back to the stage, and yet I find I can’t tear my gaze away from his handsome face. One of the girls takes his hand, and I remember what his hand felt like on my knee the other night. A pleasant heat rushes to my cheeks.

At that precise moment, Royce seems to feel the weight of my stare. He looks up from his casual conversation with the girl and his blue eyes land on me.

I swallow hard. He doesn’t smile, but he doesn’t look away either. I ball my hand into a fist when I notice I want to raise it for a tentative wave. *Stop being an idiot*, my inner voice tells me. *He’s not going to wave back.*

And then my heart stops when he does give me a smile. It's barely there, but it touches his eyes, and it is directed at me. Even though he's still holding the blonde girl's hand.

"Hey, little dreamer." Sytse pokes me in the side. "What are you standing around like that for? If we don't hurry, we'll have the shittiest places in the whole square."

"What about Dad and Grandma?" I say.

"*Heit* and Antje are sitting over there on top of the carriage, see? No worries. Come on."

I see a gray and a dark-brown head sticking out above the crowd. "Yeah." I clear my throat. "Yes, of course. Sorry."

My heart trips like a Current trance beat. It reminds me of that time I was hiding in the delivery quadrangle of the *Electron* once, after a late school party. The Current club is alongside the Longway leading to Upper, just three hundred yards away from the exit to Dead Men's Caskets. Annie, a classmate with a rebellious streak, had taken me last year because she knew where to go to secretly listen to their music. Standing out there in the dark with her, I'd imagined what it looked like inside as Annie's hoarse voice described to me how the Currents' lean bodies writhed under flashing, colorful lights, sweaty with exhaustion. She knew, because she'd been inside once – using the back door to sneak in after dropping off a delivery from her father's brewery. The thrumming of the ground underneath our feet and the wisps of hypnotic trance-like music drifting out through the cracks in the doorframe had reminded me of another world. A forbidden, dark, and sexual place.

Royce's smile just now reminded me of that place. It makes my blood run hot and cold at the same time.

"What's up?" Dani inquires as she pulls me along. "You look flustered."

"It's hot in the sun," I mumble evasively.

"Well, you want to sit under the tarp, then?" she giggles. "Together with you-know-who?"

"I'm not going to hang out with him anymore," I say. If Sytse is ever going to believe that lie, I should tell Dani the same thing. On our way here, she and Sytse agreed to go to Osterend together on

Sunday, so it's best if they both believe I'm working on my history assignment.

In truth, I'm keeping myself available on Sunday just in case.

Just in case that look passing between Royce and me meant anything at all.

As expected, Mayor Edison drones on and on about the friendship between the Currents and the Skylgers, and the Oorol festival being a symbol of our harmony. Why is he always so insistent that we're friends? We're not even equal partners in this supposed union. The Currents don't really need us. I've wondered for a while now why their beloved St. Brandan ever decided to set up shop here in the first place. Maybe Royce knows.

After Edison is done, the Skelta takes the stage. He reminds me of my late grandfather – tall and gray-haired, his face weathered from living in a coastal town all of his life. The wind, the sea salt, and the Nixen's call will do that to you.

When he starts to speak, a hush falls over the crowd. Somehow, his presence is far more commanding than Edison's. His voice is steady and gentle as he addresses the audience, but mostly the ones in the open air. "Dear islanders," he says. "Oorol is a time for celebration and culture. It is a time to embrace our past and our future together. Let us not look at each other and fear the unknown. Let us stand side by side and respect our roots as well as what's ahead of us. In sharing our music, we are sharing our souls. It's time for the traditional Skylger choir to sing to our ancestors and pay tribute to the past, just like your Firekeepers appease the darker creatures that roam our waters with melody and light."

The Baeles-Weards girls will perform later tonight, but I won't be there to witness it. Their songs remind me too much of the actual Sirens' song, but their voices seem to sing the haunting melodies in reverse, if that makes any sense.

Everybody applauds as the Skelta gives the floor to our traditional singers. They're wearing folkloric costumes vaguely reminding me of the attire that the old people in the forbidden book

were dressed in. I've never wondered about their outfits before, but now I wonder who picks their costumes and if there is any meaning behind the various shades of blue in the fabric.

A shiver runs through me when they start singing and the Skylgian language washes over the multitude. Half of the people here no longer know what the words mean, but I do, and so do Dani and my family. The song speaks of longing for a lost home, the call of the past, and our deepest respect for the sea. Nowhere does it mention terror or fear. Surely a song honoring our origins wouldn't include the latter, but it suddenly strikes me as strange that the ancient hymns don't mention anything negative at all. I've lived on this island my whole life, and everybody knows that the sea and its creatures can be dangerous. The Nixen aren't just a part of our past – they are very much a part of our present.

It's as if they're trying to save them. Dani's words echo through my mind, remembering me of the old ink drawings and the things she found out about Dead Men's Casket Lake. Suddenly, I'm terribly upset about losing the book to the Skelta and the resistance. I would have loved to know more about our lost tales.

"You coming?" Dani wants to know as the square partly empties after the choir has gone off-stage. "You wanted to go see Adrian Limes, right?"

"Yeah. Let's go."

We get our bikes and zigzag through the crowd of people, all of them on their way to the park. I know it's silly, but I keep looking back to see what Royce is doing. According to old customs, he'll have to wait for the sacred choir of St. Brandan to finish their performance before he can go anywhere else. He's one of the Current VIPs, after all. For the first time, I wonder how much of a cage the easy life is to Royce. Sure, bars keep the danger out, but they also keep his people locked up. I think he's trying to escape by composing – his music sounds like he's celebrating a certain kind of freedom that is always just out of reach.

I should really stop thinking about him.

"So. You and Sytse, huh?" I say once we've left our bikes at the park entrance and slowly make our way toward the small stage.

Dani blinks at me in alarm. "W-what do you mean?"

I chuckle. “Just that you guys are going to Osterend tomorrow. But after your reaction, I should probably assume it means more.”

“Don’t be absurd.” She looks away.

“Yeah, ‘cause my brother is not a big fan of age gaps, apparently.”

“Oh.” Dani pauses for a few seconds. “What makes you say that?”

I clear my throat. “He said Royce was way too old to hang out with the likes of me.”

Dani shakes her head. “Not *that* old.”

“Well. I’m not going to see him again anyway.”

My friend shoots me a sideward glance. “For real?”

“Yes.”

“You’re really giving him up because Sytse wants you to?”

I shrug awkwardly. “I guess.”

In the silence that follows, I can see a look of incredulity grow in Dani’s brown eyes as she stares me down. “You’re not going to give him up,” she finally establishes. “I know you. That’s not the way you tick.”

“Well, maybe I’m resetting my clock.”

She sighs. “Please be careful.”

“You’re not listening!” I cry out in frustration.

“And you’re not being honest,” Dani calmly replies. “Fess up – when are you going to see him again?”

I bite my lip. She knows me far too well. “Tonight,” I admit. “I’ll break it off tonight. Please don’t tell Sytse.”

She rolls her eyes. “Of course not. What kind of blabbermouth do you think I am? I’m your best friend.” Before I can stop her, she hugs me tight, and I try to fight back tears. Somehow, I always cry a little when people comfort me. Maybe it’s because I feel I can finally let go.

I wriggle out of her grasp after a few seconds. “Come on, let’s just chill out near the pond,” I say, my voice a bit thicker than usual. “It’s close enough to the stage but we’ll be able to lie down in the grass.”

I want this afternoon to just be about me, Dani, and our mutual love for music. I’ll deal with whatever comes next by the time I get

there.

13.

“Ouch.”

I stifle a curse when I bang my knee against the windowsill. Gasping for breath, I crouch down in the grass underneath my window and carefully crawl away from the house. Sytse and Dad think I’m already in bed for my early start tomorrow, but if they happen to glance out the window and see a shadowy figure running away from the house, they might think to check up on me. I don’t think I’ve ever attempted to escape from my own house by sneaking out through the window, but desperate times call for desperate measures.

The stress lancing through my body makes me run toward the abandoned village despite the darkness. I know the way now, and I know there are no obstacles to trip me up besides the lies I had to tell to even make it here. Maybe I should do what I told Dani I would – I’ll allow Royce to listen to my LP one more time and then take it away from him forever, and myself along with it. If Sytse is right, all of us Skylgers might be able to listen to Jyoti in the near future anyway. So I don’t need Royce or his damn equipment.

By the time I arrive at the cottage, I am completely out of breath and my fingers holding the *Phoenix* LP are a bit damp with sweat. Sinking down onto the sagging garden fence next to the door, I run my hands through my hair and hope it will make me look slightly more presentable. My chest expands and shrinks, forcing the air in and out of my lungs. Slowly but surely, I calm down.

And that’s when I hear it, through the hammering of my own heart in my ears. It is music – an otherworldly, captivating piano melody that drifts out the window and into my heart. Royce is playing, and this time he’s not wearing his weird earmuffs. I can hear him, softly yet clearly.

When I gingerly push the door open, he doesn't turn around or look up. Maybe he hasn't even heard me enter. His body is hunched over the keys and he sits spread-legged on the piano stool as though he is riding a horse, holding the reins to control the melody and shape it like the songs of his soul.

Slowly, I tiptoe toward him, not uttering a single word to break the spell. A part of me wants him to acknowledge my presence, but another part wants to just eavesdrop on him unawares – and become a part of his most private emotions. His shield is down, opening the shutters so I can look in from the outside.

When I come even closer, Royce unexpectedly looks over his shoulder to shoot me a look I can't fathom. His mouth turns up in a roguish smile before he turns back to the piano. My heart stutters. He has seen me. He knows I'm here – and yet he keeps playing. He wants me to hear this.

Of course, the melody has to run its course and dry up eventually. A meaningful silence descends in the room as Royce gets up from his piano bench and stares at me. A few long strides and he's standing in front of me, towering over me as I look up and rack my brain for something to say.

"You let me hear your work in progress," I finally whisper in awe.

"I did." He nods, and the movement makes a few strands of dark hair flop over his forehead, partly obscuring his blue eyes as they search mine. His lips curl up in a smile. "Isn't that part of the reason why you came?"

"N-no." My tongue feels like sandpaper. "I just – wanted to..." Say goodbye, I add in my head.

"No?" Royce takes another step closer, prompting me to hold up the LP like a shield. It makes him smile a bit wider, and I turn red. I don't know what the hell I'm doing. "Then what do you want?"

He stands there, clad in those way-too-sexy, ratty jeans and a sleeveless black top. I don't ward him off anymore when his hand reaches out to touch my cheek. The feeling of his fingers on my flustered skin stops any coherent thought I might have conjured up. He slowly leans into me, his face so close to mine that my breath falters. Meanwhile, he's pulling me in, tugging on a strand of my long, dark hair.

“Stop toying with me,” I croak, despite the fact that I want to shut up and just wait for him to kiss me. I want this, but I don’t. I don’t know.

“I’m not,” he says, softly and seriously. “You really think I’m playing you?”

“I’m scared.” My whisper is hardly audible.

He exhales. “Me too.”

That admission makes me blink up at him in surprise. Why should he be scared? He’s got nothing to lose.

“Why?” I say, but my question remains unanswered.

Royce moves in and his lips briefly touch mine, the heat from his mouth erasing the words that lingered there. He pulls me into his arms and kisses me again, more insistently, trailing his hands down my back and resting them on my hips in a deliberate gesture.

The LP drops to the floor. I moan softly and close my eyes when his tongue parts my lips, stirring a hunger in me that I’ve never felt before. And I know this is what I came for – I could tell myself and Dani and my brother a million other things, but this is what I want. I’ve allowed my sad, hungry heart to lead me astray and make me fall for the wrong guy.

Royce slowly pushes me backward until my back is against the wall, his mouth never leaving mine. A shameful heat flushes my face when I feel just how much I want him. My body is so warm and soft and eager to embrace him. It’s all new to me. I liked kissing Alke, but I guess we never had true chemistry. Nothing like this.

“Enna,” he says when he finally breaks away from our passionate kiss. His rough voice sends shivers down my spine. “I’m so happy you came. I thought you wouldn’t.”

“Why wouldn’t I come?” I say, looking up at him. “I promised I would.”

“Well. It’s late.” Royce shows me that crooked smile that makes my heart race. “Much too late to be out in a dangerous place like this.”

“I saw you today,” I blurt out. “With all those girls.” Inwardly, I kick myself for sounding like a jealous witch seconds after our first kiss.

“They’re freshmen,” he replies calmly. “I was their supervisor during a study project a while ago, so they wanted to say hi.”

“Right.” I stare at the floor.

Royce lets out a sigh and slips his arms around my waist. “I don’t like them, okay? I like you.”

His words make my heart sing, but I’m too scared to believe them. “Why?” I just want to know.

“Because you’re real.”

When I look up again, his blue eyes look so sincere that I can’t stop myself from entertaining the possibility that he’s telling the truth. “You – you don’t meet a lot of real people?” I stutter.

He shakes his head. “They hide. Just like me, actually. I want to be different, but I can’t. The only time I’m showing myself is when I play my music. But people don’t realize it. They think my vulnerable side is just a part of some cunning theatrics I put up to enthrall the audience.” Royce takes a step back and pulls me along to sit on the couch, but I stop to pick up the record I dropped earlier.

“Was it different when your mom was still around?” I hazard once we’re both sitting down.

“Yes.” He caresses my hand. “She knew who I was. She could – sense things. I guess that’s how the Sirens lured her out to sea. A sensitive soul is too easy to snare.”

“Yeah. I get that.” I gaze at him, still unable to believe that this gorgeous, famous, Current guy just kissed me. When he cracks a smile, I laugh nervously. “Sorry I’m staring.”

“You can stare at me all you want,” Royce replies. “I like looking at you too.”

A horrible blush creeps up on my face. “You’re just making that up. You always have your eyes closed.”

He winks. “That’s what you think. I’m sneaky, aren’t I?” He grins wider when he sees my red cheeks. “Besides, I just realized that I actually knew you before I got to know you for real,” he then says cryptically.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, Last Oorol?” he mumbles, suddenly a bit nervous. “You were sitting in the park with a friend of yours and she was playing the guitar. You were singing. It was an after party organized by one of the Skylger songwriters, I guess. I happened to be out that night, and I couldn’t tear myself away from your spontaneous performance.

Your voice was so heartbreakingly beautiful. I just never saw your face, because I was behind you. In my mind, I called you ‘mystery girl’.”

He’s right. It was me singing with Dani playing the guitar that night. The description fits. “I – I never saw you either,” I mumble, completely flummoxed by his admission.

“It was dark. You were singing by candlelight. Plus, I kept out of sight. I’m happy the mystery is solved now.” His hand cradles my cheek, and I inadvertently lean in to him, my skin craving his touch.

“I – can’t believe this is happening,” I whisper. “You’re so gorgeous and I’m just – me.”

Royce smiles. “You think you’re plain, Enna? Skylgers don’t keep mirrors in their houses?”

“Of course we do.” I roll my eyes.

“Well, you should know you’re a beauty, then.” He’s stroking my neck now, softly and warmly.

I smile shyly. “Are you serious?”

“Like the star.”

“What star?”

“Sirius?” He cocks an eyebrow, and I burst into a nervous fit of giggles.

“Stop being so funny,” I gasp at last.

He grins. “Sorry.”

“You know – I never really expected you to be this cool,” I admit. “Meeting you here is like a silly daydream.”

He nods slowly. “It’s not supposed to be real,” he agrees.

“But it is now,” I whisper.

“Yeah. It is.” For a moment, his eyes flicker with a hint of fear and apprehension. Then, he smothers his alarm by kissing me again, pulling me down next to him while softly stroking my hair. Breathlessly, I shudder as every inch of my skin touching his is set on fire. I was right – this is like a dream. And I never want to wake up.

By the time I get up to leave Royce's cottage, it is near midnight. My entire body is aglow after an evening of talking, kissing, and listening to LPs. My world is expanding so rapidly that I'm afraid it will explode.

"See you tomorrow," he says at the door, gently touching my face. "You're skipping Oorol?"

"Yes." I nod eagerly.

He cracks his handsome smile. "Me too, then. What time shall we meet?"

I suddenly have an idea. "Let's meet up somewhere else," I suggest. "There's this place near my house that I always go to when I want to be alone. It's a kind of cave."

"Color me intrigued," Royce says. "How do I get there?"

"I can't really tell you. We'll meet up at the Stortumer Dyke," I explain. "At the signpost near the border of Kinum. Noontime?"

"Sure." He leans in for one last kiss, and then I turn around and walk down the path with empty hands but a head filled with love.

I've left my LP with Royce, together with my heart.

14.

The albatross isn't there when I get out of bed. Normally, this would disturb me, but today nothing will rain on my parade. I'll spend a few hours on my history assignment in the morning before taking off to show Royce my secret grotto. I'm bringing the gramophone so we can listen to some classical music. Last night, I discovered he owns Rachmaninov's full Piano Concerto No. 2 on record, which made me green with jealousy and elated about his taste in music at the same time. I never heard it past the first eight minutes because our shellacs never contain more than four on each side, and my father never bothered to track down the rest of the set. We only have the very first part.

Just as I sit down for breakfast, Dani bursts into the house and waves at me and Sytse. "Good morning, my darlings!" she sings. "Are you ready to explore Osterend with me?"

I raise my hand in objection. "I'm still not tagging along," I point out. "History homework, remember?"

"Oh, come on, don't be a killjoy," Dani rebuffs my protest. "You're not gonna spend all day on that assignment, are you?"

"I should if I'm supposed to show Mr. Buma anything passable by tomorrow," I grumble. Sadly, I'm not even lying – meeting up with Royce will mean I have to slave away in the evening to make up for lost hours.

"I'm happy to see you taking school so seriously," Sytse says. He sounds like he's pinning a medal of brotherly approval on me, and for a split second I feel ashamed for lying to his face when all he wants is to protect me.

"Yeah, well." I shrug. "If I keep my grade point average up, I might get a better job after graduation." No Skylger ever gets to go to university – we don't need to learn about modern inventions that

we'll never be allowed to use. Plus, it's a Current institution located in Upper Brandaris. I wouldn't want to be caught dead in that place.

After breakfast, my dad and I are quietly doing the dishes in our tiny kitchen when he suddenly puts his dish rag down and looks me in the eye.

"Enna," he says. "Are you feeling okay?"

"Sure," I say. "Why?"

"You seem – different. So rebellious."

"So?" Yeah, he's right – I do sound defiant.

"You didn't used to be like this."

I roll my eyes. "It's called puberty, *Heit*."

He sighs. "Are you angry about Sytse?" he continues. "About the things we've kept from you?"

"Actually, yes." I toss a bunch of spoons into the hot, soapy water. "I might have helped, you know. I could have been useful – I can *still* be useful."

"I know that." His voice is gentle, unwavering. "I just wanted your life to be simple."

A bitter laugh bubbles up in my throat, but I swallow it down. If only he knew how complicated things have become as of late. "Don't worry about me," I reply. "I'll take things in my stride. You don't need to protect me."

"No." His shoulders slump almost imperceptibly. "No, I guess not."

And suddenly, I want nothing more than to fling my arms around him and disappear into my father's embrace. Let him shield me from this world with so many dangers and heartache lurking in every corner. But I can't – I can never go back, because I crossed that threshold when I thought I was ready, and now the door has fallen shut behind me. I'm no longer a child, and we'll have to assume new roles and get to know each other again.

I grab his hand. "I love you," I simply say. "And I'm fine."

He smiles. "I love you too. I'm glad to hear you feel fine."

The thought of seeing Royce again today makes me feel more than just fine. It's as though the blood scorches my veins passing through my feverishly-beating heart. He'll come to Kinum, for *me*, and he'll sit with me in my secret hide-away. It's too much – a silly,

girlish daydream unable to survive in the open air of the real world. And yet, I have no doubt he'll be here at noon. He likes me, because I am real.

When I hear the clock tower in the distance toll out the half-hour after eleven, I pack up a bag of books, snacks, and a bottle of elderflower cordial. Last but not least, I grab the portable gramophone and a selection of records.

"I need to get some fresh air," I announce to my father as I step out the door and find him weeding in the front garden. "The walls are closing in on me."

"Off for a seaside stroll?" He eyes my baggage. "Or a beach picnic?"

"Both. I'll be home in a few hours."

The road running alongside our yard is deserted, because most people living in Kinum have gone to the festival in Osterend, Baydunen, or the big stage in Brandaris. They have quite a line-up today – even better than yesterday evening in Upper Brandaris. Last night, as I made my way back home after meeting Royce in Stortum, I could see the Current light show in the distance. Very faintly, like a brilliant sunset I'd narrowly missed. The fog-dimmed electric lights had lit up the sky as though to mock the uninvited like me. But I didn't mind – I'd been to a more private party with a far more satisfying ending.

I peripherally notice a few kids running toward the beach holding metal buckets. They'll be hunting for small crabs. I used to do the same in the early summer months with Dani and Alke. For just a second, I'm worried they will see me and Royce together, but I know they'll be focused on scanning the sand for shellfish. Sooner or later, they'll start walking sideways just like those animals. We used to get dizzy from hunting them too.

I turn my eyes toward the road once more. My step falters when I see him – Royce is standing by the signpost I told him to meet me at, his arms crossed and his lean body turned toward the sea. He's squinting against the sun hitting his face, but it doesn't make him

look awkward or weird. In that moment, he is so much like the out-of-my-league crown prince of Brandaris that I always admired from afar that I want to turn around and run far, far away. He's not for me.

But when our eyes collide and his mouth turns up in an endeared little smile at the sight of me clutching the gramophone, I forget all that. I deserve to be with someone who gets me and who sets my heart alight.

"Hi," he greets me, his voice soft and melodic. "You want me to carry some of that?"

"Sure." I try not to look too smitten when he grabs the handle of the record player like a real gentleman. "It's quite heavy."

"You're right." He looks surprised. "Why is that?"

"The mechanism inside is sort of clunky, I guess. It needs a steel spring and a protective case around it."

"Is that how it runs?" He sounds fascinated. "By winding up a spring?"

"Well, yeah. How does your turntable work, then?"

"It runs on electricity. The power from the Grid keeps it spinning indefinitely if I don't turn it off."

He makes it sound like magic. I've always believed it *is* magic, or at the very least, something sacred. If St. Brandan's Fire needs an entire club of priests and priestesses like the Baeles-Weards to protect it and tend to it, it must be special.

"Shall we walk?" I say, gesturing to the east.

He just nods and falls into step next to me when I saunter down the path following the line of the Stortumer Dyke. Overhead, the seagulls shriek, diving down and swooping back up, always in sync with the wind tormenting our shores. I imagine high waves beating down on the beach in the summer sun while Royce and I stand in the surf, the legs of our pants rolled up to dip our feet in the water.

"Did you know that people go swimming in the sea near Harns?" I say softly. "In summertime? They go out for days on the beach to cool off."

Royce shoots me an incredulous look. "You mean they're not scared of the water?"

"No." I can still summon up the image of a crowded beach in my mind. Sytse once brought me a black-and-white postcard from the

mainland depicting the beach at Harns, and I couldn't believe my eyes. "The Sirens don't come there."

He smiles faintly. "That must be wonderful."

"Have you ever been to the mainland?" I want to know.

"No. Have you?"

"Nope." I shake my head. "I just like listening to my brother's stories, I guess. Traveling there is way too dangerous."

"Why does he do it? Your brother, I mean?"

"Sytse told me he needs more space," I say. "He wants to see the world, and he doesn't mind risking his life in order to expand his horizon." Plus, the pay is really good. Dad and I would have starved to death a long time ago if Sytse didn't bring in the money to support us, but I'm not telling him that. My Skylger friends don't even know that.

"I guess he longs for a different life," Royce mumbles. "I'd feel trapped here too."

"If you weren't part of the Current elite, you mean?" My voice sounds a bit accusatory.

He smiles wistfully. "Yeah. Some of us belonging to Current society feel trapped, even."

"Then why don't you leave?"

"Our ferries are also attacked by Sirens. You know that. Even more frequently."

"No, that's not what I mean." I stare at him. "If your people feel trapped here, why don't you pack up and live somewhere else? Like I said – the mainland is outside Nixen territory. Why did St. Brandan ever decide to sail to Skylge and make his home here?"

"To safeguard the Fire," he promptly replies, as though he's dredging up the explanation from a textbook.

"Well, couldn't he have safeguarded the Fire somewhere else? In Fryslan? Nethersaxony? Back in Anglia?"

Royce pulls up short and I stop in my tracks right next to him. As he searches my face, I can feel a tingle of fear shooting across my shoulders. Does he think I'm a blasphemer?

"You should probably not question St. Brandan's motives or wisdom in my presence," he says at last. "Or in front of other Currents."

“You just don’t know why your people are here, do you?” I mutter crabbily, even though I know he means well. He’s warning me where he could be reporting me to the Baeles-Weards right this minute.

And then, to my surprise, he shakes his head. “No, I don’t,” he admits softly. “And I wish I did. I’ve been wondering the same thing, but the priests aren’t exactly forthcoming with their clarifications.”

“Well...” My voice falters. “Maybe you should find out.”

“Who am I to question the way things are?” he says bitterly. “I’m rich. My family is important. I go home to a safe house filled with warmth and light and music, all thanks to St. Brandan’s Fire.”

“You should question it because your mother walked away from all that,” I point out. “All that warmth and light and luxury couldn’t keep her away from the Sirens on our shores. If only you lived somewhere else, that never would have happened.”

“Same goes for you,” he shoots back. “Why are your people still here?”

“Because this is *our* island.” I clench my fists. “We were here before you, and we built our lives on Skylge even before Brandan and his Holy Fire showed up.”

He’s quiet for a few seconds. “That’s true.” Without another word, he slowly resumes walking, and while we bridge the rest of the distance separating us from my secret cave, he doesn’t speak anymore. Actually, my very own response makes my mind reel a bit. I never consciously thought about it, but the pride of the Skylger people is related to this place. This is our home, and no matter how dangerous things get, this is where we belong. It doesn’t make sense for the Currents to feel the same way, though. And Royce seems to realize that all too well. No one has ever fully explained to him why the Anglians insist on living on this island. I’ve sowed a small seed of doubt in his mind, and I have no idea what it will blossom into.

By the time we get to the grotto, my hands ache from carrying my shopping bag. I should have used my backpack. The stairs leading down to the man-made cave are hidden by a cluster of trees and a hatch that I instruct Royce to lift up. With wide eyes, he stares down into the darkness. “I’m really supposed to go in there like this?” he says. “No lights?”

“You think my hide-away is connected to the Grid?” I counter with a little eye roll.

He chuckles. “Okay, fine. I won’t wimp out. But if I trip, I might drop your phonograph.”

That gives me pause. “You have a point. Let’s swap.” With a little grin, I take the player from him and hand him my bag of food, drinks, and books. Royce grins back. His lopsided smile suddenly makes me blush, and very much aware of the cramped space we’ll be sitting in all afternoon.

We stumble down the stairs and I can hear him gasp when I close the hatch and plunge the corridor into complete darkness. “Just put your hand against the left wall and feel your way forward,” I suggest. “It’s an even floor.”

His footsteps hesitantly shuffle down the passageway. I put my hand on his shoulder, both to comfort him and to let him guide me. The tunnel curves to the left, and after about ten seconds of darkness, we see light at the end. I blink my eyes against the sunlight once we end up in the cave. It’s low tide, so the water doesn’t come all the way to the entrance. We have enough room to both sit down.

“Wow,” Royce exclaims next to me. He’s looking around, taking in the grotto with curious eyes. “This looks like some kind of pagan temple. Those decorations are beautiful.”

“Funny you should say that,” I mumble. “That’s what I thought when I first discovered it.”

He puts down the bag and I do the same with my gramophone.

“Well, why not?” he continues. “It’s in honor of the sea. At low tide, people can come in and leave offerings for the sea to take away when the water rises.”

“Offerings?” I gulp down a little lump in my throat. “You mean – people?” After all, that is what the Nixen want from us. Living souls, untainted by the cold and dimness of the sea.

“Maybe that is how they kept the Sirens at bay before we came here,” Royce theorizes. “Human sacrifice.”

“I don’t think so,” I protest. “Our history doesn’t mention that.” Nor did the book I inadvertently stole from the Skelta.

“Well, it would explain how the Skylgers survived here without the Brandaris Tower.”

“The Tower was here before the Anglians showed up,” I blurt out before I can stop myself.

He cocks an eyebrow in a gesture so arrogant that it instantly puts my back up. “Right,” he draws out. “Who told you that lie?”

I can’t tell him. Suddenly, I see why Sytse wanted to keep me away from Royce. I’m way too prone to discussion and debate, but in this case I should keep my cards close to my chest. The last thing I want to do is reveal information previously only studied by the resistance. “Just – it’s an old tale,” I shrug grouchily. “Forget it.”

“Enna.” I am struck by the way my name on his lips sounds. It’s like it belongs to someone new. “I don’t want to bicker, you know. I hope that isn’t why you brought me here.”

I bite my lip. “Then what do you hope I brought you here for?” I whisper.

Royce smiles lazily, and my heart starts to race. “To spend some quality time together,” he mumbles, pulling me into his arms. “To listen to beautiful music...” His lips brush mine. “And to kiss that delicious mouth of yours...” He breathes into my ear. “And to hold you as close as you’ll let me,” he concludes, sending my pulse through the roof.

“Okay,” I stammer. “I think that sounds good.”

When he kisses me again, I open up to him like a flower hungry for the sun. I’ve wanted this since last night. To be fair, I’ve wanted this for a long time. Why waste time on discussing island history with him when I can have this? There’ll be plenty of time for that later, in all the days after this one. Royce is holding me like he never wants to let go. His hands roam my body and his tongue gently explores my mouth until we dissolve in an embrace that is no longer gentle and quivers with burning excitement.

For the first time in my life, I can shut out the Nixen’s call in this place without playing my music.

15.

“I can’t believe it.”

Dani’s voice is hoarse from shock. Her eyes blink up at me as she sags onto the nearest bench in the school yard. I cycled to school alone this morning, because I was horribly late. She decided to wait for me at the entrance, eager to tell me about her day in Osterend and to hear about my talk with Royce.

“Me neither,” I confess.

“He kissed you?” Dani whispers. “He could be arrested for that! *You* could be arrested for that.” She looks around, but no one is there. We both decided to skip first period so we wouldn’t have to stumble into Mrs. Atsma’s class ten minutes late.

“I don’t care,” I say, my voice rebellious.

“No, of course you don’t. That guy is sex on legs. Oh my God, Enna – you have a hot and secret boyfriend!” Suddenly, Dani is quietly squealing, and I can’t help but join in with a wide grin on my face.

“A Current boyfriend,” I say breathlessly.

“A famous boyfriend,” she adds. “He’s really your boyfriend, then? You guys are dating?”

I blush. Yesterday, he did a lot of things to me that only boyfriends are supposed to do. More than Alke ever did. And he wanted to see me again on Tuesday. Tonight’s his first performance, so he wanted to focus on that today. Fair enough. “Yeah, we are,” I nod.

Dani’s face falls. “What are you going to tell Sytse?” she suddenly worries.

“Nothing. It’s none of his business.”

“True.” She hesitates before she goes on: “But won’t it endanger him? Since he’s, you know, a spy for the Skelta and all?”

“Royce is not dating my brother, is he? I don’t see why, as long as I keep my mouth shut about it.”

“Yeah. Okay. That must be difficult, though. Ideally you’d want to share everything going on in your life with the guy you’re in love with.”

Dani’s right, but at the moment, I have so many things I can share with Royce that I don’t care. We have our love for music. We have the same sense of humor. And we have chemistry that puts St. Brandan High’s lab room to shame.

I can’t wait to see him play tonight. For the first time in my life, I won’t have to imagine what it would be like if he were playing his music for me. He did play it for me, in his cottage two nights ago. I’m a part of his life, and he’s a part of mine.

Dani rips into the waffle I brought for her to make up for my tardiness. Crumbles fall into her lap as she enthusiastically babbles about the bands she saw in Osterend yesterday. “Sytse bought me two shellacs,” she divulges. “The local bands had some for sale.”

“That’s very generous of him,” I observe. Locally-pressed records are very expensive. Traditional production methods are slow and costly – the only reason we can afford shellac records from the mainland is because they are second-hand merchandise, sold by Anglians who want to get rid of their fifties music collection. All the artists I love are already long dead. A sad fact of life, but now I have at least one favorite artist who is still very much alive. All thanks to Royce and his risky offer to share Jyoti on LP.

When the bell for second period rings, we trudge into the school building. Hopefully, Mrs. Atsma won’t have noticed our absence. She’s kind of hare-brained. I step into Mr. Buma’s classroom and make a beeline for his desk to present him with all the work I did yesterday. Of course, I could have done more, but Royce was very helpful when I told him I needed to work on a history assignment. He told me all kinds of things about the village of Stortum because he heard stories from his grandparents. He even generously donated a tintype depicting three of his ancestors in front of the Stortum village hall, their faces forever frozen in time.

“They look so stiff,” I’d commented with a little giggle when Royce showed me the old photograph.

“They were supposed to hold still for half a minute as their picture was taken,” he’d explained with a smile. “So yeah, they’re sort of a rigid bunch. I’m sure people didn’t look like that all the time.”

Mr. Buma eyeballs the picture with keen interest. “How did you come across this one, Miss Buwalda?” he inquires. “I don’t believe I’ve seen any old pictures of the village hall before.”

Score. Inwardly, I thank Royce for lending it to me. “It’s been in our family for generations,” I improvise on the spot. “My great-grandmother was born in Stortum. That’s why I chose this topic. Sadly, the people in the village struggled to obey the law.” And still do, I realize with a little smirk – the only resident being a Current guy sharing his electricity and dreams with me.

“Well. Please keep working on your report. It looks very promising.”

With a relieved sigh, I walk over to my usual seat. As I slide into my chair, Alke catches my eye and smiles at me. “He liked it?” he mouths.

I nod and smile back. “Your German test?” I whisper.

He just gives me a thumbs-up before digging around in his backpack to get his textbook out. I wonder if he’s excited about tonight. After all, that Frisian band from the mainland is coming, and they must be up to something. Maybe they’re a protest band trying to get away with singing rabble-rousing lyrics in Frisian right under the Currents’ watchful eyes.

Time seems to slow down to a trickle today. Since I’m looking forward so much to tonight’s Oorol performances, it seems like I’ll never get there. Seven periods have never felt this long.

By the time Dani and I leave the building, I am beyond thrilled. The entire town is buzzing with excitement. People are milling around to set up market stalls and make some last-minute purchases for tonight’s Dinner in the Square – when Skylgers and Currents come together to watch the show and bring their own picnic baskets filled to the brim with rich food and sweet drinks. For some, it’s a valid excuse to get hammered. Last year, when I was still with

Alke, he let me try a few sips of his liquor, but I didn't like it all that much.

This year, I'd love to drink from whatever bottle Royce would give me, but I can't. He won't be in the audience, because he'll be up on stage playing out of his skin.

"You want to get some bottled beer?" Dani proposes. "I was told the Botha family brewed some very nice ale this year."

I nod absently, my eyes scanning the town center. "Alke and Sytse are over there," I say, pointing at the entrance to the backstage area. "You reckon they'll let us ride their coattails so we can meet some famous people?"

"It's worth a try," Dani replies with a mischievous glint in her eyes.

We start pushing through the crowd. By the time we get there, my brother and ex-boyfriend have disappeared, though. On our way to the other end of the square, we picked up some of our classmates, all eager to dig into their food and find a good spot to watch tonight's show.

"I brought goodies," Annie announces, holding up a picnic basket that, unsurprisingly, contains lots of beer from her father's brewery. Nolan and Ynze, her younger twin brothers, are carrying more bags stuffed with sandwiches and cold cuts. I shoot Dani a quick look and she nods in agreement. We are going to stick with the Bothas.

"Why don't I get us some cakes?" I suggest after we scout a nice location close to the stage and start setting down our belongings. "We still need dessert, right?"

"Brilliant." Annie flashes me a grin so wide that it makes me think of wild, Current celebrations and booming music under electric lights. It's funny – she reminds me more of the noisy, numbing parties they throw than Royce ever will. With him, the beat is steady and slow, seeping into every corner of my soul.

Gradually, the sky turns dark. Candles are lit and rush lights in holders are placed at strategic positions to illuminate the square. The lights are a cheap way to light up the dark. They smell horrible, but somehow they always make the town during Oorol look so cozy.

High-end gas lights are dangling from a chandelier above the main stage. The musicians need more light to see by, and this is the

best the Currents can do for their own people without sharing their precious electricity with us.

“Hey, Enna,” I hear a voice pipe up behind me. When I look over my shoulder, I see Alke and Sytse approaching our little group. “You got any food left?”

“We brought some potato chips,” Sytse adds, plunking down on the blanket next to me. “So we can swap.”

I want to ask him about his visit backstage, but I can’t – not with Annie and her brothers sitting with us. “So, all is set up for tonight?” I ask cryptically.

He smiles. “Sure is.” He and Alke exchange a look that sets me on edge, not because I feel left out, but because they look slightly anxious to me. What the heck is going on?

Before I can ask anything else, more light floods the stage as the rest of the gas lamps are turned up. Mayor Edison appears, his entrance met with a loud round of applause from the Current spectators on the bleachers. I half-heartedly clap along until the noise dies down.

“Citizens of Skylge,” he says, his voice amplified by a loud-hailer. “On behalf of the city council, I welcome you back to our Oorol festival. We have a marvelous line-up tonight, starting with Josiah’s Jazz Band, continuing with Royce Bolton, our gifted pianist, and finishing off with,” his eyes momentarily dart to the flyer he’s clutching in his hand, “Twarres, a band from the mainland. Fryslan, to be exact. Please put your hands together for the first performance of this evening!”

Josiah and his trumpeters spill onto the stage. I like them – their music reminds me of the Frisco Band recordings we have at home, but some of their songs can be soulful too. They’re actually a favorite with both native Skylgers and Currents.

“Want to dance?” Alke courteously extends a hand and I take it with a smile. I’m so glad that we managed to stay friends after our break-up. There’s no awkwardness between us whatsoever. Our history as childhood friends may have been helpful.

We twirl around and hold each other’s hands, while other people around get up to dance, too. This is our chance to stretch our legs, because Royce’s performance will be all about quiet listening and

dreaming away and not so much about the explosive energy I'm feeling right now.

Alke whirls me around in a frantic jive and all I can think of is how this would feel like if Royce were holding me. I can't wait to see him up on stage. The world is spinning out of control, and I don't care.

Panting for breath, we finally sit down and drink some of Annie's beers while Josiah's band packs up and makes way for my boyfriend.

"Pinch me," I say to Alke.

He cocks an eyebrow. "Excuse me?"

"Never mind." It still feels like I'm dreaming, but I know I'm not.

Dani scoots closer to me and leans on my shoulder, suggestively whistling as the lights dim and he makes his way to the grand piano. My mouth turns dry when Royce turns his head and peers into the audience as his fingers stroke the keyboard. Maybe he's looking for me, but he can't see me in the dark. That's all right – he knows I'm here. And I know, when he starts to play, that the prelude echoes a melody reminiscent of Kathleen Ferrier's song, to let me know he's thinking of me and the song I played for him. In this massive crowd, we are each other's best-kept secret.

I close my eyes and let the tune sink in, remembering the night I visited him in his cottage and the kiss we shared. His music is so mournful, so full of longing that I'm surprised it has never drawn out the Sirens. The muscles in his strong arms flex when the melody morphs into something wilder, more insistent and mysterious. His dark hair falls over his forehead and hides his eyes from view. He doesn't need to look in order to know he has utterly captivated the spectators with his performance.

"Wow," Dani mumbles when his recital is over after what seems like a delicious eternity. "That was mind-blowing."

"Yeah." I shrug noncommittally on purpose, because I can feel Sytse's eyes on me. "As expected." My eyes don't follow Royce as he leaves the stage. Instead, I peer at the flyer lying on our picnic blanket. "How long is Twarres going to play for?"

"That depends," Sytse says, his mouth twitching with nerves.

"On what?" Dani wants to know.

He exhales. "Just watch."

And so we do. Under everybody's watchful eyes, four young men and one woman wheel gigantic carts containing instruments onto the stage. Actually, one of the carts seems to contain a stack of barrels connected by wires. Some kind of mainland drum set? The woman steps forward and introduces herself as Mirjam, the singer of the band. As the other band members set up their equipment behind them, she plays a beautiful acoustic song on guitar while singing in German. After a roaring applause, the others join in, playing another simple song on two guitars, one viola, and drums, the lyrics in Frisian this time. I look up at the band with a smile, still a bit unable to believe that the Skelta managed to invite this band from the mainland to play at our festival. They sound good, and they're clearly proud of their heritage.

And then, a blinding light floods the stage. I yelp, raising a hand to shield my eyes. Before I can even say anything, a collective gasp runs through the audience as the full band segues into their next song, which sounds unlike anything I've ever heard before. The guitars cut through the air with a strangely distorted sound. I can hear the woman's voice, loud and clear, and she's not using a loud-hailer. Her singing seems to be amplified somehow.

"Oh my God," Dani hisses. "They're using electricity. In front of everybody."

"No way," I blurt out, but I realize it's true. Somehow, Twarres has hacked into the Grid. My jaw drops when my eyes adjust to the light and I can make out its source. A brilliant spark running between two dark pillars that look like charred wood.

"Is that – burning charcoal?" I venture.

Sytse flashes me a self-satisfied smirk. "It is charcoal, but it's not burning. Those two pillars are conducting energy, creating a current between them. Tesla calls it an arc light."

Only then does it sink in that the vocalist is now singing in Skylgian. The lyrics jolt me out of my stupor. "*Trochloftich folk fan Skylge*," the vocalist sings in our old tongue, "*wês jimmer op dyn Skylgerlân great, fol eare en trots.*"

Respectable people of Skylge, be forever proud of your Skylger land full of honor and pride. She's singing to *us*, not to the Currents, and she's blasting out her message in a foreign language the

Anglians don't understand, by means of forbidden electricity. No wonder Sytse and Alke were nervous before. This is going to cause outrage. Palpable excitement hovers over the crowd. Already, I can see Mayor Edison jumping up from his seat in the grand stand, storming down the steps in a huff to put an end to the performance that's breaking every single law on the island.

Meanwhile, the crowd around us is getting agitated. Lots of people here still understand the old tongue, even though it is prohibited to speak it in public places. Twarres is inciting us to stand up for ourselves and break the bonds of slavery to St. Brandan's Fire.

"What are they doing?" I say breathlessly, still unable to believe this is really happening. "They'll get arrested." Nervously, I glance around. Most of the people in front of the stage are Skylgers, but I do spot some Currents in the audience on the town square, too, and they don't look too pleased.

A deafening drum roll ends the band's protest song in Skylgian. "Welcome to our show, all of you," the female singer addresses us in Anglian once more. "We have an evening filled with entertainment planned for you."

"Not if he can help it," Dani comments, pointing at the mayor, who has finally managed to push through the gathering and is presently climbing onto the stage.

"You are to stop this travesty at once!" he bales, trying to grab the strange device the singer's holding in her hand. This seems to be the thing that's amplifying her voice, because Edison's protest suddenly increases in volume too.

"What travesty?" Mirjam calmly replies.

"You are abusing St. Brandan's Fire." The mayor turns red in the face.

"Not at all." She turns sideways to address the audience. "We're not plugged into your Grid. We don't *need* your Grid to generate electricity. We can make our own."

A stupefied look spreads on Edison's face. He stumbles back, like a flustered actor who has realized he's forgotten his lines. Frantically, he starts to look around him, dashing to and fro to inspect

Twarres's instruments. Meanwhile, Mirjam hasn't stopped talking to the crowd staring up at her from below.

"Please, don't be servants to your Current elite anymore," she pleads. "They're about to lose their edge. You've seen what we can do. You can all be a part of this – all of you."

I blink. Out of nowhere, she's tackled to the ground by three police officers rushing up to grab her. I hadn't even seen them coming. With a sickening thwack, her head hits the floor and blood starts to trickle from her nose. The other band members seem to be frozen for a split second before they sprint forward to help their friend.

"How will you stop the Sirens?" Mayor Edison hollers at the top of his voice. "You can't! You know you can't!" He turns toward his own people on the bleachers. "We can't allow them to insult St. Brandan," he continues in a dark voice. "Some people should be put back into their places."

It's only when I feel the crowd pushing into my back that I realize fights have broken out behind me. All of a sudden, the town square has turned into a living nightmare. Police officers are everywhere, trying to force the gathered Skylgers to leave, but my people aren't too eager to move. Some of them are still watching the events unfolding on stage with morbid interest, others are kicking and screaming at the law enforcers dragging them away from the stage. Currents are trying to beat them into submission, spurred on by Mayor Edison's words about our civil disobedience and disregard of their holy ancestor. A nauseating, claustrophobic fear clawing at my insides debilitates me when I suddenly feel the hands of a law enforcer on me and he yanks me away from my brother and friends. It only takes a split second to completely lose sight of them in the clamor around me.

"Let go of me!" I howl, shaking off my paralysis and trying to fight off the policeman. "You have no right."

I lash out at him, but of course he easily dodges my punch. His face is a flinty mask. "Resisting arrest?" he growls. "Don't make it any worse for yourself, young lady."

"I haven't done anything," I gripe, but of course my protest falls on deaf ears. Amidst the violent commotion, there's nothing I can do

when the law enforcer marches me toward the left side of the stage, his hands like iron grips around my shoulders. As soon as the crowd disperses a little, though, I try to wrestle myself free and make a run for it. Bad move – this side of the stage is full of Currents, some of them already fighting the Skylgers, some of them looking for trouble. I gasp when my eyes land on a familiar face with burning, blue eyes and dark eyebrows knitted into a worried frown. He's on a low platform behind the stage, specially erected to accommodate the artists after their performances and supply them with refreshments.

“Royce!” I call out, cupping my hands around my mouth to make myself heard over the din, to reach out to him over there, safely sequestered away in his own world.

He catches my eye, just before a cluster of hands grab me and knock me down. I taste blood on my tongue as I tumble to the ground. Desperate for help, I look up and search his eyes once more. I see his gentle mouth and remembered how he kissed me. My gaze lingers on his face. He locks eyes with me once more.

And then, he looks away. Only now do I notice his two older brothers and his father standing next to him holding glasses of champagne. They all look perplexed and slightly disgusted by the fights that have erupted everywhere. Mr. Bolton laughs awkwardly and points at me, and Royce joins in, as though he has never seen me before.

He's pretending not to know me. After all the things we shared.

The world grinds to a stop and drains my heart of all the warmth I kept tucked away there. Cold washes over my entire body. As they start to drag me away, I don't attempt to call out to him again.

16.

I hang my head in shame when *Heit* shows up a few hours later to bail both me and Sytse out. Apparently, I wasn't the only one to resist arrest and kick up a fuss. In jail, we weren't in the same cell – I was stuck in a horrible, dark hole together with some fierce-looking Skylger women, and he was behind bars in the men's holding cell across the hall. Every once in a while my brother smiled at me to encourage me. I could see a strange kind of admiration in his eyes. Maybe being in prison together felt like a bonding moment to him. Siblings, standing united against the Current oppressors.

"Thanks, Dad," Sytse mumbles demurely as we follow him down the hall. "I will pay everything back. The Skelta will help."

My father whips around and unexpectedly fixes Sytse with a fierce, blazing stare. "Why did you have to involve Enna in this? You knew what that Frisian band was up to. How they were trying to start a riot. Your sister could have been trampled to death or mortally injured."

Sytse sighs impatiently. "It wasn't that bad. Besides, Enna needed to see Tesla's invention. Everyone out there needs to know the truth. We've sat back and played at complacency for far too long."

"You could have made sure she was nowhere near the stage," Dad doggedly maintains.

"*She* is standing right here," I interrupt sourly. "And she honestly doesn't give a shit right now." My voice suddenly cracks with the deepest sadness I have ever felt.

Dad slips an arm around my shoulder. "What happened, darling?"

"Her Current friend ignored her pleas for help," Sytse says when I remain silent, making me flinch. So he saw what happened – he must have been behind me, escorted off the square by another policeman.

I glare at him, but I have nothing to say. He's right. Royce was a complete jerk back there. When I think of how he was standing on the platform with his family, looking down on me from above, I suddenly seethe with anger. In troubled times, he obviously turns to the familiar comfort of his Current life instead of standing up for 'real' people like me. I want to hold on to this anger eating away at me, because I know what will inevitably come once it drains from my body. Misery. Disbelief. Disappointment.

Only hours ago, Dani and I were giggling about me having a Current boyfriend. What's left now is a sickening sense of betrayal. Royce is not my boyfriend – not if this is how he acts when I'm in trouble. He's not my friend, even.

"I told you," Sytse says softly. "I warned you about him." To his credit, he doesn't sound smug about it.

Hot tears pool in my eyes as I follow my father and brother out the door. Outside, the square is deserted and strewn with litter that the cleaners haven't picked up yet. The gas lamps on stage have been turned up, replacing the arc light that caused the whole town to get into a neighborly brawl. Well, it wasn't just the damn light – I hope Twarres made it out unscathed under the Skelta's protection after their provocative performance.

My vision blurs when I spot five people wheeling the grand piano off stage. No, I tell myself. No tears. This is *not* going to happen to me. What Royce did is inexcusable, and I'm going to hold him accountable for it.

"Where are you going?" Sytse exclaims in surprise when I stalk over to my lonely bike still leaned against a lamp post. "Eida is waiting for us with her carriage."

"I'm not going home," I bristle. "Not yet. I'll catch up with you later."

"Well, where are you off to?"

"Upper."

"Enna," Dad tries to calm me down. "Don't be foolish."

"Foolish?" My voice shoots up. "Well, sorry to be so damn irrational, *Heit*. Guess I just wanted to believe in something for a change. Something out of the ordinary. And if Sytse is allowed to dream about changing his stars, then so am I."

Before I can see the impact of my spiteful words on his face, I grab my bike and cycle away as fast as I can. Up, through the streets of Lower Brandaris. Past the Tower that glows with a pulsing light at night. Soon, I reach the Longway stretching out through the woods. My legs are screaming, begging me to stop and spare my acidified muscles, but I don't heed their warning. On and on I ride, zipping past Dead Men's Caskets and the Upper Brandaris town border. Sweat pours down my back. I'll get to Royce's house if it kills me. I have to speak to him – tonight.

It's only when I'm standing at the gates of the Bolton mansion that I lose my nerve. If I ring the doorbell, will he answer? I can see the front door up ahead, illuminated by twinkling artificial lights. With a hammering heart, I press the button on the left side of the gates and wait.

"Yes?" A small box underneath the bell crackles to life. The voice sounds too old to belong to Royce.

"Can I speak to Royce Bolton, please?" I say, trying to make my Anglian sound a little bit more Current than usual.

"Who is this?"

"Enna Buwalda, Sir." Fear constricts my throat. Do they have my name on file as one of the dissidents that was thrown into prison by now? Does news spread that fast in Upper? I have no idea. The silence stretches until I can no longer bear it. "Hello?" I say timidly.

Another full ten seconds elapse before the disembodied voice addresses me again. "Mr. Royce is presently indisposed," it tells me. "Can I take a message?"

You coward. My anger flares up again. What right does he have to be indisposed? *He* wasn't dragged off to prison a few hours ago with stains of blood on his face. "He has something that belongs to me," I blurt out before I can stop myself. "And I want it back."

"One moment, please."

Maybe that will make him come out. I don't even care about the record anymore – I just want to see *him*. Holding my breath and forcing back my tears, I peer at the front door. The elation I feel when it actually swings open should embarrass me, but to hell with my pride. My stomach lurches as someone comes out and starts

walking down the drive, but my shoulders slump when I see it is an unfamiliar man who is approaching the gates.

“Is this what you were looking for?” he says, his eyes skimming over my haggard appearance with a mixture of incredulity and mild disapproval. Reaching out, he hands me the Jyoti LP.

Royce is too afraid to come out and face me himself. He’d rather give up this music than talk to me face to face. The realization punches me in the gut and leaves me feeling so empty that I could scream just to fill the void. “No,” I say, my voice unsteady. “He can keep that. He no longer has what I’m looking for.”

With those words, I turn around and leave.

The ride home seems to take forever. All energy has drained out of me. It’s over. The tiny ray of sunshine lighting up my life is gone, and I’m back to the way things were. Except, they can never be the same.

Without thinking, I take a left turn toward Stortum. A part of me longs to see the cottage one last time, empty and dark like a distant memory. The vacant buildings of this ruined village are emblematic of a much bigger emptiness in my heart. Of course, he isn’t here, but I knock on the door all the same.

“Royce,” I finally scream against the lacquered wood, “you’re an asshole!” As long as I keep screaming, I won’t have to cry.

Wordlessly, I pass my grandmother, father, and brother in the kitchen when I get home at last.

“Don’t you want a hot drink?” Grandma Antje says quietly.

I turn around and smile at her. “I’m all right, Gramps,” I say, but of course I’m lying. I’m far from all right.

“Enna,” Sytse addresses me gently, imploringly grabbing my hand. “It’s for the best. Believe me. They’re the enemy, and the sooner you understand that, the better.”

I’ve never thought of the Currents that way, but I can understand my brother in this case. I’m not their biggest fan, either. “If they’re

really the enemy, then why are they willing to share St. Brandan's Fire with us?" I mumble.

"They're not sharing."

"But they're protecting us from the Nixen," I counter.

It's my grandmother who speaks next in a fierce tone of voice. "There was a time before the Anglians came. And in that time, we didn't need Brandan to protect us."

"No? So what did we do? Throw our weakest members to the waves to keep the monsters at bay?"

Her brown eyes, so much like my mother's and mine, soften. "Enna, dear. Of course not. What a silly notion. That's not the way of the Skylgers."

Royce and his stupid comments. "So what was our way?" I whisper. "What did we used to do?"

My question is met by silence, as expected. "We will find out," Sytse says at last. He searches my eyes. "Will you help us?"

His trust in me almost chokes me up. "I don't know," I reply softly. "I need to deal with stuff first." Giving him no time to ask me any more questions, I stalk over to my bedroom door and retreat into my little safe haven before I melt into inevitable tears.



The next morning, I wake up with red-rimmed eyes and a sore throat. I have no idea how to 'deal with stuff'. As I stare back at my face drooping with fatigue in the mirror, I try not to feel sorry for myself.

The albatross is back. Its beady, honey-colored eyes observe me with innocent curiosity when I open the window and peer outside. It's overcast, which matches my mood perfectly. Right now, I couldn't stand blue skies and a bright sun.

"Fuck school," I mutter. I don't want to talk to anyone. Chances are they'll even call off school today until the mayor has done some damage control. Last night's drama will have set tongues wagging, and he's going to want to make sure there's nothing to talk about by denouncing Twarres's claims. In order to pull that off, he'll want to

stop people from clustering together. And what better place for gossip-eager upstarts to gather than high school?

It's early. I only realize this by the time I've taken a shower and go to the kitchen to eat something. Nobody is up yet.

In the back of my mind, I can still hear Jyoti's mysterious, melodic words. "No longer chased, we embraced," I softly sing to myself. But the memory of Royce turning his back on me will forever follow me around. Unthinking, I open the front door and stroll into the garden without even putting on my shoes, past the path connecting the outer houses of Stortum, up the dyke, and beyond – I dip my bare feet into the cold water of the sea. I don't need rubber boots today. I don't need to eat today. I wish I could hunt for oblivion and scoop up my own tiny bit of private nothingness in a fishing net.

Clenching my hands into fists, I start to run down the sands leading to my secret cave – my refuge away from the world. Except it isn't anymore. I let the world in and risked breaking my heart in doing so, because I believed life would be good to me.

"Why?" I scream against the wind that has picked up around me, tossing my dark hair in my face. "Why are you such a jerk?" I whisper to the guy who can't hear me.

Before I know it, I'm at the entrance of the tunnel leading to the grotto. I go down the steps and plunge myself into the darkness of the narrow passageway, almost tripping in my haste to get to the cave looking out over the endless sea. My angry footfalls echo in the corridor like frantic beats on a drum. Even in my anger, I can't stop hearing music – it causes the blood to rush hotly in my veins and makes me want to punch the wall until my knuckles bleed.

Shivering, I sink down to my haunches and embrace my knees, resting my chin on my arms. I can feel them out there, so eager to welcome me and take the pain away. The Nixen are singing, and I no longer want to close myself off to be safe. In this world, no one is safe anyway.

I wince when I register the pain of my fingernails digging into my palms. My anger is fleeting, and the rage of before turns into such deep grief that I dissolve into tears, the salty water running down my cheeks an echo of the briny waters out there, calling to me.

I don't know how long I sit there, curled up into a sad ball. I just know that at some point, the beating of my heart matches the ancient rhythm of the sea. My breath falters when I hear them, far out there but so close to my soul. Eerie, mesmerizing, seductive. Their song sounds like heaven. Otherworldly voices, laced with the promise of sweet forgetfulness. I've never felt their presence as strongly as I do now.

Blinking against the light, I hesitantly stretch out my stiff legs, then my arms, before crawling over to the water's edge. The blue looks so inviting. So – tempting.

Is this what my mom felt when she ventured out too far, once upon a time?

Somehow, I sense the Sirens' promise that all pain will end if only I give in to their call. I know everything will end.

With a shaky sigh, I plunge my feet into the water. My legs follow, then my upper body, and then I submerge myself completely. The waves close over my head and my clothes turn heavy with the weight of the sea.

Under water, the Nixen's song sounds muffled, yet even more enthralling. And it's warm here – I feel much warmer than I expected. I open my eyes, the sting of the salt making me gasp for breath.

But I can't breathe.

The sea fills my lungs. The Sirens' call fills my ears.

Longing floods my entire being.

I want to go to my mother. She'll keep me safe and protected and chase the monsters away. All I need to do is to let go and give in.

It's very easy.

17.

*I have untied all knots
done away with illusions
turned off the lies of the world.*

*no more troubled thoughts
no confusion
God fell silently from the heavens,
and all music stopped.*

I can assure you:

no-one will save me now.

18.

Cold.

All those voices. Why are people shouting?

A flashy, blue light near my face, seeping through my closed eyelids.

“Oh my God, Enna,” he says. “You’re awake.”

It’s him.

Royce.

And then I realize it isn’t just people shouting. The Nixen alarm is blaring all across our island with a distorted warble. They must have pumped up the volume. The sound of sirens tells me that there’s been an attack. And I’m lying on the beach completely drenched in salty water from the deep.

His warm hand on mine. “Hang on,” he says. “We’ll get you to a hospital.”

When I finally find the strength to open my eyes and look up at him, I’m so happy to see his face that I burst into tears.

“You came,” I sob. “You came back for me.”

Darkness is covering the sands around us. I must have been in the water for hours.

“I’m so sorry,” Royce says, his voice hoarse. “I’m such a coward.”

“Yeah.” I nod feebly. “Yes, you are.”

He rubs his eyes with a tired gesture and doesn’t say anything to that.

“Do you really want him here?” It’s my brother’s voice. Only now do I notice him and Dad standing behind Royce, joined by a bunch of gawkers from our little village.

“Sytse,” I breathe. “How did you guys find me?”

“He came round to talk to you,” Sytse says, his voice trembling – with anger or fear, I can’t tell. “We didn’t know where you were, but he had an idea. Told us about your grotto. He saw you bobbing

around in the high tide and dragged you out of the water – after getting you so desperate you were ready to drown yourself first, of course.”

“He – saved me?” I croak.

Sytse shakes his head. “You’re very weak. You’re not out of danger yet.”

“I called in an ambulance,” Royce says in his defense, pointing to the source of the bright, blue light shining in my eyes. “You’ll be all right. We’re taking you to Upper.”

“But...” I can’t help but protest. “I’m not supposed to go there.”

“We have the best doctors.”

“I’m not allowed to ride the ambulance.”

He barks out a laugh. “I don’t care.”

“They’ll – know you’re with me,” I whisper.

“I don’t care,” Royce repeats, grabbing my hand once more. “Did I do this? Did I push you to...” He doesn’t finish.

I bite my lip. Truth is, I don’t remember. Sure, I was upset and angry with him, but I never meant to go out to the grotto to be taken away by the Nixen. Somehow, they got to me. Too many of them came too close to the island and their voices lured me in. They even set off the alarm in Brandaris. By all accounts I should be dead – and yet, somehow they didn’t kill me.

That’s when I remember.

“She’s out there,” I mutter, my eyes widening. “Sytse – listen to me.”

My brother frowns. “What?”

“Mom.” I swallow hard. “Her soul. I could feel it. They’ve kept it. She’s not gone.” I turn to Royce. “And neither is your mother.”

Something flickers in his eyes. “Ssh,” he comforts me, stroking my cold face. “You’re hallucinating because you’re in shock. I’m going to call the nurses to put you on the stretcher, okay?”

I nod, even though I know he’s wrong. Out there in the water, I learned something important.

I have come back from the dead, and I’m carrying a message for the living.

The trip in the ambulance goes by in a blur. Too bad, because I've always wondered what it would be like to make a trip in a motorized vehicle, but now I sort of doze through the whole experience. Royce and Sytse are sitting on either side of me, both holding one of my hands. They won't look at each other.

I bet Sytse is itching to hit Royce in the face, but he can't really do that since Royce personally arranged this Current ride for me and made sure they'd treat me in the Upper hospital. To be honest, I won't put it past myself – hitting Royce in the face at some point, I mean. He's been an absolute, horrid bastard and he shouldn't think he can buy his way out of a nasty fight by getting me an ambulance after my near-drowning. But it helps, and I am embarrassingly glad to see him. He actually came by in Kinum to talk to me, and he set out to look for me together with *Heit* and Sytse. It makes me all glowy inside to know that he cares for me after all.

"Royce?" I squeak, after they've wheeled me into a spacious, private hospital room, tucked me into bed, and drummed up a few other nurses to hook me up to a bag that they called an IV drip.

"Yeah?" He puts a hand on my forehead.

"Will you stay with me?" It sounds like I'm asking him for more than to just sit at my bedside. From the corner of the room, I can see Sytse shaking his head in frustration.

"Of course." His face falls. "I can't believe you still want me to stick around after I – well, I betrayed your trust."

"Why did you?" My voice sounds small.

"I didn't know what to do when those fights erupted. The way Skylgers and Currents were pitted against each other by Mayor Edison. And then you came by my house and I just didn't know what to tell my family. I panicked." He hung his head. "I know I ruined things between us."

I bite my lip. "Well, you damaged things. Doesn't mean we can't try to rebuild."

His blue eyes light up with a spark of hope. "I'd love that."

"Me too." I look up at him and suddenly feel so very tired that I can't stop myself from yawning in his face.

"She should rest," Sytse says, and Royce nods wearily.

“I won’t go to sleep if you leave,” I say stubbornly. “You have to stay – both of you.”

“Well, that’s gonna be awkward,” Sytse states rather bluntly, shooting Royce such a cold glare that I cringe.

“You don’t pull any punches, do you?” Royce replies a bit sourly.

“Nope.”

“I can see where Enna gets her argumentative side.”

This makes me snicker a little. “Play nice,” I mumble drowsily, closing my eyes. “Sytse, why don’t you tell Royce a bit more about Tesla’s invention? He cares about the island – about all of us living here. You can trust him.”

It’s weird – even though Royce trampled all over my heart, I know I can rely on him to do the right thing when it comes to the future of both our people. The way he talked about keeping the Nixen out for good, that first time we met up, is on my mind. He just might be ready to change our world.

I know I am.



That night, I sleep soundly through all the commotion in Brandaris. Later, Sytse tells me how they warded off a Siren attack that night by letting the Brandaris Tower shine full-blast. It’s almost as though the Nixen are in cahoots with Mayor Edison, trying to prove that the Skylgers can’t survive without the Currents and their magical light. The joint effort to keep the merfolk away from our shores also helps in settling the tension of the night before. But it doesn’t erase the events from memory. In a way, Sytse was right – people need to know what our world might look like one day, and things like that can’t be expected to happen without setback or argument.

Royce is there when I wake up, feeding me a salty kind of porridge for breakfast and quietly talking about what happened in town after Twarres’s fateful performance. When he finally runs out of things to say about the outside world, I ask him: “What will happen to us?”

He looks at his hand still holding my spoon. “I’ll have to lay low for a while. I mean, people know I brought you in. I told them it was

because I saved you and knew your life was in danger when I dragged you out of the water.”

“So you’re still not brave enough to tell them the truth about me,” I conclude bitterly.

“I am.” He looks up. “Look, you make me think about things. In a way that rocks my world and forces me to reconsider everything I’ve been taught was true.”

I smile faintly. “Good to know.”

“And just so you know, Sytse talked to me for hours last night,” he rushes on. “About Tesla, and about other things he’s been busy with. By now I want to know what the world would look like without our monopoly on energy. I want to know if what the Currents say is actually true.” He rakes a hand through his hair, ruffling it and reminding me of the fact that I found him irresistible before he hurt me like hell. “And your brother wants me to help both you and him. For that, my own people can’t know I’ve changed. I can’t show them that you and me are friends. More than friends. You know how that will end – the Currents have to trust me.”

I slowly nod. “That makes sense.”

He smiles gingerly, taking my hand in his. “I hope you can do the same.”

“Do what?” I frown.

“Trust me.”

I keep quiet for a very long time. Although I feel I can trust him when it comes to doing the right thing, I can’t stop my broken heart from smarting.

“Eventually,” I say at long last.

Royce nods, letting out a sigh. “I’m happy to hear that.”

And then, we just sit there, quietly getting used to each other’s company again. It’s time to rebuild – and I suspect the result will be worth waiting for.

The story continues in 'Light of Lorelei – Tales of Skylge, Book 2'. Available soon! Sign up for release notification here:

<http://eepurl.com/x1X9P>



Acknowledgements

This whole story more or less started with an old wind-up gramophone I bought off Marktplaats (the Dutch version of Ebay). I was looking for one with a big horn like you see in twenties movies, but I soon found out they're pretty much unaffordable, so I settled for a simple cabinet-style gramophone instead. It fascinated me that the thing would play without any kind of electricity – and that set me off thinking what it would be like to have a society running parallel to our own where people wouldn't be allowed to use electric power.

At the same time, I was toying with the idea to write a story about mermaids, but I wanted to write something with a different angle that hadn't been done before. So in the end, I combined the two and used my visit to the island of Terschelling (Skylge) three years ago as an inspiration for the setting. So far, all my stories have been set in foreign countries, so I thought it was about time to be proud of my heritage and write a paranormal/dystopian story set in my home country, the Netherlands – but with a twist. Fryslan is merely a province of the Netherlands nowadays, but the area still has its own cultural heritage, national anthem, flag, and the official language is Frisian (closer to English than Dutch, linguistically-speaking). Skylge is a part of the province of Fryslan.

If you're curious to see what the island looks like in real life, be sure to check under the tab 'Book Places' on my blog:

<http://jenminkman.blogspot.nl>

The music that Royce and Enna listen to really exists – Jyoti Verhoeff is a kind of 'Dutch Tori Amos' and I recently discovered her music after going to a local singer-songwriter festival in The Hague. She has a website with music samples and CDs for sale. I suggest you check it out if you like mysterious, beautiful, and haunting melodies!

I'd like to take the time to thank all the bloggers who agreed to review this title before its official release – I sent out my request email and had over 30 responses within the hour, which was a nice way to find out that I'm being appreciated!

Last but not least, thank you to all the readers who picked up this first part in the Skylge series. I hope I'll see you back for the continuation of the story in Book 2, Light of Lorelei.

Best wishes,
Jen Minkman.

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