

FIONA DIXON

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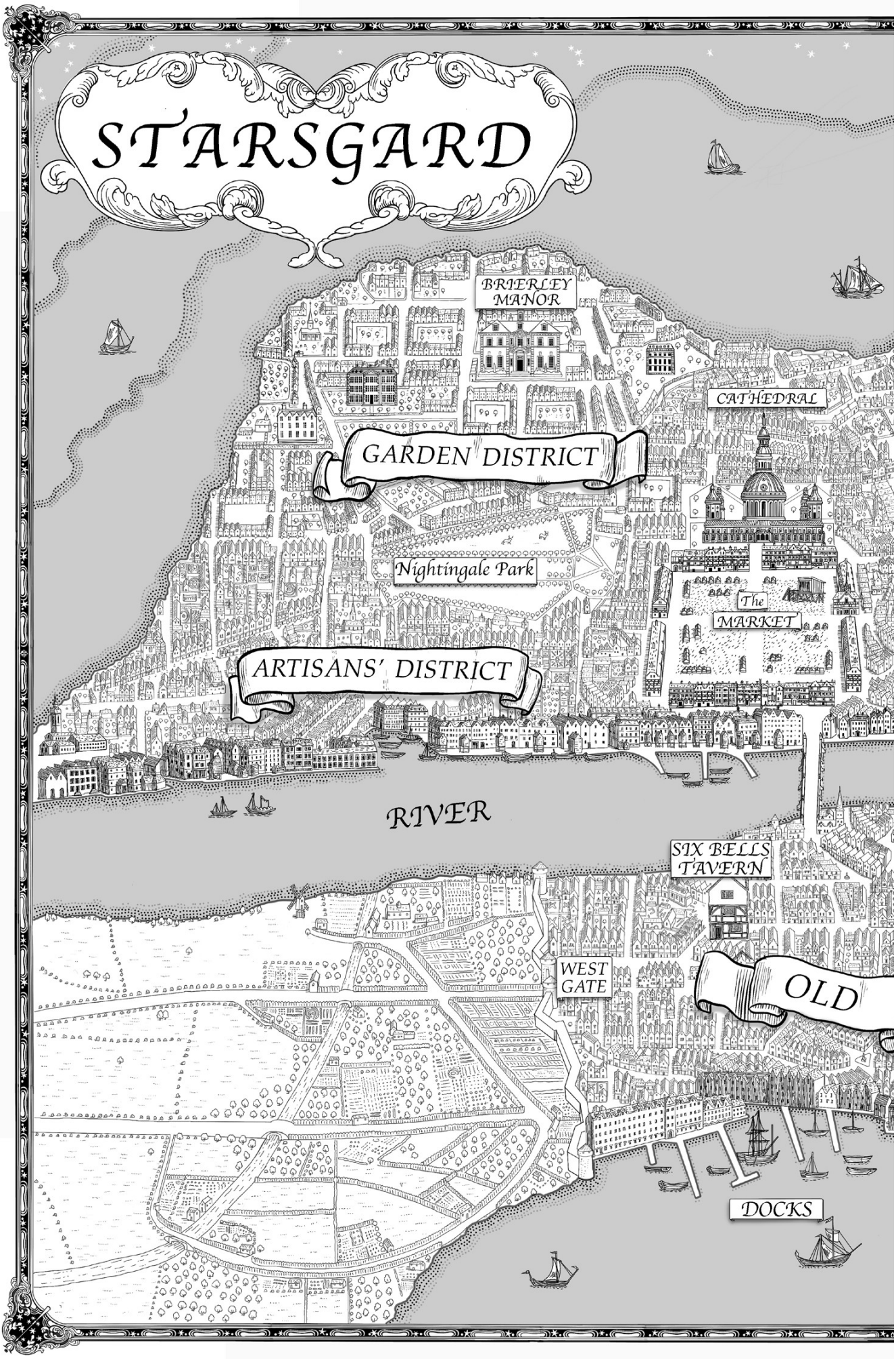
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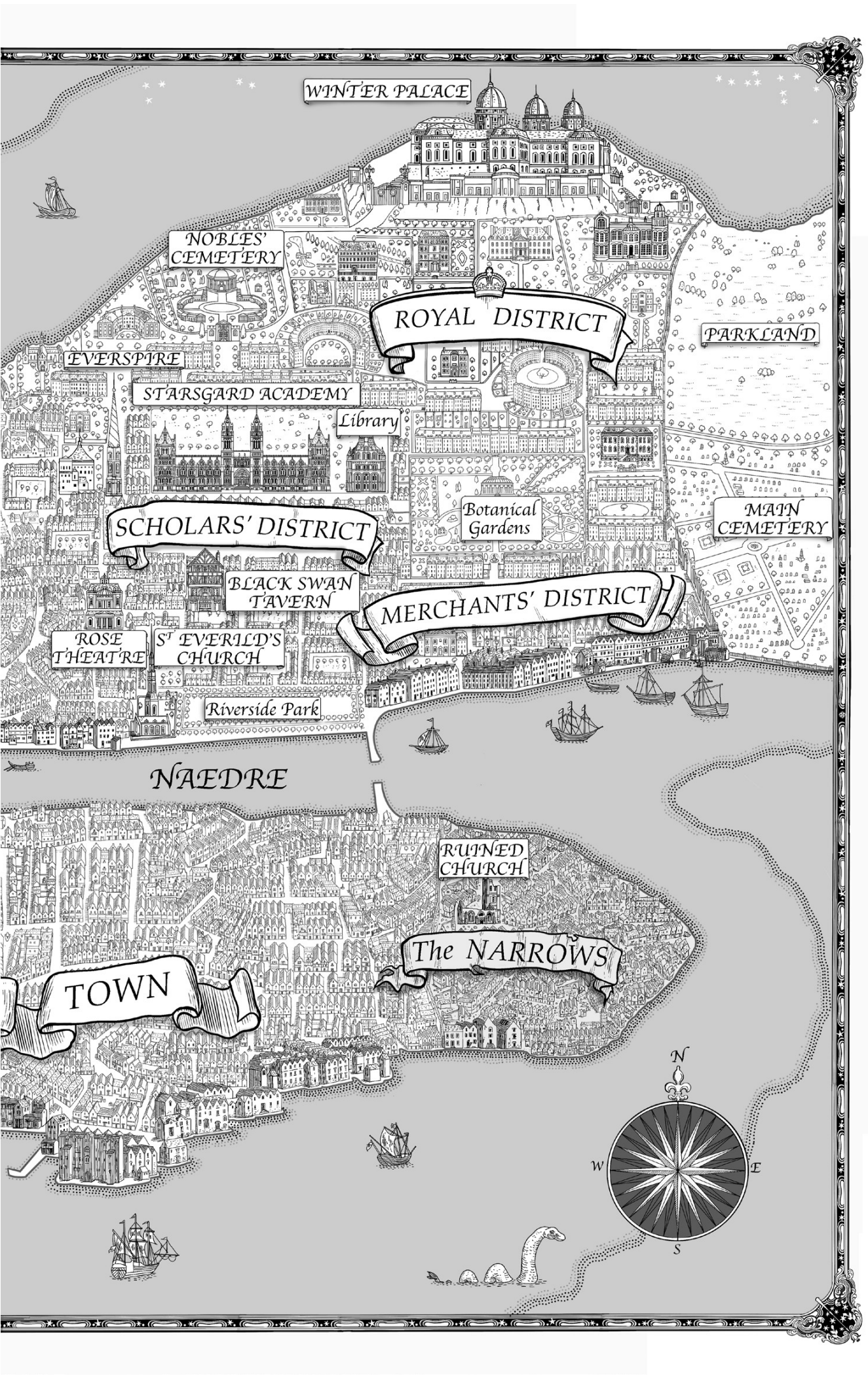
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For my parents, who lit the fire of my imagination.

And for Nick, for all the stories and worlds we've shared,
and all those to come.


STARSGARD
BRIERLEY MANOR
CATHEDRAL
GARDEN DISTRICT
Nightingale Park
The MARKET
ARTISANS' DISTRICT
RIVER
SIX BELLS TAVERN
WEST GATE
OLD
DOCKS


WINTER PALACE
NOBLES' CEMETERY
ROYAL DISTRICT
PARKLAND
EVERSPIRE
STARSGARD ACADEMY
Library
SCHOLARS' DISTRICT
Botanical Gardens
MAIN CEMETERY
BLACK SWAN TAVERN
MERCHANTS' DISTRICT
ROSE THEATRE
ST EVERILD'S CHURCH
Riverside Park
NAEDRE
RUINED CHURCH
The NARROWS
TOWN
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The Arrival of Oros

Twenty-six days until All Souls' Eve

From the top of the cathedral, Starsgard spread out below Crow like a map. To the north was the Winter Palace, its domed towers gilded by the last of the evening light. The Market, the beating heart of the city, was immediately below. Across the river was Old Town – a labyrinth of streets and alleys sweeping down towards the docks.

He could just make out the huge white sails of the ships that clustered in the harbour like a flock of birds. Traders from the neighbouring countries and as far away as Jaish and the Southern Isles came to sell their wares in Starsgard, bringing everything from livestock and grain to rum, spices and jewel-coloured silks.

Crow leaned down and grasped Jonas's hand, pulling him on to the roof.

Sal scrambled up after them, her face flushed. 'What are we doing up here anyway?'

'Shh, just watch. It's starting.'

A faint blush spread through the purple-grey of the clouds. The three of them sat on the rooftop and watched the sun sink towards the horizon. Coral pink, burnt orange and deep red streaked across the sky.

A smile crept across Sal's face. 'I've never seen a sunset like this before.'

Crow stole a glance at his two best friends. Sal's dark blonde hair hung down her back in an untidy plait. She had a thin white scar on her chin from a fight a couple of years ago and a smattering of freckles across her nose. Jonas had light brown skin, with close-cropped hair and an ever-present glint of mischief in his eyes.

The rooftops became silhouetted as the light began to fade. Lamps across the city glowed like fireflies. Except in one area. In the south-east of the city there was a small patch of darkness.

The Narrows.

It was where, fifteen years ago, the plague had first broken out in Starsgard. In an effort to curtail the disease, the city militia had walled up the whole area. It had been deserted ever since the quarantine was lifted. Crow shuddered.

'Everything looks so different up here.' Jonas stood up to get a better view.

'Look – you can see the Night Market,' Sal murmured.

Down below them, the evening traders were setting up, and a crowd had gathered in the main square, ready for the evening's performances.

'Follow me,' Crow said. He walked along the ridge to the bell tower, slipping between the pillars. There was a sudden fizz as he struck a match and a candle flared into life.

An old, faded blanket covered the stone flags. Jonas whipped it off with a flourish. 'Ta-da!'

Sal's eyes widened as she took in the feast. Laid out on sackcloth were a loaf of freshly baked bread, a wedge of cheese, boiled eggs, a meat pie, a bunch of grapes and bottles of ginger cordial.

Crow pulled a package out of his backpack, revealing a small cake topped with lemon-yellow icing and sugared almonds. 'It's a bit squashed, but it still tastes good,' he said, licking icing off his fingers.

'What's all this?' Sal asked.

Crow shrugged. 'Call it an early name day celebration.'

Sal's cheeks pinked. 'But my name day's not for another week.'

'It wouldn't be a surprise if you were expecting it.' Jonas grinned. He leaned over to Crow and whispered, 'I think she likes it.'

Crow couldn't help grinning back; Jonas's enthusiasm was infectious. He sat down cross-legged on the blanket and uncorked a bottle of cordial. 'Come on, let's eat.'

‘Where did you two get all this from?’ Sal slid a knife from her belt and cut a piece of soft cheese, wrapping it in bread then shoving it into her mouth.

Crow picked up a boiled egg and started peeling off the shell. ‘Here and there.’

Sal took a slice of the pie. ‘Mmm.’ Her eyes lit up, and crumbs sprayed as she spoke. ‘You’ve got to try this. It’s so good.’ She passed Crow and Jonas a piece each.

The pie was no longer hot but it was still delicious. Sausage meat flavoured with apple and sage stuffing encased in buttery pastry melted on Crow’s tongue. It had made a dent in the coin they had stashed away, but it was worth every copper to see the delight on Sal’s face.

Crow glanced at the sky and something in his chest fluttered. There it was, just as predicted.

Sal followed Crow’s gaze. ‘Is that the comet?’ She sprang to her feet, moving to the edge of the tower. ‘Show me.’

Crow stood behind Sal and pointed up at the stars. ‘You see the Giant?’ It was one of the easiest constellations to spot, with three bright stars in a row that made up the Giant’s Club. ‘Then move a little to the right until you come to the Dragon. The comet’s just below the tip of the Dragon’s wing.’

‘That’s what everyone’s talking about?’

‘Oros the Changebringer. The astronomers say it’s only visible every seventy-five years or so,’ said Jonas. ‘Apparently it will become brighter and brighter the closer it gets to us – which for this cycle of the comet’s orbit falls on All Souls’ Day. After that, it starts moving away again.’ He pulled a

piece of paper from his pocket and unfolded it, revealing neatly drawn diagrams and calculations. 'Look – here's Eortha and the moon. And this is Oros's orbit round the sun. It goes right out beyond Tiw,' he explained, pointing to the furthest planet in the solar system.

Crow shivered. By the time it reached this point in its journey again he'd be eighty-seven – if by some miracle he managed to live that long. 'How do you know so much about it?' he asked Jonas.

'I might have sneaked into one of the astronomy lectures in the Academy this morning.'

'Again?' Sal rolled her eyes. 'One of these days they're going to catch you.'

Jonas shrugged. 'They haven't yet. And besides, how else am I going to learn?'

Sal reached over and cut another slice of cheese. 'Old Alfric was ranting about the comet in the Market earlier. He gathered quite a crowd.' She waved her arms and spoke in a quavering voice. '*Look to the skies. Doom is coming!*'

Crow laughed. 'The fortune-tellers have been busy ever since Oros appeared.' He looked up at the comet again, his heart banging against his ribs. The arrival of Oros marked the start of a month of festivities. Most people in Starsgard believed the comet heralded the dawn of a new age, although there were a few, like Old Alfric, who saw it as an ill omen. Banners and flags depicting Oros – a fiery orange sphere – now hung from many houses and shops, giving the city a celebratory air.

The rhythmic sound of drums drew Crow's attention back to the Market below. Performers dressed in red and orange embroidered with gold thread carried a papier mâché comet with a long, billowing silk tail out on to a stage and began to sway in a sinuous, rippling motion. Fire eaters weaved in and out of the tail, belching flame, which made it look as though the comet was alight. Crow's nose wrinkled as the scent of sulphur drifted towards them.

Sal whistled. 'Would you look at that!'

A hush fell over them as they watched the show from their rooftop eyrie. When the performance ended it was as if a spell had been lifted. Applause rippled through the crowd.

'That was incredible,' said Crow, his dark eyes dancing.

'We had the best view from up here too,' Sal said.

'So who wants cake?' Jonas asked, cutting three large slices without waiting for an answer.

The cake disappeared in seconds.

Crow licked crumbs from his lips and cleared his throat. 'Do you still think about leaving Starsgard?'

Sal's eyes sparkled. 'Of course.'

Crow glanced at Jonas and raised an eyebrow.

'You know I do.'

'So how about it?'

'You're serious?' Jonas ran a hand over his cropped hair. 'You know what Yarrick would do to us if we got caught.'

They'd talked about getting out of the underworld for as long as they could remember. But once you were part of

the Reavers, there were only two ways out: escape or death. The corner of Crow's mouth turned up in a wry smile as he remembered a rumour of a third option: find a patron to buy out your contract with the Reavers. But that was nothing more than wishful thinking – he'd never heard of anyone that had actually happened to. And besides, who would want to take on a street rat?

Their only option was to find a way out of Starsgard and run as fast and as far as they could. They'd already tried – and failed – to escape once. Crow winced, thinking about the beating they'd got when they'd been caught trying to stow away on a ship bound for the Southern Isles. They hadn't been able to sit down for days. He remembered what Yarrick had said would happen if they ever attempted it again: *I will hunt you down, no matter how long it takes, and then I'll inflict more pain on you than you could imagine possible.*

But they'd always held on to the hope that, someday, they'd manage to escape. When things were at their worst, they'd say to each other, 'Someday.' That was enough to keep the hope alive.

'We were kids then. We're older, better prepared now.' Crow thought about the coin they had stashed away in nooks and crannies all over the city. Never too much in one spot. They'd learned that lesson the hard way. His dark eyes glowed as he spoke. 'Can you imagine it? Free to do whatever we want? We could work our passage; find somewhere we'd be safe.'

Sal looked out across the city, then exhaled loudly. 'What do you have in mind?'

Crow paced the tower. 'All we'd need is one big score, then we'd have enough to get out of here.'

Sal whistled. 'A job off the books? That's a big risk, Crow.' The Reavers ran the underworld, and all high-value jobs were sanctioned by one of the Reaver bosses, like Yarrick, who took the lion's share of the proceeds. Many of the jobs that Crow, Sal and Jonas did were dangerous, but at least they had the backing of the Reavers.

'Not if we do it right.' Crow had been thinking about it for months, running through scenarios in his mind. His words tumbled out in a rush. 'Now that Yarrick's made Jed captain, things are worse than ever.'

Sal picked at the skin round her fingernails. 'When?'

'All Souls' Eve.' Crow sprang up to the ledge, his tattered coat fluttering behind him like feathers. 'The festivities should provide enough distraction for us to get away.' On All Souls' Eve, everyone was masked and the streets were crowded with revellers.

'That's less than a month away.' Sal twisted her braid round the end of her finger.

Crow could practically hear the cogs whirring in her brain as she tried to figure things out. The seconds seemed to stretch out into hours.

Finally she took a deep breath. 'You're right. It's the best chance we'll get.'

‘So you’re in?’ Crow couldn’t keep the smile from his face.

Sal smiled back. ‘I’m in.’

‘Jonas?’ They both turned to look at their friend.

Jonas ran his lucky copper penny back and forth across his knuckles. Then he grinned. ‘I’ll miss this city.’

Crow jumped down and threw his arm round Jonas’s shoulders. ‘Me too.’

Starsgard was the only home any of them had known. He knew what he was suggesting meant leaving everything they’d ever known behind – and he had no idea what would come next.

A lump rose in his throat as he thought about the evenings they’d spent at the Market, scraping together their coin to buy spiced tea and cinnamon cakes to share while they watched performances. Memories flickered through his mind like a magic lantern show: the boisterous camaraderie of the stallholders, most of whom he’d known his entire life; long winter nights clustered round the fire at the Six Bells scaring each other silly with ghost stories; the rooftop eyries that he’d made his own. But leaving the city was the only way to get out of the underworld. The only way for them to have a chance of a better life.

‘Does that mean . . . ?’ Sal asked.

‘Let’s do it.’ Jonas thrust his fist out. ‘All or nothing.’

Crow and Sal bumped their fists against Jonas’s. ‘All or nothing,’ they echoed.