



PROLOGUE

Five Years Ago

BRILLIANT LIGHT FLASHED ACROSS THE NIGHT SKY, leaving a trail of stardust in its wake. In the watchtower below, a man had been waiting for just such a sight. He and a small boy bundled up, yanking on fur-lined boots, wool gloves, and hats.

“Take my hand,” Tirin said to his son, and they marched out into the snowy woods.

Stardust glimmered on the icy snowdrifts, marking their path toward the fallen star. The boy sniffled, and Tirin patted his shoulder.

“Soon you’ll see, Kyro. This is how we will honor your mother. It’s as if she’s right here with us.” Every brush of the

wind on Tirin's face whispered his wife's name. But all Kyro felt was the cold.

They moved swiftly through the tall, leafless trees with spindly arms clawing toward the sky. When Kyro tripped into a snowdrift, Tirin fished him out and lifted him onto his shoulders. Above them, the stars hung brightly on their dark canvas.

"Look, they smile on us," Tirin said.

They can't replace her, Kyro thought.

The glittering trail grew brighter the farther they went, and up ahead, the top of a hill glowed like a beacon. Tirin broke into a run, then set his son down at the top. A crater lay before them, and inside it was the source of the light, the reason for their journey in the middle of the night.

Gentle warmth poured from the fallen star. Tirin dropped to his knees and whispered his wife's name—*Sanna*—like a last breath. Already the star's light had begun to fade around the edges of its old burlap casing. Tirin scooped it up.

"All it needs is a little love, and it will be good as new," he said. Without taking his eyes off the star, he began the trek back to their watchtower. Kyro trundled after him, colder than before without his father's hand to hold.

When they reached the tower, Tirin set the star on his worktable, brushing aside the cogs and bits from his clockmaker's trade. Kyro stood beside him, unable to contain his curiosity as his father sliced open the frayed burlap case and pulled out

the heart of the dying star. It was a strange, molten thing, with light leaking out over its curves. His father gently set it into the new case he had worked so hard to design, one that would be sturdier and last longer. These new cases were made from glass and metal with hooks built into the design and angled just right to catch on the edges of the sky.

“When the Seven Elders first hung the stars, Kyro, they placed them in burlap because it’s durable and the light could shine through. Now”—he patted his newly made glass casing—“they will shine brighter than ever.”

Satisfied, Tirin picked up two tokens from the worktable—a handkerchief embroidered with the letter *S* and a small mass of gears that turned and beat in the shape of a heart—and placed them inside the casing too. Kyro frowned as he held up his own token. His father had shown him how the gears worked before his mother died, and he had managed to cobble together a token that resembled his terrier puppy, Cypher, complete with a wagging tail and cogs for ears. He set it on the other side of the star’s heart, then shoved his trembling hands in his pockets.

Tirin smiled at Kyro and closed the case. Off they went back out into the snow. This time, they did not have far to go. The catapult they used to send the stars back into the sky stood at the edge of their yard. Kyro’s father carefully placed the star into the sling. He let Kyro press the red button, and the gears began to whirl and whine. The noise grew louder and faster

until suddenly the star was flung toward the heavens. Father and son stood by watching, waiting.

The star sailed higher and higher. A little to the west of the watchtower, it stuck on the sky and twinkled as it settled into place in a silent *thank you*.

Tirin put his hands on Kyro's shoulders and led him back inside.

“Now every night when the stars hang over our heads, our family will be together again.”



CHAPTER ONE

“PLEASE, FATHER, LET ME GO THIS TIME,” KYRO SAID. HIS father had been a Star Shepherd for five years now, and still he had not let Kyro retrieve a fallen star on his own. But over the past few months he’d been doing his best to wear down his father’s resolve.

Tirin began to object, but Kyro had already leapt up and grabbed the starglass goggles on the worktable. “It fell close by. I’ll only be gone a short while, I promise,” Kyro pleaded.

His father’s objection died on his lips. “All right, since it’s close. Take Cypher with you. And be sure not to drop the star on the way back!” But by then he was talking to thin

air. Kyro and his dog were already out the door and racing through the woods.

Kyro adjusted the goggles as he ran, searching for the tell-tale heat waves from starlight that signified the location of the fallen object. The lenses were crafted by the Star Shepherd Council from stars that had fallen into the sea and went out before they could be saved. The Council oversaw the watch-towers scattered across the lands, and the Star Shepherds reported back to them every year. In return, the Council provided their home and money for food, star casings, and equipment like the goggles.

The cool night air rushed over Kyro's limbs while he and Cypher tore past the trees, dodging branches and jumping over low bushes in a burst of exhilaration. The night might have been dark and overcast, but Kyro could understand what his father saw in shepherding stars.

If only his father didn't take the whole thing so seriously. Kyro had been ready to go out on his own for months. His father didn't trust him to do it, but he'd prove he could tonight. Maybe then his father would share other things with Kyro, like the clockmaking he had shown him before his mother had died and they moved to the outskirts of Drenn. Maybe their house would feel more like a home and not just a place where Tirin slept during the day.

Cypher barked, bringing Kyro's attention to the glowing

crater nearly concealed by low brush up ahead. Excitement shivered through him. The fallen star was waiting.

He angled toward the crater and knelt down to scoop up the star. Awe filled him. His mother came from a line of Star Shepherds, and she used to tell him bedtime stories. His favorite ones were about the history of the stars. Hung from hooks fastened to the sky centuries ago by the Seven Elders, the stars eventually wore out and fell. When the world first formed, the night was filled with unspeakable horrors that thrived in the darkness. The Seven Elders made the ultimate sacrifice and gave their hearts to the sky in the form of the seven Elder Stars. They shone brightly, creating a wide net of light with beams connecting star to star, pushing the evil back into the dark corners of the world where the light could not touch them. As the people grew in number, many made the same offering, until the sky was filled with thousands of gleaming stars. But the art of giving one's heart to the sky and the secret technology of the Seven Elders died out after many years. Though all of the stars were important, the Elder Stars were the strongest. As long as they hung, the world would never succumb to darkness again.

Now a star was resting in Kyro's hands. The soft glow pulsed, and for a moment something stirred inside him. He must return it to the skies. Here on the ground, fallen stars were a long way from the Elders' magic, and when the sun rose, it would sever their connection to that magic and they'd sputter out.

With the burlap case nestled in his arms, he made his way back to the watchtower more cautiously than the journey through the woods. If he dropped such precious cargo, his father would never trust him again.

But when Cypher began to growl, his sharp terrier ears flattened back, Kyro came to a stop. The shadows were deep in this part of the woods. The trees' branches, always reaching toward the sky, seemed like they had wrapped the night itself around their trunks.

"What is it, boy?" Kyro peered at the forest. Gooseflesh broke out on his arms. The air had grown colder since he first set out. It felt like the middle of the night, but he didn't think he'd been away that long.

He ignored the fear breathing down his neck, and started home again. With every step, the chill deepened. Soon his breath was turning to frost on the air. He glanced at the clouds. The stars peeked through here and there, but they didn't seem to threaten a storm.

Uneasiness slid over his shoulders like a cold hand. His mother's words, long gone, still rang in his ears: *The stars held back horrible creatures that lived in the shadows.*

Kyro know not everyone believed the stories of the Star Shepherds, but Kyro's mother had insisted they were real. She had been so certain that he couldn't help believing too.

"Let's go, Cypher." Kyro quickened his pace. The trees



teemed with more shadows than ever before. From the corner of his eyes, the darkness crept over his field of vision. The shadows began to take shape up ahead. Something tall and dark and, most of all, cold.

The figure moved toward Kyro, the ground frosting over as it passed. Without thinking, Kyro held up the star like a shield, the light of the molten orb inside seeping out through a jagged tear in its case. The shadow reared and backed away, leaving nothing but ice and darkness in its wake.

Kyro shivered and his dog whined at his side. He patted Cypher on the head, his heart pounding in his chest. His mother had given names to dark creatures who would wish him harm: vissla, wraiths of shadow whose desire was to extinguish all the light in the universe; the spider-like vritrax; scaly zin-trins, and many others, all bent on darkening the world. They had haunted his dreams when he was little. Maybe when this star fell, a vissla had escaped. All the more reason to get it back in the sky quickly. “Let’s hope we never see anything like that again,” he said to Cypher, who still growled in the direction the shadow had gone. Kyro clutched the star more tightly to his chest.

I better not tell Father, Kyro thought. If I do, he’ll use it as an excuse to never let me retrieve a star again.



When Kyro reached the watchtower, Tirin was pacing by the workbench. His father checked the clock and sighed. The hands edged closer to morning, but they had plenty of time to return the star to its place in the sky.

“Come, come, hurry, my boy,” his father said.

Kyro set the star on the table, and his father sliced the burlap open. The new glass and steel case was ready and waiting to house the ebbing star.

Every time Kyro saw a living star, it took his breath away. This one shimmered like liquid silver but was as light as a handful of feathers. It was impossible to know exactly how old they were. According to the legends, hundreds of years at least.

His father settled the star into place and snapped the latch on the case. A silence had overcome him, as it often did lately. He cradled the star in his arms and hurried outside without a word. Not a single “Well done, son” or “Let’s send it back to the sky together.”

Disappointment settled over Kyro as he followed his father to the catapult. Tirin already had the star in the sling and the gears turning in preparation to launch. At first, his father had always let Kyro press the red button that sent the stars soaring into the heavens.

Now, he rarely waited for him.

His father pressed the button, and as Kyro reached his side, he heard him whisper. “It’s beautiful. Just like you, Sanna.”

He straightened up when he realized Kyro stood next to him. He patted his son on the head, then returned to the watchtower, watching as the star rocketed away.

When his father had first begun shepherding stars, it had filled him with purpose. But gradually it seemed to make things worse. Once, he had told Kyro that he wished the magic of the Seven Elders had survived. Then Sanna could have lived eternally, her heart given to become a star. But that magic had long faded from all living memory, and now each star was a reminder that while Tirin could save them, he hadn't been able to save his wife.

Kyro missed her too, every single day. His father never noticed that. Instead, he slept, hidden from the sun, and spent every night up in the watchtower, his gaze glued to the stars. He never bothered to make little clockwork toys anymore.

Kyro's hands balled into tight fists while he watched the star soar until it found its resting place in the sky. Cypher licked his hand and nudged his master's leg to go back inside.

Only the stars mattered to his father now. Nothing Kyro tried would change that.