

Chapter 1

I entered the unfamiliar group of trees, looking over my shoulder to see if Liam had changed his mind. As I watched the shimmering door close behind me and disappear, I wasn't surprised or upset he'd chosen to stay. Learning from his example, I abandoned all further thought of him and moved forward into the unknown.

This realm looks similar enough.

I approached a clearing and exited the trees.

Or... not.

A group of large buildings sprawled before me for as far as I could see. I'd never seen so many tall structures. I slowly descended the stone steps that were wedged into the hill on which I stood, drawn forward by wonder. People shouted greetings at each other while they bustled along cobbled roads and in and out of buildings. Horse hooves clapped on the stones as they pulled carriages and carts toward unknown destinations.

A dark mass moved overhead, blackening the sky. I crouched, covering my head and neck, and prepared for impact. When nothing happened, I peeked up at the flying ship, held aloft by a curious floating bubble. After determining it wasn't in danger of falling on me, I followed the ship from the ground as it traveled above the buildings.

Fascinated, I peered through shop windows. There were all manner of wares: clothes, food, and shiny metal devices that moved by themselves.

Because I kept stopping to look into windows, I had to run to keep the flying ship in sight. It landed in a field, which contained a series of wooden platforms with other ships docked at them. A door opened in the side of the hull, creating a ramp where humans disembarked and began unloading boxes. I studied the flying ship, mesmerized. The bubble seemed to be made of cloth. A table near the dock had a sign that read: *Hiring Crew.*

Perfect. A moving target is difficult to find. I have no confidence she'll leave me be just because I'm a realm away.

I approached the table, and a burly man looked up from his papers.

"Name?" he asked gruffly.

"Ember."

"Ember..." He trailed off like it wasn't enough.

Of course he doesn't know me by just my first name. Well, I certainly can't give him my clan and branch information.

"Ember Otherkin." I smiled inwardly at my private joke.

"Have you ever worked on a merchant airship before, Ember Otherkin?" He squinted at me skeptically.

"No, but I'm useful to have around," I said with confidence.

He continued to eye me, unsure. "What're your skills?"

"I'm a good fighter, fast and strong."

"We don't have much need for fighters. How're you at climbing?"

"I have good balance and can hold my own weight plus more."

"Great. You can be our new rigger."

He handed me a piece of paper with the details of my contract. I signed it, and he stamped it.

"Report back at dawn," he said, shaking my hand.

I guess I have time to kill before we leave. I had no human money, but I wandered around the nearby shops. I'll be living here from now on. I need to be able to fit in.

I looked at my reflection in a shop window. Self-conscious, I checked to make sure my dark hair covered the tips of my pointed ears. *I suppose I'm passably human. If Helena hadn't stripped my magic before banishing me, I could easily cover my ears with a glamour.*

I clenched my fists and teeth, digging my fingernails into my palms to squelch my need to punch something. A scuffling sound came from an alley to the left. Curious, I investigated. Two large men held a young man by the arms while another hit him repeatedly. The slight youth's blond head slumped on his chest. The assailant grabbed his hair and lifted his face up to strike him again. The blood streaming from his nose glistened in the dim light. A cut marred his pale cheek, and one eye looked painfully swollen.

I smiled to myself. *It looks like I'll get to relieve my anger after all.*

They didn't see me coming. I took out the attacker first, sweeping his legs from under him. The other two dropped their prey, and he went down hard. I had expected some satisfaction from the fight, but they didn't provide. After a few well-placed punches and kicks, they fled the alley.

Novices.

I approached the young man and rolled him to his back. I checked his pulse, and it beat hard and strong.

Now what do I do with him?

His eyes fluttered open and focused on me. He sat up quickly. The movement made him unsteady, and his head fell toward the ground. *Whoa!* I caught him before he cracked his skull. Meeting my eyes, he smiled weakly.

"Thank you," he whispered.

He sat up slowly the second time and pulled a handkerchief from his pocket. Trying to wipe the blood from his face, he smeared it across his cheek. I sighed internally as I watched and snatched the rag from him to wipe his face properly.

"Why did they beat you?" I asked as he winced while I cleaned his face.

He shrugged. "When I asked them for food, they told me to give them money. I guess they were angry I didn't have any."

I looked at him more closely. His clothes hung loosely on his slight frame. In between the bruises and scrapes, his skin was pallid. I handed him the handkerchief and removed my pack. My hand found the bread I'd taken before leaving Faerie, and I passed it to him. He devoured it like he hadn't eaten in days.

I stood to leave, and he rose to go with me, wobbling a little at the knees. I turned a cold stare on him that said, "Do not follow me." He didn't seem to notice and shadowed me anyway.

"Well, goodbye," I said at the mouth of the alley.

"Take me with you."

"No."

"Please."

"No."

"I won't be a burden."

"You're already a burden."

“My name is Reilley. What’s yours?”

“Go away.” I left, but he kept pace with me. *This is why I don’t help people.*

Though his face was battered, he smiled cheerfully. “Where are we going?”

“I don’t know where *you’re* going, but it’s not with me.”

He continued to pursue me, undeterred.

Finally, I turned on him. “Why’re you following me?”

He flinched at my harsh tone, and his smile faltered. “I want to go with you,” he murmured, his green eyes pleading.

Shit. “Look, you can’t go with me. I sail with a merchant airship tomorrow.”

“You work on an airship? Can I see it?”

He smiled innocently, and I let out an exasperated sigh.

“Fine. But after I show you, will you go your own way?”

He nodded enthusiastically, so I sighed again and motioned for him to follow me.

We marched to the dock, and I pointed to the airship.

“There. You saw it. Now, you can go.”

He ignored me and stared at the ship with sparkling eyes. Reilley’s gaze found the recruiter still sitting at the table, and he dashed toward him. Seeing his purpose, I rushed after him. He’d reached the burly man before I could catch him.

“Name?”

“Reilley Nai,” he panted, trying to catch his breath.

“What’re your skills?”

“I’m a great cook.”

He took in Reilley’s hungry appearance. “What’s your experience?”

“I grew up working at my parents’ inn. I often helped in the kitchen.”

“We do need another cook...” he mumbled. “All right, kid, how old are you?”

“Twenty-two.”

We both looked at him with raised eyebrows. *We’re that close to the same age? He looks so young.*

“Let me see your papers.” The recruiter held out his hand, squinting at him with a hard mouth.

Reilley shuffled his feet. “They burned when the inn caught fire.”

“Then, I need your parents to sign permission, stating your age.”

He looked down and answered quietly. “My parents were lost in the fire, too.”

The burly man gave him a heavy nod and turned to me. “Otherkin, take Nai to Records and bring me proof he’s twenty-two.”

I opened my mouth to protest. *I really need this job.* “Aye, Sir,” I ground out.

Reilley bounced with joy as we left the dock.

“Where’s Records?” I asked Reilley. *I don’t know anything about this place.*

“Near City Hall, but it’ll be closing soon.”

We hurried through the crowded streets while trying not to bump into too many people. A trail of annoyed protests followed in our wake. One vegetable stall vendor let out a particularly colorful string of curses when Reilley knocked into his cabbages. My heart sped up when I looked over my shoulder and saw he was chasing us. I let out a breathy laugh when he settled for throwing a cabbage after us.

Records turned out to be a small room with a polished wood floor. The walls were off-white and featured portraits of greying men who stared stonily at everyone who

entered their domain. We stepped up to a tall, orderly desk, and the neat man sitting behind it looked over his spectacles at us.

“We need proof of age,” I told him.

“Name?”

“Reilley Nai.”

“Place of birth?”

I looked at Reilley.

“Sutton,” he responded.

“Year of birth?”

“1995.”

Has that much time passed in the human realm? Time really does flow differently in Faerie.

The man nodded and pulled a tube, which jutted from the wall, toward him. “Proof of age, Sutton, 1995, Nai, Reilley,” he pronounced into the tube. “Please step aside.” He motioned us to wait.

After a while, a clicking came from the doorway behind the counter. It grew louder, and a cart with wheels attached to two metal bars affixed to the floor appeared. It had a large key on the side that slowly spun as it moved, and it stopped behind the counter. The man in spectacles took a volume from the cart and opened it to a marked page.

“Yes, Nai, Reilley. Born March 5, 1995 in Sutton to Mr. James Nai and Mrs. Mary Nai, née Sheffield. All is in order.” He made a note on a piece of paper and stamped it. Then, he handed it to Reilley. They locked the door behind us as we left Records.

Returning to the dock, we didn’t find the recruiter. We approached the ship and asked the guard where he’d gone.

“Mr. Brewster has retired for the evening.”

“He asked us to bring him proof of age,” I explained.

“Ember and Reilley?” the guard asked.

We nodded. He knocked on the side of the hull, and the hatch opened. We climbed into the cargo hold. A man on the inside closed the hatch behind us.

“We have something for Mr. Brewster,” I told the sandy-haired man who’d closed the hatch.

“New recruits, eh?” He sized us up.

I nodded, squinting at him hard as he eyed me.

“Welcome aboard. I’m Shy.” He held out his hand.

“Ember.” I shook his hand firmly.

“Hey, Shy. I’m Reilley.” Reilley smiled brightly.

I glanced sideways at Reilley’s upbeat demeanor. *His cheerfulness is a little irksome.*

We followed Shy through the packed cargo hold. Reaching a steep flight of stairs, we climbed up to the next deck. A long hallway stretched before us with doors on either side.

“This is the quarterdeck. Mr. Brewster is the first mate.” He knocked on a door on the right, and Mr. Brewster stuck his head out.

“What is it, Masters?”

“Recruits to see you, Sir.” Shy stepped aside, so Brewster could see us.

Reilley handed him the paper. The first mate read it and nodded.

“Come in and sign your contract.” He opened the door to reveal a cramped but cozy room with no personal possessions in sight. The bed, table, and chair were standard size,

but I had a difficult time imagining Brewster fitting into them. A shelf with books and rolled maps looked well organized and frequently used.

Reilley signed the contract, and Brewster stamped it.

As he was about to dismiss us, Reilley asked, “Mr. Brewster, Sir, may I stay on board tonight? I don’t have anywhere else to sleep.”

Brewster stared stone-faced and grunted. “Fine. Masters, show them to their bunks. Unless you’re leaving for the night, Otherkin?”

“No, Sir.”

He nodded and shoed us from the room.

“What jobs were you given?” Shy asked as he shut Brewster’s door.

“Cook,” Reilley said brightly.

“Rigger.”

Shy’s smile faltered a little, and I narrowed my eyes.

We followed Shy as he walked farther down the hall. Turning left, the room opened into a kitchen and mess hall.

“Reilley, you’ll share a bunk with Willie, the other cook.” Shy pointed to a door to the left. I thought Reilley would go to his bunk, but he continued to follow us as we walked back to the main hall. At the end, we took stairs to the next deck.

“As you can see, this is engineering.”

Men and women dashed around the room, gleaming with sweat and smudged with black smears. The fires burned low. A large furnace at the center of the room had a thick chimney leading from it into the ceiling. Some people were moving piles of what looked like coal, while others tended a huge machine. It consisted of a number of large metal coils attached to gears. Some of the coils were wound tight while others were loose. The gears attached to the coils were meshed with gears that had magnets on them. Ropes, made of a material I couldn’t identify, were threaded through the center of the magnet gears.

We passed through engineering and climbed to the main deck. The wooden deck sprawled before us. The chimney from engineering came up through the floor and reached toward the cloth bubble above us.

Shy pointed to a cabin on the left. “That’s where you’ll bunk with the rest of the deckhands, Ember. I still have inventory to do. I trust you both can get settled?” He disappeared below deck.

I walked toward the cabin, and Reilley followed.

“I wish we were bunking together, Ember,” he said, slumping his shoulders. I didn’t respond and entered the cabin, shutting the door in his face.