

Chapter 1

*When we learn to tie knots, we call it knowledge.
When we learn to untangle them, we call it wisdom.
—Tengalian proverb*

The stick slapped my arm with a sharp crack. A red stripe raced across my skin, smarting and hot. I'd braced for it, fist closed, shoulder tense. The schoolmistress lifted her pointer as if to hit me again. She was hardly bigger than the item she'd struck me with, a slender reed of a woman with a cruel mouth that radiated fine lines when she frowned. It was something she did often, and the lines had begun to set that way.

"Tell us, Hadara, what's so important that it distracted you from your lessons."

I kept my voice level, unafraid. I hoped I sounded contrite.

"I apologize for my brief inattention, Mistress. I shall endeavor to do better."

Rubbish. I'd endeavor never to set foot in class again. I'd plead with Mami to bring me back out to the fens with her, once the priests allowed it again. *If* they allowed it again, I corrected myself. Who knew, with all the talk on the piers about what was going on out there.

In front of me, girls clad in the chaste gray uniforms of Ward Sapphire's school squeezed onto long rows of benches. Every pair of hands that didn't wave a reed fan seemed to twitch and fidget. Several wrists bore telltale welts from that pointer, and all eyes were focused on me,

standing useless at the front of the room. Humid air hung tight and heavy in the boxy classroom, though I'd have been sweating in any case. School did that to me.

Only the best families in Port Sapphire got to educate their children, and even then it was usually the sons. I should remember that. I tried to concentrate on feeling lucky and privileged and not sticky and uncomfortable.

“You’ve promised that before,” the school mistress droned on. “Yet there you were, once again unable to name all Nihil’s wives and their character flaws. Can you name even one?”

I struggled for the answer. Nihil. Wives. Nihil was our god, the god of the Temple of Doubt, source of all our magic and wisdom, and he took one wife as soon as another died. There must be dozens of them. All their character flaws? Any of them? I glanced toward a middle row where my sister Amanuel sat, stock still, a look of pure panic on her contorted face. I don’t know why we never worked out a secret code or anything. She could be flashing me the right answer. She always knew it. She rolled her eyes and pretended to yawn. I fished around for something, anything to say. If only I ever got asked a question I could answer, like which constellation appears on the southern horizon every vernal equinox, or what herb should never go in a burn poultice. Just one of Nihil’s wives is all I had to pick.

“Bardusre? Aranel. Pulwe or Pulgre or something. She was stupid. I remember the first one was stupid.” A few snickers flitted through the rows. This was all so unimportant when the fens were off-limits, maybe forever, and when there was so much more going on.

Not when the talk on the piers . . .

“Amanuel, come up.” The school mistress didn’t even turn. “Maybe Hadara will pay better attention if you pay the price.”

“It’s my fault,” I said. The pointer tip swung to a finger’s length from my chest, over the Eternal Tree crest stitched in blue on my sun-bleached blouse. I struggled with my anger and to keep my voice from wavering. “You know it’s my fault. Punish me.”

The Ward was always pitting us against each other, Amaniel and me. I never wanted Amaniel in trouble because of me. Just like Mami tried hard not to make trouble for Babba. It just seemed to follow us. I held out my wrist again.

“I’m beginning to think you like it too much,” the schoolmistress said. “Alright, one last chance. To what fascinating and ungodly destination was your mind wandering off to today?”

I sucked in my breath and dove into whatever it was I’d started. May as well. I clearly wasn’t going anywhere until I had.

“The falling star from a fortnight ago. I’m supposed to pretend I didn’t see it, right? I’m sorry, I just can’t. If it’s going to bring Nihil to us, I just want to, well, to know. That’s all.”

There, it was done. Good luck to anyone trying to make sense of my little tirade.

“The falling star.” The school mistress dragged out the vowels as if I’d spoken a foreign tongue. “Anyone else see a falling star?”

I shifted on my feet, aware the stillness in the classroom had become its own sound, of reed fans stopping mid-stroke, of clothing that no longer rustled, of breaths caught in throats.

“Anyone?” No one spoke. Her diction stuck on every consonant so each syllable pierced straight into my skull. “Well, I certainly saw something. Two six-nights ago, in fact.”

Hands shot up. In a few moments, I’d be tongue-tied and looking like the dullest student again as the smart ones rattled off descriptions of the blazing thing. They’d have been indoors,

most of them, and probably cowering beneath a stack of floor cushions. I'd been outdoors by our hearth, sand-scrubbing pots when the fireball started: tiny and far away at first, glowing and growing and aiming straight at us. I'd dropped a platter and it shattered on the tile at my feet. I must've yelled, because soon neighbors had piled out of huts and houses and scrambled for a better view from the boardwalks.

I'd seen it first, I'm pretty sure of that, but Nihil blast me to smoldering bits if I can get a word in with all the girls impressing the school mistress with how observant they'd been. Now that she'd given her tacit blessing, they were droning how it was so bright this and it lit up the sky that. I'm not sure how one can tell if something's lighting up anything if you're having to peep through your fingers from behind shuttered doors. I raised my hand a few times but the school mistress had her back to me. She called on a trio of girls who squealed about how it landed in the marshes beyond Port Sapphire, kicked up a wall of mud ten houses high, oh yes. I could've burst into flames myself at that point. That's word-for-word how I'd described it to *them* outside the Ward that first Sabbath afterward.

Amaniel saw me fuming and winked. I exhaled some of the tension and realized I'd been wiping sweaty palms on my uniform skirt. I tried to smooth the folds but it was no use; I looked like I'd rolled on the floor in it. That, of course, was the exact moment the school mistress remembered I existed.

“So why does it take two full six-days to mention such a large event?” she asked me. I got one of those quick up-and-down gazes that said yes, she'd noticed my rumples and wrinkles. With any luck, this is the last time I wore a drab gray instead of the bright colors of the women. I would beg Mami if I had to.

“Hadara. Mind drifting again?”

“Um, two six-days. Yes. Sorry.” I had no idea why it took everyone so long. I’d tried to ask anyone who didn’t shush me. I reverted to my best humble-student voice. “Had I known of your interest, Mistress, I might have asked about it sooner.”

Instead of an answer, the teacher turned to my classmates. “Anyone know why Hadara dares to speak of celestial events, alone of all of you? Why she would broach a subject even the priests have not chosen to discuss?”

A sea of blank faces gazed back. Doubtless they were thinking up reasons too rude to say aloud.

The school mistress didn’t wait long. “Because she’s a bold and curious girl. That might win you friends among barbarians, but pious girls maintain their propriety. You might be more like your sister, Hadara.”

It had been a trap after all, one of her better ones. She’d let me bring up a taboo topic, openly airing it and then slapping me back down for mentioning it. Perfect. I looked up and caught Amanuel making a long face and shaking her head. She couldn’t help being singled out; I bit back my jealousy. As long as I was bold and curious—and those were somehow bad traits—I decided to ask the second part of my question again.

“Mistress, is Nihil coming?”

Gasps. Stares. Well, I wanted to know if our god was coming to see for himself where the star had fallen. That was the speculation on the piers. That was truer than Scripture to me, especially if the priests were keeping mum.

The schoolmistress shook her head. “You don’t know what kind of trouble that might bring, do you?”

“Then he’s coming?”

“Hadara, would you know Nihil if he came?”

The only right answer was no. Yet I couldn’t squeeze that one tiny word out of me. Several in the class snickered again. Most of them were younger than myself and could use a firm switching. I pictured myself with that pointer in hand. I wouldn’t need it long.

The lines deepened again around her mouth. The pointer tip waggled toward me again, as if in reproach. “If he does come, I’ll ask the high priest to offer you as a gift. If Nihil will take you, that is.”

“Gift?” My mouth felt dry. The high priest happened to be her husband. “Wouldn’t that kill me?”

“Be seated, Hadara.”

“But you wouldn’t really . . .”

“Be *seated*, Hadara.”

I made my way to my bench, weaving through the rows of girls. A gift of a virgin would come from one of us. The high priest’s wife, my schoolmistress, that rotted little twig, would insist that it be me. I tried to picture what it would be like to lie with Nihil, what a man’s naked body might look like, how it might feel, and whether I would be awake afterward when he consumed my soul. My memories and daydreams and all my plans for earning my own way in this world would be dead. What was left of me would be fit only for the funeral pyre.

I slid in next to Amanuel, who clenched my hand until her nails bit into my skin. I winced and held on. There wasn't anything in that day's lessons that would hold me any longer. Nihil pity me if I wasn't happy for a loud interruption. The evening horn blared a single, sorry tone across the Ward courtyard. Horn signals could mean different things, but the lone note usually meant sunset prayers. It was only afternoon, when clouds usually jostled and crashed overhead, sending the summer rains that meant Mami and I would soon have more of our wild harvest to keep us busy.

But no rains had come since before last Sabbath and now the evening horn sounded at the wrong time, in the clear light of a too-sunny day. The schoolmistress leaped toward the door, sliding it back on its track and shooing us out. "By the piers," she said. "You'll all want to go by the piers."

The horn must mean some special gathering, then. Maybe Nihil was coming after all.

Amanuel waited for me and grabbed my hand again.

"Sorry," she whispered. "She was worse than usual."

I shrugged. I didn't need Amanuel feeling sorry for her older sister. I was vexed enough for both of us. My sixteenth birthday couldn't come soon enough. Sixteen, and a place with the women.

The class marched out in double rows, right-step, left-step, toward the gates, my heartbeat matching the rhythm. Double rows of boys filed from an adjacent schoolroom, right-step, left-step, white tunics over gray short pants. They all looked so much younger than me. Yet another reminder of how out-of-place I felt. Right-step, left-step, out the high iron gates. Once

outside, my classmates threw off the yoke of school discipline and the race was on for the piers. I picked up my own pace, Amaniel beside me.

“Exciting, don’t you think?” She gazed up at me, one eyebrow raised over her deep-set brown eyes.

“If it’s really Nihil. You think I’m going to be sacrificed?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know what the schoolmistress has against you. She doesn’t try to frighten me like that.”

“You’re good at Scriptures.”

“You’re good at other things.”

I gave Amaniel’s hand a squeeze. That was just what I needed to hear. I was good at other things, lots of other things. I’d learned to name a thousand plants and animals, describe cloud formations and tell when it would rain, and perhaps how much. I wasn’t sure how memorizing all Nihil’s incarnations was going to earn me a single copper in the marketplace, and asking such a question would likely garner a few more stripes on my wrist. I let out a deep sigh for my beautiful marshlands, closed to me in recent days, and their wealth of herbs and medicines, all contraband, orders of the priests of Ward Sapphire, our local temple, which only made them more valuable to anyone who wasn’t cured by their ministrations. Which was pretty much everyone.

As Amaniel and I walked, too anxious for small talk, Port Sapphire spread before us in a crescent on either side of the Grand Concourse, its barges and scows gliding beneath stucco footbridges toward the city’s network of canals. I loved this too, the bustle and hum of

commerce, the size and sails of ships from across the trading lands, the jumble of foreign tongues and music on the piers, the tanned sailors in billowing, bright uniforms from a dozen countries I could name, and more that I couldn't. The whole island was called New Meridian, a tiny dot at the center of the map, and Port Sapphire was its busy way station for people and cargo en route to all parts of Kuldor.

My sandals thunked across age-worn planks on a bridge that linked the two halves of the city, east and west, commerce and families. The bridge's arch gave me a flawless view of the flat rows of warehouses, the ships in their berths, the gleaming white of the Customs House at the mouth of the harbor. I could hear the singsong street vendors that gave Callers Wharf its name. It was already filling with crowds anticipating a spectacle. We hurried across the bridge and plunged into its teeming market. A brass trinket lured here, a whiff of savory spices pulled there. Amaniel tapped her foot impatiently while I took a peek into a few stalls before they closed.

"What if Nihil himself is coming? Honestly, Hadara, you'd make him wait while you tried on scarves."

"The kiosks are always closed by the time school lets out." I was sure I could face anything, even Nihil, in a pair of cloth slippers dyed a vivid pink, but they were about to vanish behind a reed shutter. "If Nihil's coming, the port might be closed for a long time. If he isn't, then maybe he won't be offended if I shop some."

Amaniel gripped my sleeve. "I'm dragging you if you don't come. I mean it. I'm not missing this."

"Alright, alright," I said. "I don't know what bitter root you've been eating today, but you're all pucker."

She pulled me along after that, threading around and between people, trying not to push but impatient to get closer. Near the harbor's edge, Callers Wharf widened into a pavilion in front of the Customs House, where scores of people crammed against a wooden railing. A balcony stretched the length of the Customs House facing the sea and it was also packed with men in the green uniforms of the civil corps. One jade green skullcap bobbed higher than the rest. I pointed him out to Amaniel and tugged her after me.

“We can't go up there,” Amaniel said. “Can we?”

I rolled my eyes. “Let them try and stop us.”

No one did. The clerks and tariff collectors parted for us as we crossed the Customs House's open floor and wound up the spiral iron stairs to the balcony. I took the lead, since Amaniel would be too caught up in what was proper and modest and formal, while I only wanted to get this over with and be by that tall fellow whom no one would ever pick an argument with. I felt safer just headed toward him, and he caught sight of us the moment we set foot through wide doors onto the sun-soaked balcony. That tall, imposing man was the city's Chief Port Inspector and my father, and he gave us the stiff, formal nod appropriate for public greetings. We partly bowed in return, careful to place a hand over the billowing fronts of our blouses.

“By all three moons, you'd think Nihil himself arrived with all the fuss.” Babba scowled at the crowd and squinted into the distance. “There's sails on the horizon, don't you know.”

Amaniel brightened at that, seeming entirely too chipper. “Red sails?”

Babba guided us to a spot along the balcony edge, where I had a perfect view of Ward Sapphire across the wide half-moon of Sapphire Bay. It was the only building taller and grander than the one we were in, the two buildings gleaming like bleached pillars of a giant gateway; one

sacred, one secular. I felt more at home here on the commercial side of the city, surrounded by clerks jostling one another in handsome uniforms of flowing frock coats over gauzy shirts and billowing trousers.

Babba wore four different shades of green, all clashing, but I thought the hues looked stunning against his bronze skin, and Mami had embroidered vermilion vines around the collars and hems. I could be proud of the figure my Babba cut. Crowds would part as if he were some visiting potentate or a powerful priest, and not an ordinary, if high-ranking, bureaucrat.

A few men stared at me, but I averted my eyes. That was the proper thing to do, even if what I really wanted was to stare back and soak in their features, figure out what made one handsome and another hideous. I wanted to look. I wanted to revel in whatever it was that kept them looking at me. I followed Amanuel's example and kept my eyes on Babba.

He kept his own eyes on the horizon, and we quickly figured out why. There, in the distance, two sets of crimson sails soared above the waves, billowing like baby's cheeks in the coastal breeze.

It was as if lightning swept the crowd, both below and around us on the balcony.

The Temple of Doubt was here! Nihil himself, perhaps!

How our lives would change, someone said. What a blessing, said others. A blessing, yes!

A blessing.

I felt cursed. My whole world was about to change, I knew it even then, peering across the harbor at the pretty ships, not knowing what to expect, except the worst. The mighty Temple

of Doubt had arrived, at least the part that wasn't built from rocks on a far-away cliff. It could still flatten us all. I had my own doubts, even if I couldn't quite figure out how to say so.