

HOLLANDOS

Vessel of the Kazàncore

Prologue + chapter 1

PROLOGUE

THE WRATH OF VOLKAN

Two years earlier...

Clouds of smoke loomed overhead. Gerard tracked a single speck of ash as it drifted downward. He raised a flat hand, offering it a place to land. The fleck settled gently onto his palm, its fragile form the same shade of grey as his skin.

His eyes lingered on it for a moment before darting past the rows of blackened houses. Beyond the rooftops, a towering plume of deep grey smoke billowed into the sky, shrouding the city of Volkaania in a blanket of ash. It wasn't unusual for the volcano they lived on to gift them such a spectacular scene, yet this time, it felt much more ominous. Gerard could feel the ground rumbling beneath his feet, as if the mountain itself were stirring.

The streets, usually empty, now teemed with people. The Volkaanians were recognisable by their bone-white skin and blood-red hair, which made a stark contrast against their dark clothes. They sang songs about their great god Volkan, their bodies moving to the rhythm of the beat.

'Dad,' Ernst called, breaking through Gerard's reverie. 'Watch this.'

Gerard slipped his hands into the pockets of his loose black trousers and glanced down. He smiled faintly as he met his son's grey eyes.

Ernst slid backward, his shoes gliding over the dark pavement. In one smooth motion, he drew three blunt knives from his belt and tossed them high into the air, one after another.

There was no denying he was Gerard's son. They shared the same washed-out complexion – a result of unions between Volkaanian and Vulkosian people – and the same love for this city. But the showmanship Ernst displayed came from elsewhere. It echoed his uncle, Gerard's cousin, Renz. A comparison Gerard found far from flattering.

'That's great, Ernst,' Gerard said indifferently.

'Soon, I'll perform at Kermesse,' replied Ernst, his voice determined as he kept a close eye on his knives. 'They'll chant my name.'

'Ernst Gunner, the juggler of knives.'

Ernst sighed. 'Blaze, Dad. They'll call me *Blaze*.'

'*Blaze*?' Gerard stepped forward, catching the knives with ease before handing them back to Ernst. A strained smile spread across his face. 'Careful. People might start thinking you're Renz's son instead of your old man's.'

Ernst tucked the knives into his belt. 'So what? Uncle Renz is the greatest showman in Hollandos.'

'He's just...' Gerard inhaled, his gaze drifting back to the city he'd been born in. Fire, ash, and a trace of coal. It still smelled like home. The black, orb-shaped houses stood unlike any others in Hollandos, moulded by the volcano itself. Ash coated their roofs, just as it did the winding streets. The familiar sight was a far cry from the rest of the Vulkos province, which Renz had turned into something unrecognisable, treating it like a stage for his own cruel show. 'His morals are just too different from ours.'

Ernst rolled his eyes again.

With an easy motion, Gerard swung an arm around his son's shoulders. 'Come on. Let's find Dada before he decides to throw knives at us for making him wait.'

Together, they crossed a broad road that wound through the city, passing hundreds of dancers as they headed toward the crater. Gerard had never seen them celebrate like this. As he moved through the crowd, people smiled, stepped forward to shake his hand, and even shared stories of their children. Despite Gerard not being in charge anymore, it seemed like they still cared for him here.

In the distance, a familiar figure emerged with long red hair and flawless pale skin. There he stood, Maarten, the brightest fire in Hollandos, at least to Gerard.

Maarten was a rare treasure. Gerard had first met him over thirty years ago, on top of this very volcano. The moment he laid eyes on him, he had felt like the luckiest man in the world, and that feeling had never gone away.

'What a beautiful morning, Maart,' said Gerard. 'Even more so now that I'm with you again.'

Maarten's eyes lit up and his smile widened as Gerard and Ernst approached. 'Oh, stop it, Geer. You're embarrassing me and our son,' he said warmly as he pulled them both into a hug.

Gerard felt his silver livery collar press awkwardly between them. If Maarten held him any tighter, the sigil of Vulkos might imprint itself permanently onto Maarten's chest, and Gerard would never hear the end of it.

'I'm so happy you're both here,' said Maarten.

'Me too.' Gerard's expression dimmed slightly as he stepped back and tugged at his collar. 'Though something feels off... The streets are crowded, the smoke is heavier than usual, even the ground's shaking.'

Maarten inhaled slowly, his smile fading. 'I feel it too. That's why I sent you the starling.'

'The bird reached us two days ago. Sorry I couldn't get here sooner,' said Gerard. 'Fallen boulders blocked the road from Circosia again. But I'm here now and I'll speak to Vera right away.'

'You should,' Maarten replied, his voice unsteady.

Gerard glanced past him and spotted Shaman Vera near the crater's edge, dancing on the brink. If anyone understood what was happening in Volkaania, it would be her.

'Alright,' said Gerard. He gave Maarten a kiss, then nodded at his son before walking off toward the shaman.

Vera had been chosen by her people because they believed she stood closest to Volkan. She was something of a prophet. Her black robes were richly detailed, inscribed with ancient Volkaanian text that also adorned the many stone necklaces hanging around her neck. She was bald, much like Gerard himself. Her scalp caught the red glow of the firelight as she moved dangerously close to the crater's edge, shaking her flute and chanting words Gerard didn't understand.

With each breath she took she inhaled the grey smoke swirling around her. And she wasn't alone; behind her danced a group of Volkaanians, each following her movements precisely.

Gerard had admired Vera since childhood. She would visit every home in Volkaania, giving bread and herbs to the families and telling stories of old to the children. He still remembered sitting in his family's living room as a young boy, listening as she spoke of Volkan's birth.

Gerard knew she was true of heart, which to him was a stark contrast from most leaders nowadays. The trust between them had always been mutual. Even after Renz seized power through rigged elections, taking Gerard's position as leader of Vulkos, Vera continued to confide in Gerard above all others.

He stopped at the edge of the gathering, waiting respectfully for the ritual to end before approaching her.

'Mayor Gunner,' said the Shaman. Her voice rose above the singing like a fiery bird. 'Welcome home.'

'It's good to be back,' he admitted. 'But I'm concerned. The smoke, the celebrations, the rumblings... Is it—'

Vera raised a slender finger, signalling Gerard to be quiet. She nodded her head to her left, beckoning him to follow her.

Wise enough not to question her, Gerard trailed after the shaman along the crater's edge. Only when they were out of sight did she stop.

'Look down,' she said.

Gerard carefully inched closer to the edge and gazed into the volcano. The ground shuddered beneath him. Simply standing there felt like brushing against the sun. Heat scorched his skin and smoke stung his eyes, yet he forced himself to focus.

Far below, through the haze, a thin crack split the earth, letting out a faint red glow.

'Volkan,' he breathed as he stepped back.

'The Lord is stirring from his slumber,' said Vera. She drew in a slow breath. 'Soon we will all answer for our sins and return our lives to the one who granted them.'

Answer for our sins? A chill crept down Gerard's spine. 'What makes you say that?'

'Our people once lived elsewhere, before the Original Settlers came.'

Gerard raised a brow, wondering what she was getting at. 'They did. What of it?'

'Their third king, Willem Kroon,' said Vera. 'He drove us from our city and renamed it Circosia.' Her necklaces rattled as she stared into the crater. She looked unmoved by the heat and smoke as they danced around her like a morning breeze. She began to dance in circles, her arms waving with the smoke's movement. 'We came here and took Volkan's home. Now he reclaims what was once his.'

Hesitantly, Gerard closed his eyes and let Vera's words echo in his mind, guessing what the future might hold.

Dark and violent visions revealed themselves. The crack below splitting wide open, unleashing a storm of fire that would swallow Volkaania whole. The city crumbling, dragged into the burning depths of the volcano.

Gerard gasped, his eyes snapping open.

Vera's bare feet glided across the hot stone. 'Volkan's reckoning has only just begun. The grey smoke still dances. Our Lord is gathering his strength. When the time comes,' she raised her arms, her ashen fingertips curling upward as if they were bending around the fumes, 'a single trail of smoke shall rise.' Her body trembled and her arms folded inward. 'Smoke, red as blood. A signal. A mercy. A final moment to say goodbye.'

The hairs on Gerard's arms stood on end. He swallowed, his mind filling with images of men, women and children succumbing to fire and destruction. Everyone who lived here, including his own family, lost to the flames. The greatest tragedy since the flood that destroyed Veluwos.

He looked up at the churning sky. What kind of man would he be if he did nothing? A failure. Unworthy of the title he carried. No, he would not allow it. He would do everything in his power to prevent Volkan's wrath from destroying the people he loved.

'With all due respect, Shaman,' he said, his voice firm, 'we need to evacuate this city immediately. You have to tell everyone to leave.'

Vera pressed her fingers gently against his lips, silencing him. 'Our people will not abandon this sacred place,' she said.

Gerard lowered her hand and clasped his own together. 'Shaman Vera, you are the echo of Volkan,' he said, his voice turning into a plea. 'There must be a way to save them. Please. You *must* tell me.'

'Your fear honours them,' Vera said as her blank gaze drifted upward. Smoke swirled over her like an omen, looming as though death itself watched from above. Her gaze slowly floated down before it met Gerard's again. 'To interfere with Volkan's plan would be to deny his judgement.'

Gerard hesitated. What if Vera was right? Even Maarten had needed years of convincing before he dared leave the city, and he only did it for love. The people would never abandon Volkaania.

He exhaled slowly and bowed his head. 'Thank you for informing me, Shaman,' he said, his tone cold. 'I'll return to my family now.'

'It warms my heart that you have visited us again, Mayor Gunner. I hope you stay while you still can.'

'I'll consider it,' replied Gerard. He forced a faint smile, then turned and walked away from the crater.

The streets stretched out before him. His husband stood leaning against one of the black houses, looking at the falling ash, while their son was further down the street, once again entertaining a small crowd with his knives.

'How did it go?' asked Maarten, a frown creasing his face.

Gerard's gaze dropped to the ground as he came to a halt in front of him. Where would he even begin? With the news that the volcano was about to erupt? That Volkan would burn the city to ash? Or that Shaman Vera was refusing to evacuate? The weight of it all crashed down on him. He had to tell the love of his life that everything he had ever known was soon going to crumble.

Maarten stepped forward and wrapped his arms around him. 'It's bad, isn't it?' he whispered.

That's an understatement.

'Volkan... he's waking...' said Gerard.

Maarten pulled back slightly. 'What do you mean?'

Gerard took a deep breath, composing himself. 'Volkan is going to wake. And when he does, this city will burn.' He swallowed, forcing the words out. 'Few will survive. I suspect death might even reach the rest of the province.'

Maarten staggered back, shakily cupping his hand to his mouth. 'No,' he breathed. 'How long do we have? What... what do we do?'

'Vera told me we have until the red smoke rises from the volcano, which could be tomorrow for all I know. I suggested the evacuation of the city, but she said the people would never leave.'

'They would if *you* asked them to. You were once their leader. They trust your judgement.'

Gerard shook his head. 'Not above that of their shaman.'

'Then we'll find another way.'

'There isn't one, Maarten,' Gerard said. 'All we can do is prepare the rest of Vulkos. When the volcano erupts, they need to be far from here.'

Maarten wrapped his arms around Gerard and pulled him into a tight embrace. 'If you evacuate the rest of the province, Renz will hear of it. He'll punish you for diminishing his power. You know he will.'

'I know,' sighed Gerard. 'But what choice do I have?'

Silence settled between them as they held each other.

Maarten suddenly pulled away, his eyes widening. He glanced up at the swirling smoke, then back at Gerard. 'Wait... what about dragon energy?'

Gerard frowned. *Dragon energy?* There was a single dragon roaming in an isolated place called the Draken Sanctuary. Gerard had never seen the animal himself. He tapped his fingers, thinking back on the stories he'd heard when he was younger. The Deltadragon was powerful and ancient. In the days of old, she would aid the people of Hollandos whenever... Then it struck him.

'Disasters,' he gasped. 'The dragon can stop disasters.'

'Exactly!' said Maarten. 'Maybe her energy could seal the volcano.'

Gerard hesitated. 'Would it be enough to stop the eruption?'

Maarten shrugged. 'It's our best bet.'

Gerard nodded slowly. 'Volkaania might survive.'

'There's just one problem,' said Maarten. 'The dragon—'

'—is half a kingdom away and hasn't flown in over a century,' finished Gerard. 'Yeah, I know.'

Maarten exhaled shakily. 'So how are we supposed to get her here? It's impossible.'

'I don't know.'

'Should we tell the other mayors of Vulkos? Maybe they'll have a solution?'

'No.' Gerard's voice hardened. 'You said it yourself, Renz can't be trusted. The risk is too great. If word spreads to him, he will turn our destruction into his own spectacle. Let's pray he never finds out.' He took a deep breath and paused for a second. 'Maybe Magister Kenau can help us. As a wizard, she might know a way to make the dragon fly again, or to harness her powers.' Gerard sighed. 'But she's on the Council, just like Renz.'

'A wizard,' muttered Maarten. He scanned the street before his gaze settled on a woman conjuring flames for a small crowd nearby. 'You should talk to Cat.'

'You mean Catherine Carnelian?' Gerard frowned. 'Why her?'

'She's a great wizard, like Kenau. And she's not on the Council. She might know something, anything, that could help.'

Gerard shook his head. 'Knowing magic isn't the same as knowing an ancient dragon.'

Maarten ran a hand through his long hair as he shrugged. 'Maybe not. But it's the safest option we have.'

Gerard hesitated, then nodded. 'Alright.' He clenched his fist and looked up at the plume of smoke dancing above the city. It was up to him now to travel to Gravos and find a way to save his people. If that was even possible before the red smoke rose.

CHAPTER 1 - MAXIEM

PENDULUM CLOCK

Maxiem kept his eyes on the sand path, careful not to let the blindfolded Stars stumble. His hands rested lightly on her shoulders, guiding her forward. Step by step, he matched her pace, trying to steer them both onward.

‘Are we almost there?’ asked Stars.

‘Almost,’ said Bente. ‘Don’t take off the blindfold just yet.’

‘Can I trust Sunny not to throw me into a bush?’

‘Only one way to find out,’ Maxiemi said with a grin.

He glanced up, scanning the surroundings to make sure he was still going in the right direction. Luna and Bente walked beside him. The seventh of January had brought the cold back in full force, so Luna had wrapped herself in a long black velvet coat that accentuated her bright, freshly dyed cyan hair. Bente, in contrast, wore only a T-shirt and red shorts. Paired with her short auburn hair, she looked like she was living in mid-summer, as she did all year round. Both watched Stars expectantly, eager to see her reaction to her birthday surprise.

They followed the path until they reached the edge of a square pond, where Maxiemi gently let go of his girlfriend.

‘Where do you think we are?’ asked Bente.

Stars clasped her hands behind her back and inhaled deeply. ‘By my estimation, we’re about an hour and a half from Molenpoort.’

‘Wow. Yes. Correct.’

‘Are we in Amsterdam? Wait, no. The Hague?’

Maxiem smirked, impressed as always by his ever-so-smart girlfriend. ‘Do those magical abilities let you see through blindfolds or what?’

‘Where in The Hague?’ asked Luna playfully.

‘Let me think,’ said Stars. ‘We just left the highway, so we can’t be too deep into the city. Can you describe what you’re looking at?’

‘Well...’ began Maxiemi. ‘There’s this stone bridge right in front of us, with statues on it. It leads to a square brick house in the middle of a square pond. The roof’s grey and shaped like a pyramid. And there are ugly paintings of statues on the walls. Oh, and yellow shutters on the windows. Love that.’

Stars took a careful step forward. ‘Hofwijck,’ she breathed.

Maxiem leaned closer to his girlfriend and whispered, ‘Happy twenty-first birthday, my queen. You can take off the blindfold now.’

Her fingers slipped around the fabric and pulled it down. She gasped, staring at the building before her. 'No way.'

'Yes way,' said Maxièm. 'Like you've always wanted.'

'The Huygens Museum. How did you...?'

Maxièm shrugged, already counting the points he'd just earned with Stars. 'You always said you wanted to visit this dusty old place. We never got around to it. But lo and behold, here we are.'

'We are indeed,' she said softly.

Luna grabbed Stars's hand and pulled her sister across the stone bridge. 'Come on, let's see what's inside.'

Maxièm and Bente followed, hurrying over the bridge and into the traditional Dutch building. They slipped through the glass door and quickly shut it behind them, sealing out the cold.

The first thing Maxièm felt was disappointment. He had expected towering marble statues, maybe even a T-Rex skeleton. Instead, it felt more like they had wandered into someone's living room. Not nearly as cool as the grand museums in Amsterdam. It was just a small room with white walls, a wooden ceiling, and brick tiles for flooring. The only things Maxièm spotted on display were portrait paintings, some bizarre-looking contraptions, a piano, a table piled with fruit, and an old man standing behind it.

Maxièm studied the man. He wore a blue vest over a crisp grey shirt, and his face was lined with wrinkles that deepened his warm smile and accentuated the grey hair that clung to the sides of his otherwise bald head.

'Good morning,' the man greeted them. 'I spotted you four youngsters outside. What brings the mobile phone generation here on this beautiful winter's day?'

'Good morning, sir,' said Maxièm. 'I'm Sunny, and this is Luna, Bente, and the birthday girl, Stars.' He gestured toward her. 'She always wanted to visit. That's why we're here.'

Deep red spread across Stars's cheeks.

'Happy birthday, Stars,' said the man, adjusting his round glasses and tapping his name tag. 'My name's Bob. What a pleasure it is to welcome you here today. May I ask, do you know much about Constantijn Huygens?'

Stars stepped forward and nodded. 'I do. Constantijn lived in the seventeenth century, he was a masterful poet, and he also composed music and even created perfumes. All while serving as the secretary to two Princes of Orange.'

Bob placed a hand over his heart, his eyes widening. 'I'm very impressed. You're absolutely right. And now you're standing in his very home, which he designed himself. Can you believe it?'

'I know.' Stars beamed. 'Just like the gardens outside. And his second son lived here too, Christiaan. That man was a true genius. Discovering Saturn's rings, improving the telescope, inventing the pendulum clock... I could go on and on.'

‘So could I,’ Bob said. ‘How nice to meet a fellow admirer.’

Maxiem drifted through the room, their conversation fading into background noise. There was only so much admiration he could muster for long-dead dudes treated like they were the coolest superheroes in the Netherlands. Even cleaning up his room felt more exciting than learning boring old facts.

He wandered into the next room, where bookcases sagged under the weight of ancient tomes. He stared, baffled as to why these guys had spent countless hours writing them instead of drinking beer and enjoying pancakes with the people they loved.

‘Are you coming, Sunny?’ Stars called from behind him.

He hurried back into the first room, slipping past the beaming Bob, and followed the others upstairs. They climbed a creaking spiral staircase until they reached the first floor of Constantijn’s house.

Stars sprang to life like a wind-up doll. She explained that everything on this floor revolved around Constantijn Huygens himself, jumping from display to display and rattling off a list of facts about each one.

After the impromptu lecture, Luna and Bente lingered by a scale model of the museum in the centre, while Stars led Maxiemi into the next room. They stopped before a row of vertically stacked television screens, text scrolling over the monitors like digital pieces of parchment.

Maxiem tapped his foot. He was bored out of his mind; he despised museums. But it was his girlfriend’s birthday, so he forced himself to try and care. His eyes locked onto the archaic Dutch text as it crawled across the screens while a voice-over translated it.

Do I dream, and is it night, or has my Stars vanished?

I wake, and it is broad daylight, yet I see my Stars no more.

O heavens, you who forbid me her countenance,

Speak in human tongue, and tell me, where has my Stars gone?

He let out a chuckle, thinking about this ancient guy writing about his *Stars*, like he had a girlfriend with the same name. The poem went on and on, until at last the screen faded to black and a line of stark white text appeared:

Cupido dissolvi. Op de dood van Sterre.

‘To the death of Stars?’ Maxiemi muttered, reading the Dutch text out loud. ‘Well, that’s not a nice thing to say on your birthday.’

Stars laughed as she crossed her arms. ‘Not exactly.’

‘I’ll file a complaint with your friend Bob.’

They turned to face a portrait of Christiaan Huygens: a young man with a clean-shaven face and thick, shoulder-length brown curls.

Maxiem quickly scanned the painting before turning back to Stars with a broad smile. 'So, what do you think of your birthday present, my queen?'

Her fingers intertwined with his. 'I love it. It's a perfect start to the year.'

'The year you'll become the best wizard Hollandos has ever seen.'

'As if.' Stars sighed. 'I haven't exactly been practicing my spells.'

'You've read that magic book—'

'Tinka's advanced spellbook?'

'Yeah, that one. You've read it at least ten times since we got back. And that was, what, less than two months ago?'

'Feels like two years.'

'I'm sure you'll be just fine, my queen.'

A nervous smile crept across Stars's face. 'I'm going to miss you so much. But I also can't wait to actually use what I've learned.' She took his hand. 'Just one more night before I go back to Hollandos. Are you sure you don't want me to stay and help with Frank?'

'I'm a hundred percent sure.' Maxiemi gave her a thumbs up. 'We'll be A-okay. And once Dad's healthy again, doing cartwheels across the restaurant floor, I'll join you. You can count on that.'

'Thank you, Sunshine. I really appreciate it.'

Maxiem's muscles tightened. His thoughts drifted back to his father. He'd been sick for a long time now, barely able to keep the restaurant afloat. Going to Hollandos wasn't an option, not yet. Maxiemi had to help his dad and Uncle Lex run the place.

The chemo will work, he told himself. It has to.

'Don't mention it,' said Maxiemi. 'He's already getting better, and he's going to crush the next round of chemo. I give it...' He tapped his chin and looked upward. 'Until the first of March. About a month and a half. I'm certain Dad will be completely fine by then, and I'll be back with you and Tinka.'

'Frank being healthy and you joining me at the academy,' said Stars softly. 'I can't wait.'

'And I know Luna and Bente will be back by then, too. With or without that kidnapped princess.'

Stars frowned. 'Do you really think it's a good idea to send them off alone? What if Princess Emma is somewhere dangerous? When she spoke to us via the Zevenmill, she said the place was infested with pirates. What if they capture them and lock them up too?'

Maxiem squeezed her hand. 'Hey. We've been over this. Your sister and Bente will find Emma using that scroll thing, sneak in, get her out, and bring her back to the King.' He grinned. 'Easy peasy, lemon squeezy.'

‘And if things go wrong,’ said Luna as she and Bente joined them, ‘Bente has Heldefire.’ Luna looked proudly at her girlfriend before clasping her hand. ‘Right, Muffin?’

‘Right,’ she answered hesitantly. Bente’s free hand fidgeted with a loose thread on her t-shirt as she glanced at Luna with unease. Bente had grown quieter lately. And the closer tomorrow came, the more anxious she seemed.

Luna smiled softly. ‘I believe in you,’ she whispered. She turned to her sister. ‘We won’t take risks. You can trust us.’

Stars released Maxièm and hugged Luna. ‘Save Emma. Bring her back to Amstos. Then come find me.’

‘That’s the plan.’

‘Great!’ said Maxièm. ‘Now, enough talking. Let’s see if the next floor has cooler things than this one.’

They returned to the spiral staircase and climbed up to the attic. Maxièm nearly knocked his head against a low wooden beam as he stepped inside. He scanned the room. Plastic planets hung from the ceiling, and strange inventions stood scattered across the space, waiting to be tested.

‘The telescope,’ said Stars, already moving toward a wooden instrument in the corner by the window. She cupped her hands around the tube and peered through the eyepiece. ‘Did you guys know Christiaan Huygens perfected it?’

Luna stood beside her and looked down at the telescope. ‘How?’

‘Trilobites,’ Stars said softly.

‘Trilobites?’ Maxièm chuckled as he wandered closer. ‘Those horseshoe-looking things?’

‘Yes.’ Stars placed her finger on the telescope and traced the length of the tube. ‘Light travels through here and narrows as it passes through the lenses inside. That’s what lets you see distant objects clearly. Christiaan realised that if the light converged at a single point, it would increase the distance a telescope could zoom in on.’

‘Okay... but what does that have to do with trilobites?’

‘Their eyes,’ said Stars. ‘Christiaan calculated that shaping the glass into a wave pattern – the exact same shape found in trilobite eyes – was way more effective. It focused the light far more efficiently, bringing it to a precise point.’

Maxièm nodded as if it all made perfect sense, while privately deciding that trilobites were the strangest inspiration for a telescope imaginable. He ran a hand through his blond hair as Stars moved on to a steampunk pendulum clock encased in glass. In a way, he was grateful this Christiaan guy had improved stargazing. But for his next invention? Less so. Stars’s obvious interest in the timepiece meant another lecture was on the horizon.

Bente and Luna stood beside Stars, while Maxièm lingered behind them, doing his best to stay engaged.

'The pendulum clock,' Stars began excitedly. 'Christiaan invented it in the year 1656...'

The words dissolved into noise. Maxièm's gaze slowly drifted up to the ceiling, where he started counting the hanging planets, one by one, as her voice blurred into the background.

'Sunshine?' said Stars. 'What do you think of the clock? Isn't it amazing?'

Maxièm's attention snapped back to Stars. 'You mean that one?' he asked, adjusting his glasses and pointing at the clock. 'I think it's freaking awesome. You know, with that little stick swinging forever.'

'The pendulum,' Stars corrected him. 'It's a pendulum swing attached to an anchor. With every swing, the anchor advances a gear. The energy the pendulum loses is replenished by the gear, so it swings forever.'

'Exactly what I was thinking. Amazing.'

'What a brilliant man,' said Luna.

'Me?' asked Maxièm. 'Or Christiaan?'

Luna's lips curved into a subtle smile, not dignifying his question with an answer. Stars simply rolled her eyes.

After what felt like an eternity of explanations about the pendulum clock and Christiaan's other inventions, they made their way back down the creaking wooden stairs. They said their goodbyes to Bob, thanking him for his knowledge and hospitality, before exiting the museum.

Maxièm was relieved to be outside again. Stars, meanwhile, was over the moon to have finally seen Hofwijck and all the wonders it held. She talked nonstop about the Huygens family as they drove back toward Molenpoort.

Their first stop was Villa Roodhof, as Bente's father, Marcus Roodhof, liked to call it. Maxièm, Luna, and Stars stayed safely in the car while Bente walked inside to grab her beat-up scarlet armour and obsidian sword, Heldefire.

Maxièm rested his head on his palm, staring at the front door. A few minutes passed before Bente reappeared, her mother's raised voice following her out the door. Bente stalked over to the car, Barbara watching her with a sour expression. She tossed her armour in the boot while muttering irritably beneath her breath, then crashed into the back seat beside Luna.

'Let's go,' commanded Bente.

Maxièm glanced at Bente in the rear-view mirror. She had her sword gripped tightly between her knees, and her face burned an angry red. Luna was trying to catch her eye, but Bente kept her gaze on Heldefire's hilt. Maxièm gritted his teeth as he started the engine and pulled away from the house.

'They're just concerned about you,' said Luna softly. 'But they have nothing to worry about.'

'Don't they?' asked Bente. 'After everything we told them, the fights, Prince Viktor, Mister Kopper... Dad still refuses to believe Hollandos even exists. And Mum...' She

exhaled. 'She was right to question me after I finally convinced her it was real. What *was* I thinking? Trusting some old man in a world I'd never seen and jumping into his wagon? I could've disappeared without a trace. I was just lucky Mister Kopper turned out to be kind. But Viktor is a whole other subject. He almost killed us all.' Bente choked up. 'He...'

'He didn't kill me,' Luna finished.

'I can't go through that again,' Bente went on. 'I should just stay here.'

'Then who's going to be the Knight of Molenpoort?' said Maxiemi. 'She's the one who's supposed to protect Hollandos from evil princes, despite the dangers.'

'Like anyone needs me,' replied Bente. 'I haven't exactly defeated any bad guys. I couldn't even kill Viktor when I had the chance. I'm not a knight, not even close.'

'You *are* a knight, Bente,' said Luna, squeezing her girlfriend's hand. 'And Princess Emma needs you.'

'Why? Half a year ago we didn't even know Hollandos existed. Why would we risk our lives for some kingdom beyond a mill, to save some princess we don't know? Why would we care what the king does there?'

'Because,' said Luna, 'you've seen what he's like. He doesn't care about Hollandos.'

Stars looked over her shoulder. 'Frederick didn't stop Viktor, and he let his own people starve while he sat comfortably in his palace. He'll just keep pushing his own agenda and ruin Hollandos. Emma is the only viable heir left to ensure that doesn't happen. We have to rescue her, and make sure the Seven Stars bless someone who *does* care about Hollandos.'

'Like he's ever going to give up his crown,' said Maxiemi. 'Even without the blessing, he'll find a way to rule. I'm sure of it.'

'You're right, he won't,' agreed Stars. 'But if the people see Emma being blessed, they might force Frederick to give up his position.' She looked at Bente. 'We need to save her. I wish I could come with you both, but classes are starting soon, and I'm already late. Bente, if you really don't want to go, I understand. You can stay here while Luna and I go to the academy. I'll talk to Professor Gardena, see if I can delay my lessons so we can rescue the princess together. How does that sound?'

Maxiemi glanced at the mirror again. Bente had her head bowed over Heldefire's hilt. He recognised the indecisive look on her face; it was one she'd been wearing more often lately. Her eyes peeked over the hilt and met Luna's, who was staring at her like she was silently begging Bente to come with her.

'Fine... I'll go,' murmured Bente. 'But once we bring Emma back, I'm done fighting.'

'Thank you,' said Luna softly.

Maxiemi chuckled. 'Freddy gone, and Emma bringing the provinces together as a fantastic queen. I love that idea.'

Silence settled over the car and stayed there until they reached Luna and Stars's mother's house on the outskirts of Molenpoort.

Maxiem parked at the edge of the neighbouring forest and they all got out. The cosy wooden house was painted entirely black, and Ilona had nicknamed it the *Black Asteroid*. He hadn't been here as often as he would've liked these past two years because he was too busy helping at the restaurant. The sight of it filled him with a sense of warmth and familiarity. He had spent so many good days here watching movies with Stars that it had started to feel like a second home.

'Quickly!' Ilona called from the doorway. Her brown hair and black dress swayed in the wind. 'The cold air is already getting in.'

They hurried along the muddy path and slipped inside, Ilona shutting the door behind them.

The light of hundreds of candles flickered within, fighting back the oncoming dark of the evening and illuminating the mismatched furniture. It lit the stars that hung from the ceiling and the many plants that covered the wooden floor, including her special collection of monstera. Lavender incense drifted through the air, wrapping around Maxiemi like a fond embrace. The smell made him smile broadly.

'Hey, Mum,' said Stars.

'My baby Stars,' Ilona cooed, pulling her oldest daughter into a fierce hug. 'For twenty-one years, I've been lucky enough to call myself a mother to such a beautiful child. Congratulations on your birthday.'

Stars held her mum just as tightly. 'And I've been lucky to call you my mum,' she said softly. 'Thank you, Mum.'

Ilona squeezed her once more before walking over to Luna and wrapping her in an even tighter embrace. 'And you too. Congratulations on your big sister.'

'Thanks,' mumbled Luna as she was squashed in her mother's arms.

Ilona turned to Maxiemi and Bente and hugged them both warmly too, as she always did. 'Welcome, Sunny and Bente.' She stepped back and clapped her hands once. 'Now, who's ready for my famous vegetable soup?'

Stars beamed. 'Yes, please!'

They gathered around the small coffee table, settling into a circle. Just as they sat down, a knock sounded at the door. It was Cosmo, Luna and Stars's father, a tall and slender man with an ever-present gentle smile.

He stepped inside, wishing his oldest daughter a happy birthday as he joined them at the table. Maxiemi watched Cosmo and Ilona in admiration. The ease between them felt rare. They had been divorced since before he met them, and if Stars hadn't told him, he would never have guessed. To Maxiemi, they seemed like a much better match than Bente's still-married parents, which was both amusing and a little sad.

The soup arrived, accompanied by freshly baked flatbread, both of which disappeared in no time, burning a few mouths along the way.

Cosmo and Ilona gifted Stars a pair of earrings that perfectly matched the necklace Maxiemi had given her last year. Almost as if they'd planned it together all along,

which, knowing Ilona, she probably had. She'd suggested that necklace to Maxiém, after all. He had simply bought it and taken the credit.

The night grew dark outside the windows. With warm cups of lemongrass tea and slices of apricot pie in hand, they settled into calm conversation.

Ilona's gaze lingered on Stars. 'So, you're really going back to Hollandos tomorrow,' she said. 'I still can't quite believe it. It's exciting, but it worries me too. You and little Luna...'

'I'll look after Luun,' replied Stars. Her fingers laced together as her gaze dropped to the table, avoiding her mother's eyes. 'I'll keep her out of trouble, just like last time we visited. I made sure she wasn't anywhere near Viktor when we fought him.'

Luna squeezed her sister's hand and looked at their mother. 'Thanks for being okay with us going again.'

'I didn't hesitate for a second,' Ilona said firmly.

'She did,' Cosmo murmured with a playful grin. He chuckled, then quickly covered his mouth. 'A lot.'

Ilona jabbed her elbow into his side. 'Shh.'

'Luun will be fine, Mum,' said Stars. 'You know the plan.'

'I do,' Ilona nodded. 'You, Bente, and Luna are going to the Starfall Academy. You'll start your second year of magic school, and they'll learn more about Hollandos. Just... keep an eye on her.'

Cosmo rested a hand on Ilona's shoulder. 'They came back safe last time. I'm certain they will again.'

Ilona drew a slow breath. 'I know,' she said, tears welling in her eyes. 'I'm just going to miss you both. More than I care to admit.'

Luna and Stars got up and wrapped their mother in a warm embrace. 'We love you, Mum,' they said in unison.

'And I love you both,' replied Ilona, her voice breaking.

'The way you two talk about Hollandos,' said Cosmo, 'it almost sounds unreal.'

Ilona let go of her daughters and glanced at him, her expression dimming.

'I know it's probably impossible,' Cosmo continued, 'but imagine if you found a way to adjust the mill's power so we could visit too.'

'I can't promise anything,' said Stars. 'But I can try. Maybe Magister Kenau could reconfigure its magic, or I can find another way to bring you there.'

'Kenau...' Ilona repeated slowly. 'The Magister.' She paused. 'Be careful around her. People like that, powerful people, they often believe they're right, even when they're not. Always trust your instincts. Even if someone like her tells you otherwise.'

Cosmo chuckled. 'Except your mum, of course. She's always right.'

‘Correct,’ said Ilona with a nod. ‘Which is exactly why I don’t want any of you, or Kenau, tampering with that mill. I don’t want you getting stuck there again. We’ll stay right here and wait for you to come back.’

‘We won’t tamper with the mill,’ promised Stars. ‘And we’ll be back before you know it.’

A soft smile spread across Ilona’s face. ‘I look forward to it.’

A heaviness hung over the rest of the evening, as if everyone felt the weight of what was coming. Ilona and Cosmo would miss their daughters. Luna would miss her sister. And Maxièm would miss Stars. Even Bente admitted she was going to miss her chaotic family. Still, they made the most of what time remained.

Bente and Luna stayed at Ilona’s, planning to sleep there and prepare for their journey in the morning. Stars said her goodbyes to her parents, choosing instead to spend one last night with Maxièm at Madeline’s Pancakes. A night he probably needed even more than she did, though he’d never admit it.

The following morning, Frank and Maxièm stood outside Madeline’s Pancakes, watching the morning dew slowly evaporate off the cars. Mirroring the print on Maxièm’s shirt, the sun had begun to rise, casting a soft glow across their faces. Stars was finishing her packing upstairs. Books, clothes, make-up, toiletries, and a plethora of other stuff that she had jotted down on her list. Everything she needed for a year in Hollandos.

‘You sure you don’t want to go with her?’ asked Frank, his voice as rough as ever.

A cold breeze swept past, tugging at Maxièm’s bright yellow shirt. He shoved his hands into his pockets and stared at the quiet street, his thoughts racing, before finally looking at his father.

His condition was getting harder to ignore. Leaning on his cane, Frank looked thinner and frailer than ever. Despite being bundled up in a thick brown coat, he shivered with cold. Still, he tried his very best to give Maxièm a warm smile.

‘I...’ Maxièm swallowed. ‘I’m sure. I want to stay here for now. To spend time with you and help out at the restaurant.’ His gaze drifted away again, and his voice wavered. ‘Besides, Stars has lessons to attend. I don’t want to distract her.’

‘Thanks, son. I know it’s not easy to stay here, but I appreciate it,’ Frank smiled. ‘Still... hearing about your escapades in Hollandos was so cool. You really went on a grand adventure.’ He put his hand to his mouth and coughed. ‘Wouldn’t it be great to go on another?’

Not as great as seeing you beat that cancer, thought Maxièm.

‘I guess it would,’ he forced himself to say.

‘I’m already feeling better, you know,’ Frank continued. ‘Soon, Uncle Lex will be enough help at the restaurant. Then you should go back to Hollandos, and to Stars.’

Maxiem looked at his dad, his body tensing. 'I'd like that. Maybe... maybe one day we'll find a way to bring you there too. I could show you all the things I've seen. Give you a special Hollandos tour. Maybe even discover a magical cure to patch you up.'

Frank's face lit up. 'My son, showing me a whole new world.' He slung an arm around Maxiemi and shook with laughter. 'Sunny, I'd like nothing more than that.'

Behind them, the door opened. Maxiemi turned and looked at the figure that emerged. Stars wore a purple top and jeans, and had a massive rucksack strapped to her back, stuffed to the brim. If she claimed she'd transformed into a turtle, Maxiemi would've believed her.

'My queen,' he said. 'Are you ready?'

She nodded. 'More than ever.'

Frank stepped forward and pulled her into a warm hug. 'I still can't believe you're actually going to study magic after all these years of reading about it. I couldn't be prouder of you, Stars.'

'Thank you,' replied Stars, her eyes shimmering. 'I'm going to miss this place. I always feel at home here, and I already can't wait to come back.'

'You *are* home here,' said Frank. 'Madeline's Pancakes is yours just as much as it is mine or Sunny's.'

Stars smiled. 'I really hope you get better soon.'

'I will,' Frank said firmly. 'I'm going to beat this. You can count on that.' He glanced at Maxiemi and coughed. 'And in the meantime, I'll make certain your man gets ready for his return to Hollandos. Right?'

Maxiem snapped into a salute. 'Yes, Lord Daddington. Once you're back doing cartwheels, I'll be on my merry way.'

'Good.' Frank tapped his cane against the pavement. 'Now go on, Stars. Show them which wizard took down Prince Viktor.'

They hugged him goodbye, then Maxiemi took Stars's bag and together they set off toward the park.

A chill laced the morning air, and the trees stood barren and colourless. Maxiemi held Stars's hand tightly. Two entire months. He'd never been away from her for so long. Walking through Molenpoort with her now made everything feel brighter. Like the town was holding onto this last moment with them.

'Frank seems quite optimistic about the treatment,' said Stars, glancing at him. 'That's a good thing.'

'I guess so,' replied Maxiemi.

'No, really,' she insisted. 'A positive mindset can change...'

'Any outcome,' Maxiemi cut in. 'I know.' He looked ahead and drew in a slow, deep breath before forcing a smile. 'Anyway... you're going back to the one and only

Starfall Academy. Think you can still recite those seven trees? The ones with the impossible names?’

Stars raised an eyebrow, studying him for a moment before a smile broke through. ‘Are you questioning my knowledge?’

Maxiem grinned. ‘Just testing it.’

After she recited the trees without faltering, Maxiemi asked about the professors, then the elements. Her enthusiasm made him smile, the expression only fading when the Zevenmill appeared on the horizon.

Bente and Luna were already waiting in front of the magical structure that had first sent them to Hollandos. Bente stood with her hand resting on Heldefire’s hilt, clad in her battle-worn scarlet armour. Luna, in contrast to her girlfriend, looked like she was ready to blend in with the pirates already, wearing a black dress, leggings, heavy knee-high boots, and several chokers and pendants, the outfit topped off with a long coat and shoulder bag.

‘Was it really necessary to leave this early?’ grumbled Bente.

‘The Starfall Academy is quite a journey from the mill,’ replied Stars. ‘I’d rather arrive before nightfall.’

Luna looked at Bente. ‘Also, we don’t have a place to sleep yet.’

‘Whereas I’ll be back in bed in about fifteen minutes,’ said Maxiemi, forcing a weak chuckle.

Stars stepped toward the mill and glanced up at its sails before turning back to the others. ‘Bente, Luun, did you leave all your electronics at home?’

‘Yep,’ said Bente. ‘Trust me, I can’t afford another fried phone.’

‘Good. And you’ve packed everything you need?’

Luna tugged on her bag strap. ‘Everything we need. Including the Lodescroll. And I brought extra hair dye this time.’ She looked at Bente and reached for her hand. ‘And I have my courageous girlfriend by my side.’

Bente grinned softly.

‘Alright,’ Stars said. ‘Then it’s finally time to go.’

‘Good luck, Knight of Molenpoort,’ said Maxiemi as he fist-bumped Bente. ‘And you too, Luna Zilveryn, the Navigator.’

Bente and Luna both wished him luck in return, then turned and approached the mill. Carefully, they opened the door and stepped inside.

Stars turned to Maxiemi and pulled him into a tight embrace. ‘I don’t want to miss you, Sunshine,’ she whispered.

Maxiem felt his stomach turn. ‘Believe me, I don’t want to miss you either.’ His voice faltered. ‘But I’ll be back with you soon. The first of March, not a day later. Deal?’

‘Deal.’ Tears spilled freely down Stars’s cheeks. ‘Not a day later.’

Seeing the love of his life cry sent a shockwave through his body. Tears ran down his own cheeks. The thought of being without her felt unbearable.

'After you finish school, we could get engaged, then married,' blurted Maxièm. 'Maybe have a child.' He shook his head. 'Sorry. I'm getting ahead of myself.'

She chuckled through her tears. 'Or two.'

Maxièm's eyes lit up, a smile now gracing his face. 'Or three. Whatever you want, my queen. We'll bring our parents over to Hollandos. I could open my own pancake restaurant at the academy, and you'll be the new Magister. Magister Stars. It has a nice ring to it.'

'I'd love nothing more than that,' said Stars.

They slowly pulled apart, staring into each other's eyes for what felt like an eternity. Her deep brown irises looked like pools of magic all on their own. Maxièm could have lost himself in them forever. He brushed his thumb along her cheek, wiping away her tears.

'Go,' he whispered. 'The academy's waiting for you.'

Stars hugged him one last time, then stepped back. 'I love you so much, Sunshine. I hope Frank gets better soon. And I hope I'm holding you again as soon as possible.'

'You will be. Before you know it.'

'I know I will.'

It felt like a lifetime passed as Stars slowly turned and walked over to the mill. At the doorway, she hesitated, glancing over her shoulder one final time before stepping inside and closing the door.

'Stars...' Maxièm's voice broke. His glasses fogged up, and his fingers curled into fists as he looked at the closed door. 'No...' he muttered. He swallowed, dashing over to the door and grabbing the handle. 'Stars... don't go.'

His hand trembled, unable to decide whether to open the door. What if something happened to her? What if she hated him for not joining her? Or she achieved success and he wasn't there to cheer her on?

'I'll be with you soon,' he whispered. He had to believe that.

Slowly, he lifted his hand from the handle. As he looked up, he saw light seeping from the mill's crevices. Stars, Bente, and Luna were gone. Off to Hollandos.

And he was left behind in Molenpoort. Alone.