



The Throwaway Prince

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By J.E. Lorin

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Chapter 1

Ahvi took a step back, tilting his head to one side to admire his handiwork, the first birdhouse he'd ever built.

He'd never entertained a single thought about becoming adept at carpentry, but circumstances had dictated he learn. It was four years now since he'd been exiled to the island. While the weather was only severe for a few months out of the year, he'd noticed that salt air seemed to make everything decay faster. After the first year, it was clear his home needed repairs. There was no one around to fix it but him. Fortunately, he had more books than he could ever hope to read, including repair manuals. However, he'd lacked the necessary tools. He was forced to wait for the supply ship, which came only four times a year, and send back a list of tools amongst his requests. Then he had to wait months longer for the tools to arrive.

But that was nearly two years ago now. Since then, he'd tackled many projects. He began with the small ones first, to get a feeling for his own capabilities and to gain confidence, before moving on to the more serious matters. He'd fixed broken door handles and replaced missing roof shingles and he even shored up a sagging doorway. It didn't come naturally to him, but he'd done enough of it now to consider himself handy. He thought his father would be proud of him. He'd always wanted Ahvi to be more manly, like his brothers, to drag his nose out of books and his body out of doors. It wasn't what Ahvi wanted, but nothing about his life was how he wanted it to be.

Since his cottage was prepared for the upcoming winter, he'd recently decided to try his hand at a more creative endeavor. It was important to stay occupied. All he had was time. If he didn't fill it, it tended to fill itself with despair. He'd learned that early. Each day was regimented. He tried to mix his tasks to prevent boredom. While there was much to be done, most of it was the kind of tedious work that had been the purview of servants, back when he lived in his father's castle. House cleaning, cooking, laundry, gardening, fishing, repairs, and preserving were his most frequent tasks. Once a week during the warmer months, he gathered mushrooms and berries and wild fruit. He also kept the yard around his home neatly manicured. It was only after dark that he allowed himself leisure pursuits, such as reading, writing, and star gazing.

The chores kept him occupied, but they did little to keep the loneliness at bay. There were no native creatures on the island, apart from birds and insects. He had his cat, Nora. She was an affectionate, loving companion who took care of the larger insects that tried to invade their home, but she wasn't enough. Four times per year, he chatted with the men from the supply ship, but they weren't enough either. Neither were the letters they brought from his brothers. His was a singularly lonely life. He knew it, and yet he could not accept it. At least, he couldn't accept that this was it, for the rest of his life. He hoped the birdhouse would attract some new companions to his yard.

The birdhouse looked okay, he thought. A little rustic, perhaps, and it listed slightly to one side. But for his first attempt, it wasn't bad. Picking it up, he carried it over to the pole he'd erected the previous week. Atop it was a platform. He placed the birdhouse on the platform before pulling the hammer out of his belt. Slipping a few nails out of his pocket, he carefully affixed the birdhouse to the platform. He thought about leaving it free-standing, not nailing it down, but winter approached, and with it icy rainstorms. If he didn't nail the birdhouse down, he would wake up one morning to find it gone. From his other pocket, he pulled out a handful of seeds, which he placed inside the birdhouse. It was so late in the season he didn't think he would get any boarders until after the short winter, but it didn't hurt to try.

Task done, he turned around and made his way across the yard to his home. Compared to the castle he'd grown up in, it was a very modest home. It was two stories, although the upstairs housed only two sizable bedrooms: the master, in which he slept, and a guest room, which always sat untouched. He often wondered why a second bedroom had been included at all, since he never had overnight visitors. Downstairs, there were three rooms. The first was a large, combined kitchen, sitting room, and dining room. The second was about two-thirds the other's size, his library and study. The final room was the only bathroom. The home and his stove were heated by firewood. Fortunately, it was temperate most of the year, because the two downstairs fireplaces did little to keep the upstairs bedrooms warm. It was only a problem during the winter months; during that time he simply slept downstairs. He had indoor plumbing, for which he was grateful, although he sometimes worried about the day the system would inevitably break down.

He liked his home, made of dark brown stone and with a light wood shingle roof. It was the perfect size for a man who lived alone. Any larger, he thought, and it would only remind him of his isolation. His father had furnished it for him, although he'd provided no decorations, apart from one portrait of the family. The rest of the decorations, Ahvi made himself. He'd painted a handful of landscapes, rather impressionist in style, for he was no great artist. And he'd fashioned a wall decoration or two out of the shells he gathered on the beach. His true talent, however, lay in whittling, which he'd learned from his grandfather. Several of his complex pieces hung throughout the house.

Before going inside, he put his tools away in the shed. On his way into the house, he passed his garden, currently almost completely fallow. All he had left to harvest were the squashes and pumpkin, but they weren't quite ready yet. In another week, perhaps. Inside the kitchen, it was toasty from the low fire he always kept in the stove. He took a moment to check the contents of the pot on the stove, a hearty stew, and stir it. Then he made his way into the library. He had an hour or two before it was time for dinner. In that time, he could read one of the letters he'd received and perhaps work on one of his own. It was only two weeks since last he was visited by the supply ship. It would be at least three months before they came back. He liked to ration out his letters, rather than read them all at once. It gave him something to look forward to.

It was cooler in the study, where he rarely lit the fireplace. He went over to the desk and pulled open the top drawer. He always kept his new letters in that drawer, sealed. In the second drawer,

he kept his own correspondence. The bottom drawer was for the letters he'd already read. He went through it at least once a month, re-reading some of his old letters. He'd never burned a single one, no matter how many times he'd read it. The letters were one of the only things that connected him to the outside world. Taking an envelope out of the drawer, he sat down in his desk chair with a contented sigh. He glanced at the letter. It was from his eldest brother, Mykl. His brothers were his most frequent correspondents. Sometimes he heard from his older sister, too. Once a year, he received a birthday missive from his father. He never heard from his younger half-sisters, even though they'd been close once.

As he reached for the letter opener on his desk, he was distracted by a flicker of movement in the corner of the room. He turned his gaze toward it and got the shock of his life when he saw a man standing next to the fireplace. The noise of fright that escaped his throat was entirely undignified. He jumped to his feet so quickly it knocked over his desk chair. The sharp crack it made when it connected with the stone floor reverberated around the room. Mykl's letter flew out of his hand, but he found that he still clutched the letter opener in his other hand. He brandished it in front of him.

"Who are you?" he demanded. "How did you get in here?"

The man stared back at him, wide-eyed. He seemed as surprised by this turn of events as Ahvi.

"You can see me?" he asked.

He spoke in Balorish. Once upon a time, Ahvi was fluent in Balorish. He'd wanted to be a diplomat, which his father had encouraged. Of course, that was before he was sent away. It was a long time ago now. He hadn't practiced Balorish since. His mind was slow to come up with the words he needed and put them together in the correct order, but eventually it did.

"Who are you?" he repeated, this time in Balorish. "How did you get in here?"

The man's eyebrows twitched with surprise. He opened his mouth, but seemed flummoxed by the questions.

"I—"

He shook his head, pressing his mouth closed in a grim line.

"You need to leave," Ahvi said. He brandished the letter opener higher. "I can defend myself."

This time, it was the other man's mouth that twitched, not his eyebrows. He grinned, seemingly in spite of himself.

"With a letter opener?"

Ahvi felt first a flush of embarrassment, then one of anger, at the man's cheekiness. Before he knew what he was doing, he advanced toward the intruder. He had no idea what he thought he intended to do. He only wanted the intruder out of his home. The man's grin disappeared. Lifting his hands in surrender, he backed away. The movement took him through a shaft of light filtering through the window. It was in this light that Ahvi could see the intruder was transparent. He gasped in shock, the letter opener falling from now-nerveless fingers. It clattered uselessly to the floor. Ahvi backed away, his previous bravado forgotten, until he felt the edge of the desk pressed against the backs of his thighs.

"Are you a demon?" he heard himself asking. He didn't know why. He didn't believe in demons.

"No," the man said. His hands were still in the air as though Ahvi continued to threaten him.

"Then what are you? How did you get in here?"

"I think —" The man shook his head, as though he didn't want to say the words aloud, but then he persisted, finishing the sentence, "I think I'm a ghost."

"A ghost," Ahvi repeated incredulously.

"I distinctly remember dying," the man said. "But then I was here. I don't know how or why. You never saw me or heard me before today. I wasn't even sure if all this was ... was real."

Nausea washed over Ahvi at the words *before today*. He could hardly bear the thought of it, the idea that this *thing* had been in the house with him, watching him without his knowledge. He clutched at the edge of the desk, feeling disoriented and sick.

"I wasn't trying to spy on you," the man insisted, as though reading his mind. "I would, you know, move on, if I could."

A bubble of hysterical laughter made its way out of Ahvi's chest. It didn't seem real that he could be having a conversation like this. It didn't seem real to be having a conversation at all. Suddenly, it occurred to him that the reason it seemed unreal was probably because it was. Maybe he was so desperately lonely that he'd conjured a companion.

"I'm losing my mind," he said, looking up at the man in the corner. "I honestly thought it would take longer than four years."

"You're not losing your mind," the man said. "I'm really here."

"Of course you're going to say that. You're a figment of my imagination!"

“I’m not. I swear it!”

“Like I can trust anything you have to say,” Ahvi huffed. “Leave me alone. I’m not talking to you anymore!”

“What? Why not?”

“Because you’re not here!”

“Please.” The man clasped his hands in front of him, holding them up in supplication. “Please don’t ignore me, not now that you can finally see me.”

Ahvi stared at him. The man’s face was a desperate plea. The detail of it was so amazing it was upsetting. Ahvi wondered if he possessed the imagination to come up with such small details. He’d never considered himself particularly imaginative. He shook his head, refusing to allow his mind to travel down that line of thought any further. He wasn’t going to indulge in this fiction.

“Leave me alone!” he spat. “Just leave me alone!”

Turning, he fled the room.

Chapter 2

Later that night, Ahvi lay in bed, although he didn't sleep. He couldn't. Even though he hadn't seen the apparition since he fled the library, he couldn't stop thinking about him. The thing was, Ahvi didn't really believe in anything supernatural or spiritual. He wasn't religious. He didn't believe in an afterlife or ghosts or fate or anything of that nature. Since he believed in reason, he supposed he shouldn't have ruled out the possibility of supernatural things. It wasn't rational to claim something didn't exist simply because he didn't have personal experience of it. If he was honest, though, he'd never allowed himself to entertain the possibility ghosts might be real.

So it made more sense for him to believe he was now going crazy. That was a known phenomenon. People who were isolated, who lacked social interaction, especially if they were isolated against their will, tended to lose their minds. It was why he tried so hard to keep himself occupied. He didn't want it to happen to him. He knew it might be inevitable, but he thought it would take a lot longer, since he worked so avidly against it. Apparently, he was wrong.

The see-through stranger had to be a figment of his imagination.

But he didn't feel like he was going crazy. He supposed most people who went crazy didn't feel like they had done so. They probably all assumed they were perfectly rational. He supposed what he *thought* and what he *felt* didn't really matter. Feelings didn't change objective facts. They did, however, foster doubt. The more he thought about it, the less it made sense. Losing his mind, that made sense. Losing it in this way didn't. If he was going to imagine a companion, why would he imagine a man from Balor? The only Balorish person he'd ever met was the woman who'd tutored him in the language. It made far more sense for him to imagine someone he knew, like a member of his family or a friend, or even another random Shaydari. What could possibly possess his brain to imagine someone who didn't even speak his native tongue?

There was something else, too. Once he remembered it, he couldn't put it out of his mind. It was a story he'd read in one of the newspapers brought to him on the supply ship. It reminded him of his visitor, although he wasn't sure whether it pointed to the ghost being real or if it was further indication he'd lost his mind. Eventually, he wrestled himself from under the covers of his bed. He wouldn't be able to sleep until he read the article again. Lighting the lamp on his bedside table, he picked it up and carried it out of his room, making his way downstairs in his pajamas.

In the main room, he went to the bin next to the fireplace where he stored old newspapers for use as fire starters. Currently, the coals in the fireplace were red, still radiating heat, but not much light. He dug through the bin of papers. It wasn't easy to find what he was looking for in the relatively dim light but eventually he did. The story wasn't front-page news because it wasn't about Shaydar. He had to dig in a few pages before he saw it, a large, blaring headline: TROUBLE IN BALOR. PRINCE POISONED. The article that followed was short, light in detail. Had reading this triggered his brain to conjure a Balorish visitor? Ahvi stood.

“Hello?” he called out.

The man appeared next to him so suddenly, practically before the last syllable of the word died on his lips, that Ahvi jumped, nearly dropping the lamp. His heart climbed into his throat.

“I thought you weren’t talking to me anymore,” the man said peevishly, arms crossed in front of him. Wordlessly, Ahvi held up the paper for him to see. As the man’s eyes flitted back and forth over the headline, the irritation on his face grew. “I don’t speak any Shaydari.”

Ahvi scowled, annoyed by his own imagination, which had apparently grown rather vivid.

“It says, ‘Trouble in Balor. Prince poisoned.’”

The man’s face lit up with recognition. “That’s me!”

He reached out, trying to take the paper from Ahvi. His hands went right through it. Once again, it was the kind of detail Ahvi was surprised his brain would manufacture.

“Are you sure?” he asked.

“Of course I’m sure! Thoemyn and I stole into my father’s study to sample his good scotch. I suppose it’s just as well we did, or it might be my father here, which would be far more trouble.” The man’s eyes flicked to Ahvi’s face. “Don’t you see? This proves I’m a ghost, not a figment of your imagination!”

“It proves no such thing,” Ahvi said.

The man’s expressive eyebrows twitched. “How so?”

“Because the Balorish prince didn’t die. He can’t be a ghost.”

“*What?*” The man was thoroughly stunned by this revelation.

Ahvi turned the paper around so he could read it. It took a few minutes for him to translate the Shaydari into Balorish.

“While an antidote was applied immediately, the young prince has fallen into a coma,” he quoted. “It’s unknown when or if he will waken.”

The see-through man’s mouth moved soundlessly. He appeared thoroughly stunned by the revelation. Ahvi felt a renewed flicker of doubt. He wondered, once again, why he would do this to himself. It would be far easier to imagine a companion with whom he could truly relate, someone he *wanted* to see, someone he missed.

“It doesn’t make any sense,” the man said eventually. “If I’m not dead, why would I be a ghost?”

“It makes sense if you’re a figment of my imagination,” Ahvi argued gently. “I read about you in the paper and now, here you are. I conjured you.”

“But why would you do such a thing?”

“Because I’m lonely. I needed a companion.”

“That’s just silly,” the man spluttered. “If you needed a companion, why would you choose me, a complete stranger?”

Ahvi didn’t have an answer for that. He stared at his ghostly companion, uncertain and confused. The man certainly looked the part of a Balorish prince. Ahvi was slowly beginning to recall things from his studies. Balorish royalty were all blond-haired and brown-eyed, their skin tanned, their bodies tall and fit. His visitor was no exception. In fact, for the first time, Ahvi noticed just how appealing he was, his long blond hair pulled back into a ponytail, his face almost too handsome to be true, his clothes obviously rich and refined. Not that this proved anything. If he could recall it, then his brain could have dredged up such details to create an imaginary companion.

“How would it hurt you to believe I’m real?” the apparition asked him.

“Are you so certain that you are?”

“Of course I am!” He waved his hands dramatically. “My God, you’re stubborn. I almost wish I was dead because then at least I wouldn’t be stuck here with you. Of all the people in the world I could be haunting, I get a Shaydari stranger who doesn’t believe I’m real! I could be haunting Thoemyn, but no, I’m here with you. I don’t even know your name!”

Ahvi scoffed. “Oh, please.”

“The boat captain never said it! He just kept calling you ‘my lord.’ I can only imagine what a nobleman did to get himself exiled all alone to a secluded island.”

The comment stung. Ahvi hadn’t done anything that deserved exile. He was being punished simply for existing. His brain well knew that. He’d never blamed himself. He didn’t think he would begin to do so now. He wouldn’t torture himself like that. Neither would he create a companion who pretended not to know his name. At least, he didn’t think he would.

“By the way,” the apparition said, crossing his arms in front of himself once again, “I overheard the some of the sailors gossiping about *her*, whoever that is. Apparently she’s agitating to have your supply runs cut off.”

Ahvi’s stomach dropped. He wasn’t surprised that his stepmother would push to have him isolated completely. After all, she was the reason he was exiled. He didn’t think his father would give in to such demands, but then he’d never thought his father would give in to exiling him either. He wondered if he could survive without the supplies. He grew most of his own vegetables now. The island had wild fruit, berries, nuts, and mushrooms. He already fished for meat. The island was forested, so he had access to firewood. One bad season, however, could easily lead to starvation. Was his father so desperate to appease his own wife that he would sign Ahvi’s potential death warrant?

For a few minutes, he was too busy worrying about what the apparition said to consider its implication. If his visitor was here while the boat captain was here, that meant he was around *before* Ahvi read the newspaper. Assuming, of course, that Ahvi wasn’t making up the whole thing, which he was now almost certain wasn’t the case.

“Ahvi,” he said.

“What?”

“My name is Ahvi,” he clarified.

“Oh.” The apparition blinked. “I’m Daelyn.”

“I know,” Ahvi said. He waved the newspaper in Daelyn’s direction. “The article says so.”

Daelyn smiled. “So you’ve decided to believe me then?”

“Maybe.”

Daelyn shook his head, still smiling. “Stubborn.”

“If you got close enough to the boat to hear the sailors speaking, why didn’t you leave with them?”

“I tried,” Daelyn sighed. “I couldn’t. Any time I try to leave the island, I find myself unable to move.”

Ahvi frowned. The explanation made sense but it was still terribly curious. He didn’t know what to make of it. Part of him almost wished Daelyn was a figment of his imagination. At least that

made sense. Daelyn existing as a ghost, on the other hand, was completely nonsensical. How could he be a ghost if he wasn't dead? And if he was a ghost, why was he there, with Ahvi?

"Maybe you died after that article was written," he said, heedless of how such a statement would make Daelyn feel. When he looked up and caught the stricken expression on the see-through man's face, he hastened to add, "Or maybe your soul left your body but it's not your time to move on and you're stuck. That's why you're in a coma, because your soul has separated from the body."

Daelyn's expression turned hopeful. "Do you think so?"

"I don't know," Ahvi admitted. "I don't really go in for supernatural or religious stuff."

"Bit of a cosmic joke, isn't it, that a man who doesn't believe in the spirit realm should be visited by a ghost?"

Ahvi smiled. "I suppose it is."

"You'll help me, won't you?"

"Help you what?"

"Figure out what I'm doing here." Daelyn drew in a deep breath. "And how to get back to my body."

The request sent shock coursing through Ahvi. "I don't ... I don't know how to help you."

"All those books in there." Daelyn waved a hand at Ahvi's library. "Surely there's at least one that has answers."

Ahvi didn't know what to say. Never in his wildest imaginings did a scenario such as this manifest itself. He'd wished his father would change his mind and send a ship to bring him home. He'd dreamed of rescue by one of his brothers. In his weaker moments, he'd even allowed himself to fantasize a companion, someone who arrived on the island via shipwreck. It was selfish, he knew, but he didn't think there was any harm in dreaming. This, though, this was madness. The ghost of a man who wasn't even dead, standing next to his fireplace, begging for help. What was Ahvi to do with that? Suddenly, the weight of the late hour dropped on him. He was exhausted.

"I need to get some sleep," he said.

"But ... "

“For pity’s sake, give me a night’s peace,” Ahvi interrupted Daelyn’s protestations. “It’s a lot to take in.”

Daelyn appeared chastened. Ahvi left him there, by the fireplace, taking the lantern back to his room. He blew it out when he got into bed. Though he was tired, sleep was a long time coming.

Chapter 3

In the morning, Ahvi sat at his kitchen table, eating his usual bowl of oatmeal, when Daelyn appeared next to him. The sudden manifestation startled Ahvi so badly he jumped, flinging a spoonful of oatmeal across the table. He watched in dismay as the warm cereal splattered down in several places before turning toward Daelyn, who didn't look the least bit contrite.

“Can you not do that?” he asked peevishly.

“Do what?”

“Just appear out of nowhere? Can't you walk into the room like a normal person?”

“I can't walk into the room at all.”

Daelyn pointed down at his feet. For the first time, Ahvi noticed that Daelyn was floating. His feet didn't touch the ground. Briefly, his mind came up blank. He sat there, spoon hovering over his oatmeal, his brain incapable of processing this new information. Eventually, he rallied.

“Fine,” he said. “Couldn't you float into the room like a — ”

He stopped himself before he finished the sentence, realizing that what he'd been about to say was ridiculous. Normal people didn't float.

“Like a normal ghost?” Daelyn finished for him with a wry smile.

Ahvi couldn't stop himself from smiling as well, despite his annoyance. It was all so ridiculous. He was angry with his ghostly roommate. If anyone who knew him before could see him now, they wouldn't recognize him. Of course, that was true before Daelyn arrived as well. He wondered if that was why his stepmother had begun pressuring his stepfather to end his supplies. She never thought he would last this long. She didn't expect him to be able to keep his own house. She didn't think he would learn how to fish or forage or grow vegetables. She thought he would give up and die. Maybe she even hoped he would kill himself. It would happen out of the way, out of anyone's sight, and it would take months for someone to discover it. She could pretend to be sad about it, even if it was what she wanted.

“Is there any way you could announce your presence before appearing?” Ahvi reframed the question, although the heat had gone out of the conversation. He was no longer annoyed.

“I can try,” Daelyn conceded. “I'm sort of new to this whole ghost thing.”

Daelyn's words sent a pang of recognition coursing through Ahvi. He remembered what it was like to be new at something. When he was first dropped off on the island, he had no idea what he

was doing. His heart was broken. The whole way there, he hadn't allowed himself to cry. He hadn't allowed himself to show any emotion at all. He was brave. Stony. Mykl had insisted on being the one to take him there, to make sure the island truly was deserted, not because he wanted Ahvi to be alone, but because he didn't want anyone to hurt him. He made sure the house was sound. The whole time, Ahvi wished Mykl would turn to him and say, "I don't care what Father says, I'm not leaving you here." But he didn't. He left Ahvi there. Alone. Scared. Innocent. Once he was gone, Ahvi finally cried. He cried for days and days.

It would have been easy to give up. He didn't know how to do anything for himself. He'd never cooked a meal before. He'd never even chosen an outfit on his own. Everything about being on the island was overwhelming, from the silence and isolation to the sheer number of things he needed to do to ensure his own survival. No one had ever expected strength or fortitude from him. He was smart and clever but he wasn't physically impressive: far shorter and slighter than his brothers. More like a girl than a boy, his stepmother was fond of saying, although Ahvi didn't think that was a bad thing. He admired his older sister.

Ahvi didn't survive to spite any of them. He didn't survive because he was determined to do so. He survived because he was young and he simply wasn't ready to die yet. Besides, back then, a part of him still had hope. He thought, once his father saw the reality of his absence, he would realize his mistake and send a ship to bring him back. It was years before he gave up on that foolish dream. In the meantime, he took each day as it came. He learned how to take care of himself. None of it came to him naturally. He wasn't good at any of it, at least not at first. There were times when he failed spectacularly. None of that mattered. He found that trying to do something often felt better than the actual achievement of it.

He couldn't relate to being a ghost; he'd never been one. But he could relate to being thrust into a situation that was completely foreign. He knew Daelyn had to be scared even if he didn't show it.

"I'll see what I can find in my books," he said as he dug the spoon into his oatmeal. "You know, to help you."

"Really?" Daelyn's whole face lit up.

"Don't get your hopes up too high. I don't know if I have any books about spiritual stuff."

"But maybe you do about poisons," Daelyn said, seemingly determined to get his hopes up despite Ahvi's warning. Ahvi sighed. For a few moments, there was blessed silence between them. Ahvi went back to eating his oatmeal, trying to ignore Daelyn standing nearby, somehow radiating anticipation despite the fact he wasn't a corporeal being. He only got in a few bites before Daelyn spoke again, "Why do you speak such good Balorish?"

Ahvi suppressed another sigh. He couldn't truly begrudge Daelyn his need to talk. The poor man had been a ghost for weeks, invisible to all. It must have been terribly lonely.

"I had hoped to be assigned a diplomatic mission to Balor," he explained. "My father approved, and so he hired a tutor for me."

"He must have been very good. Your Balorish is excellent."

"Thank you. *She* is Balorish, so I would hope she knew of what she spoke."

Daelyn's eyebrows twitched, although Ahvi was uncertain whether his surprise was over the tutor's gender or her nationality.

"But you're not a diplomat," he said, stating the obvious. "How did you come to be here instead?"

Ahvi felt himself close off at the question. He'd wasted so much time brooding over his circumstances. He certainly didn't want to talk about it.

His stepmother had always hated him. He was a reminder of the place she could never quite have in his father's heart. Ahvi's own mother had died before he reached his first birthday, lost to a lung disease. Ahvi didn't remember her. His father, though, could never forget her. She was the love of his life. While he married Ahvi's stepmother two years after his first wife's death, and was overjoyed by the birth of twin daughters, Ahvi's half-sisters, a year later, he would never love his second wife as much as the first. She could never quite measure up. She knew it. Ahvi and his older siblings knew it. Honestly, the whole court knew it, even Ahvi's father. He overcompensated for his lack of full devotion by giving her whatever she wanted.

Unfortunately, what she wanted was for Ahvi to disappear. Things would have been different, he thought, if he didn't look exactly like his mother. He was the only one of his siblings who did. He had her willowy frame, her short stature, her light and perfect complexion, her pale aqua hair and eyes. His stepmother couldn't stand it. Although he was only a toddler when she married his father, she never tried to be a mother to him. In fact, his very existence seemed to anger her. He learned early to stay out of her way. He'd thought if he quietly left the court it would satisfy her. He chose Balor because it was the farthest nation with which Shaydar had any diplomatic ties. But she couldn't wait long enough for him to finish his studies. She told Ahvi's father, if he didn't send him away immediately, she'd sue for divorce. No queen in Shaydari history had ever sued for divorce.

And so Ahvi's father exiled him. It hurt more than he could ever possibly express. In a way, he didn't even blame her. Surely she could have behaved in a more mature fashion. It wasn't his fault he looked like his mother. In a perfect world, she would have seen that. The world wasn't perfect, though. He didn't expect it to be. He hated her, but he also understood her. She loved her

husband more than anything; it was a love that would never quite be matched. It drove her to madness. What Ahvi didn't understand was his father, who seemed to care more about his reputation than he did his son. It broke Ahvi's heart to be so rejected. He hadn't even expected much, only to be allowed to continue his studies to their end, and then to move to Balor. He didn't know why he couldn't have been given at least that. Sometimes he thought it would have been less cruel to have been executed.

"You're rather forward," he said by way of an answer.

"No one ever accused me of shyness," Daelyn agreed cheerfully.

However, he seemed to take the hint. He didn't press Ahvi for an actual answer about his exile. Instead, he began to chatter inanely, not seeming to mind when Ahvi obviously tuned him out. Ahvi finished his oatmeal and washed the dishes. Lastly, he cleaned up the bit of breakfast he'd spilled when Daelyn startled him. Once he finished these tasks, he turned around to find Daelyn hovering nearby, still radiating anticipation.

"You know I have chores to complete before I can delve into research," he said.

"Building another birdhouse?" Daelyn questioned archly.

Ahvi couldn't suppress a smile. He quite enjoyed Daelyn's sharp tongue.

"Winter will be here soon enough. I need to gather the last of the season's berries and nuts."

Daelyn grumbled at his explanation, although he didn't argue it. Within moments, his grumbling stopped and he asked to come along. Ahvi agreed to it without hesitation. He put on his coat and grabbed a basket. Daelyn didn't follow him out the door, or emerge through it after it was closed. Instead, he simply appeared on the other side once Ahvi was out there. They made their way into the forest together.

Ahvi quickly got used to the company of his ghostly visitor. In fact, he found that he liked it. It was nice to have someone to talk to. Someone to get to know. Daelyn wasn't joking when he said he wasn't shy. He liked to talk. A lot. While he expected Ahvi to participate, Daelyn didn't need any prompting to come up with topics. He was interested in everything: in Ahvi, in what he was doing, in what the island was like. He also had no problem talking about himself, what his life in Balor was like, what he did for a living, what he planned to do when he got back to his body, and he definitely expected to get back to his body. Ahvi had never spent any time thinking about ghosts, but if he had, he was sure he never would have imagined one like Daelyn: chatty, upbeat, engaging, and handsome.

The morning passed pleasantly. They returned home at midday with a full basket of fruits and nuts. After lunch, and putting more of his stew on to heat for the evening meal, he set the nuts

aside in the storage container. Then he set to work on turning his berries into jam. Daelyn watched him with unabashed curiosity, asking him a nearly endless litany of questions. Ahvi didn't mind. He enjoyed hearing something that wasn't his own voice, or the wind and sea outside, or the meowing of Nora.

Later that night, after dinner, they went into the library together. They'd agreed to approach their research methodically. First, they would catalogue all the books in Ahvi's possession. In addition to the tomes he had on the shelves, there were still two full crates he'd yet to unpack. Ahvi would make a note of all the ones they thought might be useful, which they decided to define somewhat broadly: any book that dealt with either the spiritual or religious; medical tomes; books on plants; and anything to do with Balor. Ahvi was still skeptical they'd find anything useful, but Daelyn was so hopeful he didn't have the heart to say anything that could dash those hopes.

The evening passed quickly. They started with the books on the shelves. Ahvi translated the titles for Daelyn. Sometimes he had to crack them open and read through a few pages in order to determine what they were about. Daelyn decided whether or not they would be useful. The ones he chose, Ahvi wrote down on a list. They only got through two of the bookcases before the hour grew late and Ahvi needed to stop for the night. He was tired after having gotten so little sleep the night before.

"Maybe you could teach me some Shaydari," Daelyn suggested as Ahvi straightened up.

"Teach you Shaydari?" Ahvi echoed with a laugh.

"That way I could help you with research," Daelyn said. "It would go faster."

Something squirmed in Ahvi's stomach. He knew what it was. Already he hated the idea of Daelyn leaving him. Once he did, Ahvi would be alone again. He couldn't allow himself to think like that. He'd promised Daelyn his help. He intended to keep that promise no matter the cost to him.

"I don't know that I'm the best teacher," he said. "But if you want to learn, I'm happy to try."

When Daelyn beamed at him, Ahvi told himself it didn't please him. It was a lie.

Chapter 4

They settled into a nice routine. Every day, Daelyn was Ahvi's constant companion. He hovered near while Ahvi ate his meals and went with him while he did his chores. Late in the afternoon, before dinner, Ahvi would spend a couple hours teaching Daelyn Shaydari. It was difficult because the Balorish man had to memorize everything. He wasn't able to make himself the slightest bit corporeal. He couldn't sit down in a chair or hold a pen in his hand or work at a desk. He went right through anything solid. He couldn't even touch the floor without going right through. So he couldn't make any notes or practice his lessons by writing them down. Even so, he insisted on persevering.

Every night, after dinner, they worked on their research. Ahvi read aloud from the books, first in Shaydari, hoping that Daelyn would slowly begin to discern words on his own. Then he would paraphrase the paragraphs for Daelyn, who was usually the one to decide whether or not something was useful. At his request, Ahvi would note those passages on a ledger. Thus far, even after a couple of months, the ledger remained woefully bare. As Ahvi had feared, there simply wasn't much help to be found. This was an unusual situation. If anyone else in the whole world had ever been through something similar, and someone wrote about it in a book, he doubted that such a book was sitting in his library on an isolated island.

Daelyn was seemingly undaunted. He never worried, never said anything pessimistic, never gave up hope. Ahvi admired him. Having Daelyn there was good for him in so many ways. He no longer felt lonely. On top of that, Daelyn's optimistic attitude kept Ahvi from sliding toward depression, which he was inclined toward, especially in the winter months when the weather was dreary. Although he'd never been a believer in the spiritual realm, he'd begun to consider Daelyn's presence providential, especially since he appeared at the start of winter. It was suddenly much easier to believe that someone out there was looking out for him.

The height of winter had roared in with an icy storm. As was his usual custom, Ahvi moved downstairs for the season so he could sleep closer to the house's source of heat. He did so on the couch in the main room where he always kept a fire. During the winter months, he also kept a fire in the study. It was nice to hole up in there with Daelyn, toasty warm, flipping through pages while wind and sleet slapped the walls of the house. During winter, there was less for him to do: no fishing, no foraging, no gardening. He was glad to have a project, two, in fact, if he counted tutoring Daelyn in Shaydari as a project.

"Where do you go when you're not here?" he asked Daelyn one afternoon when there was a rare lull in conversation. Daelyn was with him most times, but occasionally he disappeared. He didn't come when Ahvi called for him. While he always came back, it seemed to be at his own pace.

"I'm not really sure," Daelyn admitted. He flexed his fingers, a gesture that Ahvi had come to recognize as nervousness. "I'm not here but I'm not nowhere. Sometimes ... sometimes I think I hear a voice I recognize. Not yours, but like my cousin, Thoemyn, or one of my sisters."

“Maybe you’re in your body during those times.”

“Do you really think so?” Daelyn asked, so hopeful he was practically breathless.

“Maybe. It sort of makes sense. If we theorize that your spirit has separated from your body, I imagine it either wants to move on to the presumed next existence *or* go back to its body. So if you’re hearing the voices of your living family, then you’re probably in your body. They must come to sit with you. Surely they talk to you. The question is why you can’t stay there once you’re there.”

“Yes,” Daelyn agreed.

He seemed very excited by the idea of visiting his body. Ahvi felt a flash of ... something. It was an emotion he didn’t immediately recognize.

“Did you leave someone behind in Balor?” he asked. It wasn’t until Daelyn’s expression turned quizzical that Ahvi recognized how vague the question was. Daelyn had family in Balor, lots of family, whom he talked about all the time. Ahvi clarified, “A wife, maybe?”

“Oh,” Daelyn laughed. “I’m not married.”

“A girlfriend?” Ahvi persisted. If Daelyn found the line of questioning strange, he didn’t show it.

“No one special,” he replied. “My father fears I’ll never settle down, but it matters little, since it’s unlikely I’ll ever see the throne, with four brothers and sisters ahead of me in line. What about you, were you forced to leave someone behind when you came here?”

“No,” Ahvi sighed. “Since I planned on moving to Balor, I thought it best to leave romance alone. Then I was sent here when I was eighteen. I never got much chance for anything more than a little fun.”

“You were sent here at *eighteen*?”

Daelyn’s shock shouldn’t have surprised him. In the two months they’d lived together, Daelyn had quickly learned that Ahvi’s exile was off-limits as a topic of conversation. It was the first time Ahvi had said anything at all about it.

“Yes.”

“And all that stuff you know how to do, the gardening and jam making and laundry, you learned how to do it before you came here?”

“No.”

“Wow,” Daelyn breathed out, an effect made even more impactful when one considered he had no lungs with which to breathe in or out. “I knew you were amazing. I just didn’t know *how* amazing.”

Ahvi felt himself flush. He hoped Daelyn mistook his reddened cheeks for heat from the fire.

“I only did what had to be done,” he said, effectively dismissing the compliment.

“You’re a prince, aren’t you?” Daelyn asked. Ahvi gaped at him, too surprised to answer. He’d never told the other man that. Daelyn shrugged at his shock. “I used to read the papers too, you know. I remember seeing something about a Shaydari prince who’d been sent into exile. Anyway, I know loads of nobility who wouldn’t rise to the occasion the way you have. If I’d never been in the military, I don’t think I could have done it.”

Daelyn was a lieutenant in the Balorish army. He led his own regiment. Ahvi’s flush deepened at his persistence in complimenting him.

“I very much doubt that,” he said.

“You didn’t know me when I was younger.” Daelyn huffed a laugh. “My mother died in childbirth when I was young. The baby died, too. My father has never remarried, so I’m forever the youngest and my family spoiled me rotten. I grew up poorly. By the time I was near enough to adulthood, I was wasting my life drinking, gambling, and visiting whorehouses. When my father forced me into military school, I thought it was the end of my life, but it was really the beginning. The military turned me into a man, a mostly decent one, I’d like to think.”

“I refuse to believe you were so bad as that.”

“You should believe it. I was insufferable. I won’t deny it. It’s important to own one’s mistakes, I think.”

Ahvi couldn’t disagree with that. He thought back to his own situation, wondering if there was something else he could have done to ensure things turned out differently. He didn’t think there was. Once it became clear his stepmother wanted nothing to do with him, he’d done his best to stay out of her way. He was fairly certain he was blameless, although he supposed there were other mistakes he’d made in his life.

“I lost my mother when I was young, too,” he heard himself saying. “So young I don’t remember her.”

“I don’t remember mine either. My brothers and sisters tell me stories about her, but it’s not the same. I don’t feel like I truly know her, not as a person anyway. She’s more like a character in a book to me.”

“I understand what you mean completely,” Ahvi said. They gazed at one another, connecting through their shared tragedy in a way they hadn’t before.

Other than his siblings, Ahvi was never close to anyone before his exile. He’d tried so hard to stay out of his stepmother’s way, to make himself disappear, throwing himself into his studies. He didn’t go to parties or balls. He didn’t court. He’d had few friends. He’d focused so hard on getting as far away from Shaydar as possible, he never had much of a life. Back then, he’d told himself things would be better once he settled in Balor. It was how he got by. Now, he supposed he might consider the supply ship’s captain a friend. At least, they got along well. But he was it, Ahvi’s one and only friend, until Daelyn arrived. What he had with Daelyn was different. He’d never connected with anyone the way he connected with Daelyn, which was weird, since Daelyn was only partially there.

“I imagine we would have met eventually, if you’d ever made it to Balor,” Daelyn said. “I’d like to think we would’ve been friends.”

“I don’t know, I’ve never played a game of cards in my life,” Ahvi teased.

Daelyn laughed. “What about dice?”

“I suppose I could learn,” Ahvi smiled.

“Yeah, you’re good at that.” Daelyn’s tone was fond. He hesitated a moment, as though he knew he shouldn’t ask but decided to do so anyway, “So are you meant to be here for the rest of your life?”

Ahvi grimaced. “I’m not sure anyone thought things through that far. I suppose when my father dies, whichever of my brothers becomes King will probably let me come home. They’ve nothing against me.”

It would have been the perfect time for Daelyn to ask once more why Ahvi had been exiled but he didn’t. His features flickered with anger.

“I would never leave you here,” he said. “Once I return to my body, I’ll come back to get you.”

For a few minutes, Ahvi was too touched to make a reply. No one had ever offered to stand up for him before. Not his father, who loved him, but loved his image as a doting husband more. Not his brothers, who were on his side but would regardless never say a word against their father. Not the people of Shaydar, who knew he’d done nothing to deserve exile and yet had not

protested it. He was disposable, a throwaway prince. Then along came Daelyn, and after only a few months of knowing one another, he was ready to fight for Ahvi. He didn't even know whether or not Ahvi had done something to deserve his punishment. He simply liked him, felt a loyalty toward him, and that was enough.

"I should think it would be considered an act of war, meddling in another nation's affairs," Ahvi managed once he'd composed himself. His voice sounded only slightly choked.

"It would be worth it," Daelyn replied vehemently.

"Perhaps to you but I doubt it would be to your father," Ahvi said lightly. When a look of annoyance crossed Daelyn's face, he was quick to add, "I thank you for the sentiment, though."

Daelyn nearly said something else but seemed to think better of it. Folding his hands behind him, he began to float back and forth in a ghostly approximation of pacing.

"What was that last passage again?" he asked, changing the subject entirely. Ahvi accepted the shift. He repeated the last paragraph they'd covered, first in the original Shaydari, then paraphrasing it in Balorish. It was a passage from a medical tome about comas, but it didn't have any answers about how to wake someone from one. Daelyn sighed. "Sometimes I think we'll never find anything."

It was the first time he'd ever said anything remotely defeatist. Hearing it jarred Ahvi. It wasn't right. He couldn't allow Daelyn to give up.

"We've only been at it a couple months," he said. "We've dozens of books to go through. We'll find something, I know it."

Daelyn stopped float-pacing. He turned toward Ahvi, smiling.

"You're right, of course," he replied. "Thanks, Ahvi."

Ahvi liked the way his name sounded on Daelyn's tongue. Forcing himself to ignore that, he moved on to the next paragraph.

Chapter 5

The next time the supply ship came in Spring, they brought double the normal amount of supplies. In the past, Ahvi might not have noticed. At least, he wouldn't have seen anything nefarious in it. He still remembered, though, what Daelyn had said to him when they first met—that he overheard the the sailors saying the shipments might stop. When he asked the ship's captain why they'd brought so much, the man said it had been a particularly harsh winter in Shaydar; his father had feared he was suffering on the island. Ahvi could see in the man's eyes it was a lie. He asked Daelyn to eavesdrop for him.

Daelyn was happy to help. No one besides Ahvi could see him, so it was easy for him to listen in. It didn't take him long to confirm Ahvi's worst fears. The sailors, at least, were sympathetic toward him. The way they talked about it, Daelyn said, they knew it wasn't right. Some of them even expressed a desire to rescue him, to whisk him away and drop him off somewhere else, somewhere he could get help. All of them were too afraid of the repercussions. Talk was only talk. In the end, they would do as they were ordered. There would be only three more supply runs: two in Summer and one in Fall. All three of them would have double the supplies, just as this one did. After the third, they would never come again. Ahvi would be on his own.

Even though he'd known for a few months now that it was a possibility, Ahvi was devastated. He'd been disappointed by his family over and over again and yet, it still hurt him, every single time. Once the sailors left, he told Daelyn he needed some time to himself and holed up in his bedroom. He took a book with him but, in the end, he didn't have the heart to read it. Instead, he watched as the supply ship sailed away. He continued to stand there at the window until long after it was gone. How he wished he was on it! There were a hundred other things he could, and probably should, be doing but all he could do was stand there, thinking about how life was passing him by.

“Ahvi?” He was surprised when he heard Daelyn's voice. He turned to find the ghost floating uncertainly by the door. He'd never materialized upstairs before, at least not that Ahvi had ever seen. “I know you said you wanted some alone time but it's been hours and hours.”

“Has it?” Ahvi asked. He turned back to the window. Only now did he notice the angle of the sunlight, which indicated it was afternoon. The ship had left at mid-morning.

“You haven't done any of the day's chores,” Daelyn ventured.

“I suppose one day of idleness won't make a difference,” Ahvi replied tonelessly.

There was a brief pause. Ahvi didn't hear any indication of movement, but the next time Daelyn spoke he sounded closer regardless.

“I know you don't deserve to be here.”

His voice was soft, so full of concern and compassion Ahvi couldn't stop the tears that began streaming down his face. It was years since the last time he'd allowed himself to cry. Giving in to it now made him angry. He scrubbed at his wet face.

"Yeah, did you hear the sailors say that, too?"

"I worked it out on my own." When Ahvi scoffed at this, Daelyn insisted, "No one as beautiful and kind and thoughtful as you could deserve a fate like this."

Ahvi blushed right up to his roots.

"You were a cad and you changed," he deflected. "Why would you not believe my story is similar?"

"Are you trying to make me believe you got what you deserved because it's easier than the truth?" This time when Daelyn spoke, he was so close Ahvi felt compelled to look at him. He turned to find Daelyn floating right by his side. His expression was so sorrowful that Ahvi was, once again, undone. Fresh tears fell. "I wish I could comfort you."

"You being here comforts me."

"Wouldn't it be so much better if I could touch you?" Daelyn asked. Although he didn't say it aloud, Ahvi agreed. It would mean everything if Daelyn could touch him. "I would put my arms around you and hold you tight."

Ahvi longed for it. He longed for it so hard it was almost physically painful. It had been many years since anyone had held him. The only touch he'd felt since coming to the island was from the supply ship's captain, who always shook his hand. The last person who hugged him was Mykl. While Ahvi did miss physical touch in general, he thought it would be particularly nice to be touched by Daelyn. Though they'd only known each for less than half a year, he'd grown to quite like him.

"I don't want you think I'm glad you were poisoned. If I could go back in time to stop it, I would," Ahvi said. "But having you here has meant a lot to me. I'll miss you when you leave."

"And yet you still seek to help me because it's the right thing to do. You don't care what it might cost you. That's why you're the best person I've ever met. I really care about you, Ahvi."

Ahvi really cared about Daelyn, too. Somehow, he didn't have the words to express it out loud, no matter how much he wanted to. For a moment, he allowed himself a little daydream, one where they discovered a cure for Daelyn's coma, returning him to his body. In this dream, Daelyn came to rescue him, just as he'd promised, and Ahvi found the courage to go with him,

no matter the consequences. He got to live his life in Balor as he'd always wanted. He got to live it with Daelyn. If he truly got his way, they would live together as a couple, but he thought it would be almost as nice if they were only friends. It was a good dream. A really good dream. He tried to tell himself not to get attached to it, but he wasn't doing a good job of listening to himself.

Suddenly, he realized that his tears had stopped flowing. He wiped the remnants of them from his cheeks.

"Thank you. I appreciate you saying that," he said softly. "You know, I think you're right. I should probably get some chores done before I lose the light."

"That's the spirit."

Daelyn smiled at him and Ahvi felt much, much better.

After dinner that night, he and Daelyn went back to their usual routine, settling in for a tutoring and research session. Daelyn's Shaydari was improving, although it was a slow process. Language had never been his strong suit. Actually, he'd admitted sheepishly, he'd never been much one for schooling in general. He was even worse at rote memorization. There was little for him to do, however, beyond talk to Ahvi, observe him, and learn. He was essentially getting better at Shaydari in spite of himself. Even so, he and Ahvi spent most of their time conversing in Balorish. Daelyn threw in Shaydari phrases here and there when he remembered them.

Their research, thus far, had turned up nothing. Apart from his one moment of doubt, Daelyn had never expressed such a thing again. On this night, though, he seemed distracted. He was uninterested in their tutoring session. When Ahvi tried to move on to research, he showed little interest in that either. Ahvi was about to ask him what was wrong when Daelyn said, out of the blue,

"Why do you think I'm here?"

"It seems obvious that whatever antidote you were given stopped the poison's progress but couldn't undo the damage that was already done," Ahvi replied. "At least, I assume that's why you're still in a coma."

"No," Daelyn said. "Why do you think I'm here, with you?"

"Oh." Ahvi didn't have a ready answer for that. "I suppose I haven't thought much about that."

"I have," Daelyn said. "A lot."

For some reason, Ahvi's heart did a slow roll at that.

"Have you drawn any conclusions?" he asked.

"No conclusions yet."

"Any theories then?"

"Lots of theories." Daelyn looked down at his feet, one of which he scuffed as though he wasn't floating above the floor. It was the weirdly human gestures such as this that sometimes gave Ahvi gooseflesh. "The one thing I'm certain of is that it's not a coincidence. I'm meant to be here with you. You needed me."

"Oh, I needed you, did I?" Ahvi was amused. "I think it's you that needed me, not the other way around."

"Perhaps we needed each other," Daelyn said. His tone was so serious that any amusement Ahvi felt quickly dissipated. "I know you've had to be strong, in order to build a home here, against all odds, but I can tell you're not the sort of man who wants to live alone. You needed a companion. I needed someone to help me get back to my body. Some god out there must have seen us and deemed us worthy of each other."

On many levels, he liked Daelyn's idea. It didn't matter that he'd never been a believer; the idea was still intoxicating. For a few minutes, Ahvi allowed himself to discard rationality. He enjoyed the thought that there was a god out there — any god, he didn't care which one — looking out for him. It made him feel not so alone. Even more, he liked that such a god would see him struggling and send him a lost soul. He imagined this god wasn't the one who allowed Daelyn to get hurt, but one that guided him to Ahvi once once he got stuck between this world and the next. Ahvi could live in a world with a god such as that.

"I never thought much about the gods before I was exiled," he told Daelyn. "My family isn't a religious one. Since I came here, it's been difficult to believe in a god who would allow such an injustice."

It was only once the words left his mouth he realized how close he'd come to finally telling Daelyn the truth, nearly admitting aloud he didn't belong on the island. When he looked up at the ghost, he found Daelyn's expression arranged into careful neutrality.

"You don't have to tell me," he said. "Not until you're ready, even if it's never."

Ahvi wavered. Part of him didn't want to tell his story; the other part wanted Daelyn to know. Daelyn was his friend, the first true friend he'd ever had. If he couldn't speak his truth to Daelyn, who would he ever tell? Drawing a deep breath, Ahvi pressed on,

"I want to tell you."

And he did. He told his whole truth to Daelyn, from beginning to end. He didn't leave anything out, not even how any of it made him feel. His fear, he realized, was Daelyn's pity. While it was an entirely appropriate reaction, it wasn't what Ahvi needed. He supposed he should have expected more from his friend. As Ahvi's tale unfolded, no pity showed on Daelyn's face. Instead, his expression gradually grew darker.

"I tried so many times to imagine how you ended up here," Daelyn said after he finished speaking. "The worst scenario I could come up with was you being punished for a crime you didn't commit. It never occurred to me there was quite literally no reason for it at all." He shook his head. "I know it's hardly appropriate for me to say anything of the sort, but your father, Ahvi, he's no man at all if he could do such a thing to his own son."

His words didn't anger Ahvi. In fact, it felt good to hear someone say such a thing. No one had ever spoken against his father before, at least not in so many words. Still, he couldn't seem to silence the voice inside of him that wanted to defend the man responsible for his birth.

"I know it was hard for him, all those years, living with a child who so reminded him of the love he lost," he said.

"That's drivel, Ahvi. It should have made him love you more. What he and your stepmother did to you is wrong. Anyone who stood by while it was happening and didn't speak up for you is wrong. Anyone who doesn't commandeer the first ship they can find and come to rescue you is wrong. Feel it, believe it, speak it, even if only to yourself."

Ahvi looked up at him. Daelyn's face was earnest, flooded with righteous anger on his behalf. If the Balorish man had been corporeal, he would've been hard pressed not to kiss him in that moment. He didn't have a lot of experience. There'd been a few dalliances here and there before his exile. Certainly nothing that had come close to a love match. Even so, he didn't need experience to understand what he was feeling. Daelyn was the sort of man one could fall headlong in love with: handsome, accomplished, passionate, and loyal. Ahvi didn't have the imagination to dream up anyone better.

"As you say," he replied with a smile. Daelyn nodded, satisfied.

Chapter 6

By the time the answer came, they were no longer prepared for it. Truth was, Ahvi had nearly forgotten there was even a point to the research. Over the course of their many months together, their relationship had evolved. Daelyn was no longer a stranger for whom he was trying to solve a great mystery. He was Ahvi's close companion. He was his friend, one — he was forced to admit to himself — for whom his feelings were far more than friendly. They spent nearly all Ahvi's waking hours together. They were an integral part of each other's lives. When the answer finally came, it was a surprise to both of them.

There was a small part of Ahvi that didn't want to admit to Daelyn what he'd found. He read the words in Shaydari first, as he always did, but it was a botanical tome, so it included a lot of words he'd yet to teach his friend. After he read the passage, he found himself staring at the page, astounded. For that brief moment, a thousand emotions whirled through him. There was pride — this thing that they'd looked so hard for, that they'd striven toward every day for months on end, they'd finally achieved it. There was joy for Daelyn, who now had a chance to go home. After joy, though, came crushing dread. If Daelyn left, he would be alone again, completely alone. There was only one shipment left. Then he was on his own in every sense of the word.

It was selfish to consider not telling Daelyn but he allowed himself to be selfish, if only for a few seconds. He knew he would overcome it in the end. He loved Daelyn. He loved him more than he loved himself. It didn't matter if Daelyn returned the sentiment. Ahvi could never doom him to the life of a ghost, even if that meant dooming himself to a life of solitude.

“You found it, didn't you?”

Daelyn's voice broke Ahvi's reverie. He sounded almost as regretful as Ahvi felt, which was so like him it made Ahvi's heart ache. It made it much harder for him to open his mouth and translate,

“There is a flower that grows in the mountains,” he began. There was a mountain range between Shaydar and Balor, one so treacherous it had kept the two countries largely separated for the entirety of their existence. Only one road passed through it and even that was inaccessible during the height of winter. “Known widely as Midnight Mystique due to its dark blue shade. It's considered the most romantic flower because of its rarity and its unique, heart-shaped petals. Few are aware, however, that it's the source of a fatal poison called The Living Death. When the petals are dried and ground into a powder, this powder can be added to any food or drink and will result in nearly instantaneous death. An emetic applied almost immediately after ingestion will halt the approach of death but also send the victim into a coma.”

“That's it. That's what happened to me,” Daelyn said. He swallowed audibly. “Does it say if there's a cure for the coma?”

Ahvi read on, “The only known cure for The Living Death is a tea made from the roots of Midnight Mystique. Its effectiveness depends upon the health and age of the victim prior to ingestion of the poison. A recipe for this tea can be found in the book *Alvidyn’s Home Remedies*.”

Silence fell between them. Ahvi continued to stare at the page in front of him, still shocked they’d found an answer. He’d always been sincere in his help but he now realized he’d never truly believed they would achieve their goal. Maybe Daelyn was right: the gods had brought them together for a reason.

“I don’t suppose you have a copy of *Alvidyn’s Home Remedies* lying around,” Daelyn joked after a while. His voice shook. When Ahvi smiled, it felt just as shaky. They both knew he didn’t have any Balorish books.

“This book is pretty old,” he said, gesturing to the tome he held in his hands. “I’d imagine *Alvidyn’s Home Remedies* is even older. Does Balor have a royal archive?”

“We actually have an extensive public library system,” Daelyn replied. “There’s got to be a copy of it somewhere in Balor.”

The problem was, now they had an answer, they weren’t sure what to do with it. Daelyn didn’t manifest anywhere but on the island with Ahvi and no one but Ahvi could see or hear him. They suspected that when he wasn’t with Ahvi, he was in his body, but he couldn’t communicate with anyone there. That left it up to Ahvi to get the word to someone who could use it but how could he do that? He was trapped on the island as well. The only person he ever talked to was the supply ship captain and neither he nor Daelyn believed he would agree to carry a message to Balor. As far as they knew, there was only one supply run left. It was due to arrive within the next month. Ahvi needed to do something, and he needed to do it right, because they only had one chance.

Eventually, they agreed on a solution. It wasn’t one either of them felt sure of but it was all they had. The one thing the ship’s captain would definitely carry for Ahvi was letters to his family. Ahvi would write to Mykl, the brother he trusted most to do what he asked of him. In it, he would enclose a letter for Thoemyn, Daelyn’s cousin and best friend. Thoemyn was the person Daelyn trusted most to open a letter from a strange Shaydari and listen to the recommendation within. In that letter, Ahvi would tell Thoemyn what he’d found. Daelyn thought his family would try to find the tea recipe, make it, and administer it. They had nothing to lose, as nothing else had roused Daelyn from his coma for nearly a year now.

However, everything hinged upon Mykl. Would he send a letter to a man in Balor he’d never met at the request of his brother? Ahvi couldn’t say for sure. He knew Mykl would find the request very strange. He wouldn’t like it. But he loved Ahvi. He might do it, if Ahvi could express to him how important it was to him. He crafted the letter to Mykl carefully, trying to find the right words to convince his brother to do this thing for him, even though he wouldn’t understand it. In

the end, all Ahvi's agonizing over the letter didn't matter, for when the last supply ship arrived, Mykl was on it.

Their reunion was emotional. As soon as Mykl saw Ahvi, he began to weep. Ahvi knew then with perfect clarity: this was the last time they would see one another. Daelyn respectfully kept his distance, making himself scarce while Ahvi showed his brother the cottage and everything he'd done to make it a real home: the decorations, his garden, the repairs, the things he'd built. Mykl was duly impressed. Ahvi made a meal for him, including biscuits with his own homemade jam. Mykl agreed to spend the night in his guest room. It was the first time it would be used. The sailors, even the captain, always overnighted on the ship. Sometimes Ahvi had hated the room because it only reminded him of how lonely he was. Now it would finally have a purpose, for the first and last time.

Mykl had brought him a bottle of fine scotch. At the end of the evening, in the study, they each had a tumbler of it by the fire. The nights had already begun to grow cold. Soon the ice storms would come. It was over this drink that Mykl finally admitted the truth: the supplies would no longer come. When Ahvi told him he already knew, Mykl began to weep again.

"I'll come for you when I'm King," he said and Ahvi smiled sadly.

"It could be another twenty years, or more," he replied. Their father was not so old, only in his late fifties. It was an age where he could die suddenly tomorrow or linger for decades. "I've become good at sustaining myself but one hard winter could spell the end for me."

"I know." Mykl could barely choke the words out around his tears. "I'm sorry, Ahvi. If I could change it, I would."

The truth was, Mykl could change it if he were brave enough. They both knew it. All he had to do was stand up to their father. He would never do it. Ahvi had accepted that a long time ago. It no longer angered him. All he felt was disappointment. A small flicker of movement next to the fire caught his attention. He turned his eyes toward it and found Daelyn standing there, watching him with an intensity that nearly took his breath away. Ahvi gave his friend a small smile, letting him know he appreciated his presence. Then he turned his attention back to his brother.

"Mykl, I need you to do something for me. You're going to think it strange. I'll explain it as best I can. Please just hear me out."

Since his brother would think him mad if he told him he'd been living with a ghost, Ahvi had come up with a plausible cover story. He'd read the article in the paper, he said, and with nothing better to do, he decided to try to find an explanation for the Balorish prince's coma. He played on his brother's sympathy, mentioning how lonely he got, how hard he had to work to keep his mind occupied, so he didn't go mad. That part worked; Mykl flinched visibly. He'd spent nearly a year

researching, he told his brother, and finally he'd found an answer. He only needed Mykl to send the letter he'd already written to Balor. That's all he asked.

"We've nothing to lose and everything to gain," he reasoned to his brother. "If the Balorish prince's coma isn't lifted, it's merely one more thing they tried that didn't work, but they'll appreciate we tried to help. It will improve our relations. And if the coma is lifted, then Shaydar is the hero. That would improve our relations even more. I always wanted to be an ambassador to Balor. This is my last chance to achieve that." Despite this particular arrow hitting its mark, Mykl still hesitated. Ahvi pulled the last card he had, "Please, Mykl. I've never asked you for anything. I never asked you to stand against our father or save me. I've never put any of the blame for my fate on you. I only want one thing, perhaps the last thing I'll ever get to ask for. Please deliver my letter."

In the end, the guilt trip worked. Mykl agreed to carry the letter home and then send it on the next mail ship to Balor. It could take weeks, even months, depending on how early the winter storms came. There were no guarantees Mykl would actually do it. Perhaps, on the long voyage home, he would change his mind, lose his resolve. Ahvi could do nothing about that. He'd done everything in his power. The rest was up to Mykl, or perhaps to fate. The following morning, Mykl left on the supply ship and Ahvi and Daelyn were once again alone, for the final time.

Things didn't go back to normal because they couldn't. Ahvi and Daelyn no longer had a project to work on together. It took them a while to build a new routine. As winter settled in, Ahvi continued to tutor Daelyn in Shaydari. He also continued to read books to him, although now they read fiction together, rather than the dry, old history and botany tomes they'd been reading before. They also began to write stories of their own together, bouncing ideas off of one another, coming up with wild plots and characters. They never talked about the letter, or the many scenarios that could occur in relation to it, whether it found its way to Thoemyn or not. It was fun. Ahvi had never enjoyed himself so much in his life. The weeks rolled by.

Two months after the last supply run, the first ice storm roared in. After lunch, Ahvi stood at the kitchen sink, washing dishes and looking out the window, watching the sleet lash against it. During the storms, the kitchen was always the warmest part of the house.

"We don't have to have a conversation about it," Daelyn said out of the blue. "But I want you to know how much I appreciate everything you've done for me. You kept trying to help me even when all seemed hopeless."

"Helping you was never a hardship. Besides, you've helped me just as much. You brought me life again."

"I — I worry about what will happen to you after I wake up. It will probably be a while before I can come get you."

Ahvi snorted out a disbelieving laugh. “Daelyn, you don’t have to rescue me. It’s too messy. You’ll get Balor in trouble.”

When he saw movement out of the corner of his eye, he turned to see Daelyn reaching for his arm. Of course, his fingers went straight through. Ahvi shivered. Daelyn’s eyes burned brightly as he leaned in and said,

“I’m not leaving you here alone. The cost means nothing. There are only two things in the world that matter to me now: returning to my body, and being with you. I care about you. When you care about people, you do right by them.”

That certainly hadn’t been Ahvi’s experience, but he was willing to believe maybe that was how the world worked for other people. And maybe this time, it would be how it worked for him, too.

“You’re a good friend, Daelyn,” he said.

What he really wanted to say was, *I love you*. He didn’t because no matter how Daelyn responded to it, it would hurt too much. If Daelyn didn’t return his feelings, he would be crushed. On the other hand, if he did, there was little to be done about it in the moment. They couldn’t touch. They might never be able to. That thought alone was almost too painful to endure. A few moments passed while Ahvi considered these things and his chance to say it was lost. If Daelyn noticed his hesitation, he didn’t show it. Their conversation turned back to less fraught topics and the day continued on like normal, as the days had for a year now.

The following morning, when Ahvi woke up, Daelyn was gone. He did not return.

Chapter 7

The rest of the winter was long, cold, and harsh without Daelyn's presence. Ahvi mourned him in a way he'd never mourned anything else in his life. It was so very lonely without him.

It didn't take long before he began to wonder whether the whole thing even happened at all. It was almost impossible to believe. Without Daelyn there, the doubts formed easily. Perhaps he'd made it up after all. He'd seen the story in the paper and created a beautiful fantasy in his head, one where he not only had a companion, but one who was handsome and kind and loyal, who promised to come to Ahvi's rescue. That it was a figment of his imagination wasn't outside the realm of possibility. It certainly made more sense than the other version, the one where Daelyn, his soul unable to move either forward or backward, spent a year living with Ahvi on his island. When Ahvi thought about it, really thought about it, it seemed a bit pathetic. He felt embarrassed and was glad he'd known better than to tell Mykl the truth about why he wanted to send that letter.

Despite the creeping doubt, however, there was a part of him that still believed. This part sustained him through the winter. It made him feel good to imagine Daelyn out there, back in Balor, alive and happy. He tried not to think about Daelyn coming to save him because it made him too hopeful, but that fantasy slipped through every now and then anyway. He knew it was foolish to depend upon the idea. He shouldn't expect a rescue. He should live his life as though a rescue wasn't coming, continuing with the chores that would sustain him on the island. The difficulty was it being winter, which meant there weren't as many chores for him to do. He was largely trapped indoors, trying desperately to dream up tasks that would prevent him from thinking too much.

In a way, things got easier when Spring came. He had more chores to occupy him. The question of whether or not Daelyn was real faded into the background as he found himself back in the garden, planting and watering and, soon enough, weeding. There was so much more to do this time because he knew no more supplies were coming. He had to do everything in his power to ensure a healthy crop. As the months wore on, however, all the work in the world couldn't distract him from an encroaching truth. Daelyn had disappeared at the beginning of Winter. It made sense he couldn't come for Ahvi during that season because the seas were too rough. The rest of the year, however, his island was perfectly reachable.

By the time nine months had passed since Daelyn left, Ahvi couldn't deny the truth any longer. It seemed as though Daelyn wasn't coming. A million scenarios could account for this. One was the most obvious: that their time together was a pleasant fiction. Others occurred to him the more he thought about it: that Daelyn wasn't true to his word; that he'd forgotten everything that happened during his coma; that he couldn't convince his father to allow him to go — maybe he'd been deemed a madman and locked up; that he couldn't find the island; that his ship had gone down in a storm. Every scenario was as terrible as the last. Ahvi wasn't sure which one made

him feel the worst. He knew only one thing: no matter how painful it was, he'd rather Daelyn be alive than dead.

As Summer wheeled into Autumn, Ahvi resigned himself to his reality. Whatever the truth about Daelyn, it didn't matter. Ahvi was trapped on the island. He would be for probably another twenty years, assuming he survived and his brother kept his promise to free him once he became King. It was possible he'd be on the island for the rest of his life. It wasn't what he wanted but it was the fate life had decided for him. Sometimes he thought about the day the soldiers came for him, catching him completely unawares. He was so stunned he didn't even try to fight when they told him to pack a trunk and then led him down to the ship that brought him here. Now, he wondered if things might have been different if he'd fought. What if he'd ever voiced his opinion, told his father he was wrong, that this was unjust? What if he'd shouted it from the rooftops?

It might not have changed anything, but it would've made him feel better to stand up for himself. How could he expect anyone to risk saving him when he'd never risked it himself? Nearly two years had passed since he'd erected the birdhouse in his yard. Not even half an hour after he finished the task, he saw Daelyn for the first time. While he hadn't seen him in almost a year now, he did see birds. They liked to stop at his birdhouse to rest before moving farther south for the winter. Between chores, Ahvi often spent few minutes watching them. He was doing so one crisp autumn afternoon when a voice behind him tentatively said,

“Ahvi?”

He didn't startle because he wasn't sure he'd actually heard it. He thought it was a trick of the wind. When he turned around, however, he found Daelyn standing there. An uncertain smile graced his lips. Ahvi stared. Daelyn looked just as he had when he was a ghost, only he was no longer see-through and he stood on the ground rather than floating in the air. He also, for the first time, wore different clothes: what appeared to be a military outfit, with heavy boots, a sword, and a thick cloak to ward off the chill. Ahvi was almost positive that he wasn't imagining things.

“I wasn't sure if you were real after all,” he said.

Daelyn's smile turned rueful.

“I'm sorry it took me so long to get here. There are a lot more islands off the coast of Shaydar than I knew about.”

He took a step toward Ahvi, who held his ground.

“I can't believe your father allowed you to come.”

“I think that, if not for your letter, he would’ve thought me mad.” Daelyn took another step toward him. “They all would have.”

“I thought maybe *I* was mad.”

“You’re not.” Daelyn closed the distance between them. “I told you I would come for you. I wish it had been sooner, but I’m here now, and I’m ready to take you back to Balor.”

When he reached for Ahvi’s hand, Ahvi allowed him to take it. His eyelids fluttered at the sensation of the touch. Daelyn’s hand was cold and chapped from his time on the ship, but it was the best thing Ahvi had felt in years.

“What about — ”

Daelyn cut him off before he could finish the sentence.

“Even if your father finds out, which I doubt, I don’t care about the repercussions. Neither does my father. He said he would do anything to protect the man who saved his son’s life. You have an open invitation to live in Balor.” He used his grip on Ahvi’s hand to pull him closer. “The only excuse I’ll accept is that you truly don’t want to come with me, but I don’t think that’s how you feel. I think — I hope — your feelings mirror my own. I didn’t stop needing you when I returned to my body, Ahvi. I want you by my side.”

Ahvi didn’t realize he was crying until Daelyn lifted his other hand and used a thumb to wipe away the tear that slid down his cheek.

“I really wanted you to be real,” he whispered.

“I am,” Daelyn said. He drew in a deep breath. When he said the next words, he spoke them in Shaydari, “And I love you.”

Ahvi felt his eyes go wide. “I never taught you how to say that.”

“I learned it from a book,” Daelyn said. Ahvi laughed, feeling as though the world had finally righted itself again. Smiling, Daelyn tugged on his hand. “Come, let’s get you packed up so we can go home.”

Turning, they made their way towards the cottage. Ahvi slipped his other hand around Daelyn’s arm, enjoying the feeling of him.

“I love you, too,” he said in Balorish.

Daelyn leaned over to kiss his cheek. They walked off into their shared future together, hand-in-hand.

THE END.