



ANTONIUS  
AND THE  
ZODIACS



DAHLIA ORNELAS

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# ANTONIUS AND THE ZODIACS

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**FOR ELLEANA, BECAUSE SISTERHOOD IS  
JUST AS STRONG AS BROTHERHOOD.**

**FOR NIKKI, THE FIRST TO JOIN  
NAIAS ON HIS ADVENTURE.**





PART ONE

THE  
BOOK







# ONE



## THE NIGHT OF STARS

### NAIAS

A sky full of stars welcomed Naias back to the Temples. It was probably the only welcome he'd get on a night like this.

He docked his flying skiff, securing it in the shadows of the surrounding ships, hoping it would be enough to stay unnoticed. The docks were silent, barring the creaking wood as the ships bobbed in the air. All the workers had ended their shifts early, he assumed, before the sun even set, to prepare for the night's festivities.

Lights dazzled from the Center Temple Square, where the Night of Stars festival took place, the very location Naias would make his way to. Where he'd find the Book of Sky Diamonds and fulfill his end of the bargain.

Tonight was the most convenient night to steal the Book—the one holiday when the Living Stories sealed inside it were celebrated. The only night the Book was publicly displayed. It was just a shame



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the night also happened to be his birthday, and the tenth anniversary of his greatest mistake.

Ten years ago tonight, Naias had been banished, all because of one mistake that took place at the Center Temple Square. The Temples felt so foreign to him now, as he pondered his meager life. Instead of being home, Naias spent his time wondering what home was like.

He remembered that first night of his banishment, how he stood at the magic barrier, hand pressed against it. Tears streamed down his face as he continuously whispered to the Stars, to himself, to anyone who could hear him, “I swear on her Stars, I’ll be back. I’ll come back home.”

He let out a shuddering breath as he stepped foot on the floating Temples at last. “I told you I’d be back,” Naias whispered, but he couldn’t say he’d returned home.

Dread filled him, and he sucked in a deep breath of forest-free crisp air—the air of the high skies. He’d dreamt of this moment for years, but he never expected it to feel like this—like a mistake.

Swallowing hard, Naias continued walking off the wooden dock, following the paved path and small crowds that led to the Center Temple Square. *Don’t look back*, he scolded himself. *Don’t think about the Below*.

So instead, he thought about the item he was about to steal. The Book of Sky Diamonds.

It was a simple request, but only for someone as estranged from the Temples as Naias. Though he didn’t get to ask Cypress for her opinion on it, he still accepted the offer. Not that there was much of a choice, really. It was either accept Patron Ignauq’s deal or suffer the consequences, and frankly, Naias had suffered his limit of consequences.

He’d always admired the Book of Sky Diamonds because of its magic that contained the Living Stories—his heroes. The stories sealed inside that Book were what put the stars in the night sky; heroes who once lived, forever remembered as constellations. Ever since Ma first told him their stories as a child, the Stars had always been his inspiration.



The Book itself acted as a lifesource for the People of the Sky, which was why it was one of the most protected and sacred objects on the Temples. Guilt swam through his veins, sending a shudder down his spine. Stealing the Book, one of his favorite things about the Temples, and the People's most prized possession, was probably the most sacrilegious thing he could ever do. Not only betraying his heritage but, in a way, also betraying himself.

The moment he laid fingers on that Book, Naias would be a traitor. But could anyone blame him? After so much time away, this was his first and only chance at ever seeing the Temples again. Besides, the People of the Sky betrayed him ten years ago with his banishment. He wasn't going to waste his time grieving the same people who lacked remorse.

He just hoped a risk like this would be worth it in the end.

Finally reaching the Center Temple Square, Naias gasped at the sight of the festival. String lights, dangling from rooftops and lamp-posts, glowed a dim yellow over crowds of people. Banners swayed with the gentle wind, and medleys fluttered through the air into his ears. People danced and laughed and indulged in sweets. Candles and incense burned on altars as people left their prayers and offerings for the Stars.

Laughter buzzed in his ears, and children ran by, some using their flying abilities—the same kind Naias used to have—to play a game of füt. Another group of children gathered with their cloud-herder instructor, prepping for their light show that would take place after the BookKeeper's presentation. His mind spiraled into flashbacks. He was nine years old again, participating in the light show before everything went wrong. Before he *fell*.

His heart skipped a beat, and he swallowed hard. Everything was just like he remembered. Everything and everyone looked so happy and *normal*. His absence went completely unnoticed. Not that it should have been noticed. But the realization still stung, reminding him that he never really mattered.

It was all here, except for the Book of Sky Diamonds. The BookKeeper, Giuseppe, was likely leading his procession through each island. In the meantime, a pedestal stood on the main stage, waiting



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to carry the Book for the remainder of the night. His eyes lingered on the two thrones that also stood on the stage. One was empty, and had been empty longer than Naias had been alive. To its left, Patron Leonis sat, adorned in her sky-blue robes and silver jewelry. A stiff smile was plastered on her face, but Naias noticed the tears welled in her eyes as she watched the celebrations. Her left arm stretched over to the empty throne beside her, hand resting on the armrest where her lover's hand would be, if he were still here.

A council member stepped up to her side, and her waves of curly hair bounced as she turned to hear his message. Whatever he'd whispered caused her to straighten in her seat. Her smile flattened into a thin line. She swept her eyes across the crowds, as if looking for someone. Naias stepped behind a totem, hiding before she could see him. Holding his breath, Naias peeked out from behind the totem. Leonis was staring straight at him, eyes narrowed and brows furrowed. Recognition didn't seem to strike her, and she whispered back to the council member before dropping her gaze to the empty seat beside her.

With a sigh, Naias backed away, bumping into a few people gathered around a stone well—the stone well that carried sacred water known as Zaurak's Tears. His fingers brushed against the rocks, and shame immediately rushed through him. He didn't deserve to touch these stones, just like he never deserved to touch the water inside the well ten years ago.

This was where it all began. His banishment. After one stupid mistake that could never be fixed. He gnawed on his lip, trying to ignore his shame and the disgust he felt for himself.

*Leonis cursed me*, a voice growled from deep down. He glanced back at the Patron, who still sat forlorn and distant. Everyone here admired her, cheered for their creator. But not Naias. How could he, when she was the one who ripped him away from all the love he ever knew? The pain and fear she'd forced upon him bubbled at the back of his throat.

He shut his eyes, took a deep breath. He forced himself to walk away from the well, leaving his anger behind.

Bells chimed, announcing the BookKeeper's arrival. The entire festival stilled, heads turning in the Book's direction. Even Leonis paid the procession all her attention, standing with her hands folded behind her back.

Naias recognized the old BookKeeper. Despite the years, he hadn't seemed to change. He held the Book above his head, lips moving as he repeated a cantation. Fluffs of grey hair contrasted with his brown skin, and a pair of round glasses rested atop his large nose. He wore the same formal robe Naias remembered—dark blue with gold and silver trimmings. Silver wisps traced throughout the fabric, representing the magical flow of the constellations. The young man walking beside him wore much simpler robes, though they still emanated the same glow the Book itself provided. He walked self-consciously, casting glances at the surrounding crowds. Something about the dark brown curls atop his head and the scowl on his face felt . . . familiar.

Naias pushed past the crowd, trying to get closer, hoping he'd be able to place a name to that face. He was so focused on the young man, he almost didn't notice the angry glares everyone burned into the young man's robes.

When they finally stopped their procession and stood on the dais beside Leonis, Giuseppe placed the Book on the pedestal. The moment the young man stood beside the pedestal, his demeanor changed, shame weighing down his features.

"The *Oknu* dishonors the Stars!" someone yelled from behind Naias, and more people jumped in, booing and shouting contempt.

"Get him off the stage!" Food, trinkets, and trash were thrown at him as the people disregarded Giuseppe's and Leonis's demands. The young man hung his head and clenched his fists.

"Curse the outcast's brother!"

Outcast's . . . brother? But that would mean—

"Silence!" Leonis roared over everyone, her voice causing all the lights to flicker. "Tonight is a night of celebration, and you dare taint its meaning with your foolish accusations?" She raised a hand to the young man. With a snap of her fingers, a light traced his figure,



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restoring his tarnished robes. “None of you have any right to judge the BookKeeper’s decision. The BookKeeper has chosen the Apuzzo boy, and you shall respect his decision.”

Apuzzo? Naias gulped. Surely there had to be more than one family on the Temples with his surname. There had to be another family who was looked down upon as badly as his. Surely that wasn’t—

“Now, Okwu—*Kiyoa*,” Leonis said, turning to him.

Naias’s jaw dropped. “Kiyoa?” he whispered, eyes wide. His brother. That was his older brother up on the stage.

“Let me be the first to welcome and acknowledge you,” she said, placing hands on his shoulders, “as the BookKeeper’s apprentice.”

Apprentice? Like crashing waves, Naias’s thoughts tumbled in every direction. He barely recognized his own brother. He’d been back on the Temples long enough, and not once had he thought about his family. His brother was the BookKeeper’s apprentice, which meant Naias wouldn’t just be stealing from the Temples. He’d be stealing from his brother too.

*His brother.* Kiyoa looked so different now. The boy from Naias’s memories was barely visible in the young man’s features. Brown skin, much darker than Naias, and broad shoulders that seemed to carry a heavy load of responsibility. Kiyoa stood on the stage, puffing out his chest. He nodded thanks to the Patron, then turned back to the crowd. His eyes landed right on Naias, recognizing him instantly.

Kiyoa yelped and stumbled backward. Giuseppe caught him, whispering reassurances into his ear, but Kiyoa brushed it off, eyes scouring the crowds. Naias had already stepped away, hiding behind shadows before Kiyoa could find him again.

He chewed on his lip. It was so easy for Kiyoa to recognize him, and yet Naias hardly did Kiyoa. Or maybe he did deep down but refused to believe it. Because after all this time, Naias had chosen to forget about his family. The hope that they’d one day come looking for him in the Below was slowly killing him, and he’d never have survived if he hadn’t let go of them. It was a good thing he did, because they never came to his rescue. And from the looks of the robes and

the title Kiyoa now wore, it seemed his family really was better off without him.

The celebration officially began with the presentation of the Living Stories. Giuseppe stood over the Book for everyone to see and held his hands over it, his lips reciting an enchantment that brought the Book of Sky Diamonds back to life.

With a gust of wind, the Book threw itself into the air, hovering in the center of the square. As it opened, golden wisps of magic flowed out of it. A humming rolled over the crowd, but it wasn't from the people. The people had silenced the moment the Book sparked to life. No, the humming came from the Stories as they waited for the BookKeeper's command.

Standing on the edge of the stage, Giuseppe's voice boomed over the crowd in the best storytelling fashion Naias had ever heard. "Tonight, the 22nd of Uky in the 53rd year of the Sun, marks the feast day of Zaurak's sacrifice—the Islands of the Sky's greatest hero." As he spoke, the Book reacted to his words. "The Night of Stars celebrates the night our Patron of the Atmosphere gave himself up so that our unworthy world may survive. That night, we lost one of our creators, and Leonis lost the love of her life." Pausing, Giuseppe closed his eyes and took a deep breath, the Book doing the same. "But in order to share Zaurak's story, we must start at the very beginning.

"As you all know, Leonis and Zaurak created us. Though we came in different forms—Izeterrans, Glynnns, WoodWalkers, Yrians, Oqeo, and Uve—we were all their people. We first lived on the land, amongst all other living things. Outside of the Manifest, demons lurked, hoping to snuff out any love or happiness that existed in their void. Zaurak called them Beasts." The Book released wisps of magic that took the form of the Beasts, various monstrous creatures but most of them resembling vultures. "As the Patron of the Atmosphere, Zaurak was responsible for defending us. Our civilizations grew, and our energy became too strong, attracting more and more Beasts. With our survival in the Below becoming riskier amongst the Divine Council's creatures, the Beasts became an even bigger threat,



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forcing Leonis and Zaurak to create the Temples, a safe haven for us; thus our name became the People of the Sky.”

Images flew into the air from the Book’s pages, revealing the Temples, islands that floated in the sky, removed from all the dangers that roamed about the Below. The Beasts swarmed around Zaurak’s atmosphere, above the replica of the Manifest. “As time passed, Zaurak discovered that still the Temples were not safe. With all of us gathered in the sky, our energy became magnified, attracting the Beasts more than ever, along with the Great Beast, Oscutoro. One night, the Beasts’ coalition was so strong, they shattered Zaurak’s atmosphere, swarming around the Temples and sucking out all our life.” The Beasts crashed in and covered the Temples like a raging tornado. In the outskirts of the scene, a large bull stampeded closer, hoofing the air in demand of a challenge. “The only way for him to put an end to this havoc was to defeat Oscutoro.

“Battling in the void beyond the Manifest, Zaurak fought well but was still no match for the Beast.” The bull’s image stood over Zaurak’s warrior figure, thrashing its horns, until a shining light from the Temples far below the battle slowly gave him strength. “He almost lost, until the People worked together to create the Book of Sky Diamonds. We used the power and magic of the stars and constellations above—the stories of our heroes—to give Zaurak strength. We found that the only way to successfully put an end to the Beasts was to seal Zaurak and Oscutoro into the Book.” The animated Zaurak grabbed hold of the bull by its horns, allowing the Book to swirl them inside like a vacuum. The Book shut itself, though still levitated above the crowd with golden dust glowing around it. “Write their story into the stars and seal them in the Book forever, in which Zaurak would take the form of his atmosphere, reinforced and stronger than ever, with the power of the constellations.” Giuseppe stretched out his arm, and the Book returned to him as he finished speaking. “His constellation can be seen in the night sky, along with the rest of the Living Stories, and he will always be remembered, because without him and his sacrifice, we would not be here today.”



His story ended with a bow, and everyone bowed in return, followed by a loud cheer. When everyone quieted again, Giuseppe returned the Book to its pedestal, then stepped back, allowing Leonis to take the stage.

The Patron of the Skies and Stars, Leonis, from what Naias had always been told, wanted nothing more than for her people to prosper. She only created the People of the Sky after seeing how monstrous the Divine Council's creations were. Ever since the People created the Book of Sky Diamonds, their belief in the Living Stories was her only source of life. Without the Living Stories, she'd be powerless.

Naias remembered how often he used to pray to her while he was in the jungle, always begging for reentry to the Temples. She never listened, so eventually he gave up on her. Completely shutting her out was sacrilegious, considering she was his creator, so he still managed to give her an offering and prayed to her one day a year. On the feast day of Zaurak's sacrifice. In other words, tonight.

Had he still been down on the land, he would have prayed, but on the Temples, he couldn't risk giving himself away. If there was a chance she listened to his prayers and just ignored them—which would be even more cruel than not listening at all—Leonis would know he was back on the Temples.

The deity stood before her people, her arms outstretched, and a warm smile crossed her face. Her eyes glittered with the light, though Naias couldn't tell if it was the stars within her or the reflection of tears she shed on this night.

"Zaurak," she whispered, and everyone and everything silenced. As she spoke, the palms of her hands began to glow into bright blue orbs. "My love, may you hear our praise and grow ever stronger." At once, she lifted her arms above her, toward the skies, the Protector of the Temples.

The orbs from her palms shot into the sky as a wide beam of light. All the love and praise from the people was sent out to greet Zaurak's constellation, the Battling Warrior Against the Bull. As soon as the beam struck the night sky, all the stars glittered brighter. They



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took a deep breath, preparing for what came next: a speckling of lights that streaked across the sky. Meteors showered from above, Zaurak's doing to show his people his strength. The sight allowed Naias's heart to relax.

The audience cheered even more as the final meteors flashed before their eyes. With that, Leonis's gaze returned to the crowd, her arms held out to them, and an even larger smile that truly seemed genuine. "Let the night continue to be filled with joy and laughter," she called out.

The lights returned, and music began again, along with the distribution of desserts. The young cloud-herders gathered at the smaller stage at the opposite end of the square, preparing for their light show.

Everyone fell back into their movement. Leonis and Giuseppe left Kiyoa on the stage with the Book as they made rounds amongst the crowd. Groups began dancing around Naias, clapping and stomping along to the music. He couldn't help but stand there and take it all in.

Stars, he missed this. The whimsy, the magic, the thrill of living on the Temples. For ten years he'd longed to experience this again, but his heart sank as he realized he never would. Even now as he stood amongst it all, Naias would always be an outsider. He could never be a part of this world again, no matter how much he ached for it.

A tear streaked down his cheek, and he quickly wiped it away. He wasn't here to reminisce. He had a job to do.

*Steal the Book, and I'll make you a hero.* It was what he wanted most, and the only thing in his way was a brother with confidence as frail as a twig.

Taking a deep breath, Naias relaxed his shoulders and marched straight for the stage, unnoticed by the crowds. He approached from behind, where Kiyoa wouldn't expect it.

His steps were silent, like he'd trained them to be in the jungle. This would have been much easier if he could still fly; he wouldn't even have to worry about the sound of his footfalls. Then again, Naias doubted he'd be here now if he could still fly.

Crouching low behind the pedestal, Naias stuck his tongue out as he reached for the Book.

A hand snatched the Book away before he could grab it. “Oh no you don’t,” Kiyoa growled, his voice as grumpy as Naias remembered. “If you kids keep trying to sneak up on the Book, I’ll have to—” Kiyoa froze as he bent down to drag Naias to his feet. His eyes widened, and his mouth hung open.

Naias jumped to his feet, hand behind his back. “H-High Skies, Kiyoa. . .long time no see.”

Kiyoa blinked at him.

“Okwu, they called you? That’s a neat nickname.” His brother flinched at that. “Oh, you got it from doing something embarrassing, didn’t you? Surely not as embarrassing as . . . y’know, tarnishing sacred water.” He let out an awkward chuckle, begging himself to shut up. His brother paled, still staring. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

Kiyoa’s shoulders slumped, and the Book fell out of his hands, hitting the floor with a thud. Naias watched it fall, noting that the ground was the last place for a sacred Book to sit.

“Am I seeing a ghost?” Kiyoa finally breathed out, his mouth opening and closing several times.

Puffing out his cheeks, Naias looked down at his body. “Mm, I’m pretty sure I haven’t died yet, so no, not a ghost.”

Brows furrowed, Kiyoa stammered. “But-but . . . how? You—”

“Kiyoa?” Naias said, voice softening. He stepped closer.

“Antonius?” he asked, using Naias’s formal name, though it sounded more like a growl.

Naias lifted his arm and firmly offered Kiyoa the *kruir*, a Sky Island gesture that meant “brother,” “part of me.”

Suddenly, Naias was pulled into a hug, Kiyoa’s arms squeezing him tight. He wriggled at the contact. Remembering the Book on the ground, Naias used his foot to kick it behind him.

When Kiyoa let go, he stepped back, brows creased as if he were unsure how to feel. Not that it mattered to Naias. He got what he’d come for, all he needed was an escape. Hopefully one with less complications.

“Uh, so,” he chuckled, kicking the Book behind him with each step backward. He didn’t have to worry about Kiyoa noticing, since



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his brother's eyes were locked on his the whole time. "Not to freak you out or anything," he said as he put more and more space between him and Kiyoa, "but I actually am a ghost, and I really gotta go now and do . . . ghost stuff."

"What?"

"Stars Bidding, and uh, say hi to Ma for me!" Naias turned, snatching the Book off the ground.

"Hey, wait—the Book!" Kiyoa called from behind, words already muffled in Naias's ears. "Thief!" Kiyoa cried out.

The entire party froze, all heads snapping at Kiyoa as he pointed at a stunned Naias. Like a brick wall, the realization struck them.

"Outcast!" they bellowed.

And Naias took off running.



## TWO



# STARS ABOVE

## NAIAS

**S**teal the Book, and I'll make you a hero. Such simple words. Such a simple task. In theory.

Naias didn't consider himself a thief; maybe that was why he was so bad at stealing. But how was he supposed to know the one person protecting the sacred Book, of all people, would be his brother?

Stars, his *brother*. Naias just stole from his brother. After ten years, this was the impression he left?

Well, there was no turning back now.

He let out a puff of air as he rounded a corner, racing back to the docks before he was caught by the mob running after him.

"Antonius!" Kiyoa yelled from behind. "Get back here!"

Naias peeked over his shoulder, only to see Kiyoa leading the angry crowd of people. Interesting how those people were just booing him on stage, yet they all banded together to antagonize Naias.



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If anything, Kiyoa should be grateful; Naias was helping him look heroic.

“Don’t do this! Don’t be a traitor!”

He rolled his eyes at that. How could Naias be a traitor when there was no longer any sense of loyalty between him and the Temples?

The Book burned in his hands, and guilt throbbed through his fingers. The heroes sealed inside knew he was still loyal to them, and they warned him the only way they could. He may not have cared if he betrayed the Temples, but the heroes, they didn’t deserve this, did they?

He shook the thought away. *I’m doing this for my heroes*, he thought. *So I can be one of them, with them forever.*

Whispers thundered in his ears. Hundreds of voices but none of them his. Their words were indiscernible. He looked down at the Book, confident that those voices belonged to the Living Stories. If only he could hear what they really said.

His fingers traced the gold filigree along the corners’ edges, then the gems that took the shape of Leonis’s crest—the sun, moon, and a star conjoined. He frowned at the three latches that lined the Book’s opening and how they bound the Book too tight, preventing the pages a chance to breathe. Those three latches were what kept him from being with his heroes.

With all his attention focused on the Book, Naias hadn’t even noticed he’d reached the docks. Until his foot made contact with the uneven planks. His sandal slipped against the wood, and Naias tripped, chin striking the dock. The Book flew from his hands, sliding until it came to a halt at the left edge.

“Naias!” Kiyoa called out, running even faster now.

Clambering to his feet, Naias surged forward. He grabbed the Book and held it tight, running toward his skiff. The wooden planks creaked with each step as they extended into the vast sky.

Huffing out a final breath goodbye, Naias ran over the edge, where his feet were supposed to land on his skiff. But as his foot stepped into the air, he realized his skiff was gone. Naias looked down, holding his breath as he began to fall—



A hand clamped around his arm, the jolt knocking the Book of Sky Diamonds loose from his grip. Naias was quick enough to pin the Book to his side with his left arm.

He looked up. Kiyoa's widened eyes stared back at him, filled with rage and panic.

It was like he was nine years old again. Falling, staring into his brother's eyes before everything went terribly wrong. He swallowed hard, refusing to let that fear shrivel up his remaining confidence.

"Uh," he said, clearing his throat. "Where's my boat?"

"Give me the Book," his brother snarled, holding out his right hand.

Naias looked down, the jungle waited for his return down below, waiting with its smothering embrace. He shuddered. He wasn't ready to go back, but what choice did he have?

"Sure, I'll consider that, but maybe we could talk about this when I'm not dangling for my life?"

Kiyoa stuck out his hand even more. "Book. Now." When Naias hesitated, Kiyoa loosened his grip on Naias's arm, letting him fall another inch before catching him again. The Book rocked against his side, and Naias's fingers slipped against the first latch.

CLICK.

A wave of energy ran up his arm. All the hairs on the back of his neck stood tall. Kiyoa winced at the sound, and he dug his nails into Naias's arm.

"Give me the Book, or I'll let go."

"And how exactly would that get you the Book? You think I'm scared of falling? Of *dying*? Go ahead and let me go, see what happens."

"Enough with the games, Antonius."

"I'm not playing, Kiyoa. I haven't been for the past ten years," he hissed, wriggling to free himself.

Kiyoa paled at the words, his grip loosening again. His stomach churned as Naias dropped another inch.

CLICK.

The second latch gave way as Naias clutched the Book between his fingers. Light from within the Book poured out. The whispers



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grew louder. His hand ached from squeezing the thick Book so tight, and his sweaty palms weren't helping his grip.

The wooden planks creaked against Kiyoa's weight as he held Naias. The surrounding ships bobbed in the air, shadows cast over them. But their shade wasn't enough to hide the fear and anger burning in Kiyoa's eyes.

Glancing down at his hand, Naias looked back up at Kiyoa, who was also watching his fingers fighting to hold on to the Book. Naias took a deep breath, trying to stay calm, anticipating the fall.

Sweat trickled down the side of Kiyoa's face, and his lips were pressed into a thin line. But even now, Naias only saw a twelve-year-old Kiyoa holding on to his nine-year-old brother. How it should have been. Back then.

"If only you'd caught me ten years ago," Naias whispered.

Kiyoa's eyes widened. His grip failed just as Naias's fingers went numb. Both he and the Book broke free.

"No!" Kiyoa yelled, leaning over the ledge.

Scooping Naias up with one arm, he snatched the Book in the other—

CLICK.

The sound echoed in his ears. A blast of energy shot Naias and Kiyoa back onto the dock. They both stared, wide-eyed and jaws hanging open, at the Book of Sky Diamonds. It floated in the air beyond the docks, its magic clouded around it like fiery red dust. The voices from before screamed, casting a wave of magic over them. The crowd, all huddled on the cobblestone at the edge of the docks, watched and let out a collective gasp. The sound was cut off by a booming silence that spread throughout the Temples, the same moment every burning light blinked out. Even the green glow of the Yrian crystals. All flickered once, then darkened.

Naias looked back at the crowd, just as BookKeeper Giuseppe and Leonis shoved their way through to the front.

A gust of wind broke the silence. It thrust the sacred Book even higher into the sky. Lightning cracked through the pages. The once whimsical golden light spurted out of the binding, power untamed.

The wind grew stronger, and more lightning sparked. A whirlwind formed from within the Book.

They came out as colors first. A massive storm of colors that shrieked as they escaped the entrapment of the Book. Then they came out as ghosts. The Living Stories breathing for the first time outside the BookKeeper's control. They swooped down, slashing at the crowd of partygoers. The Book's depleting powers howled in their wake.

Kiyoa jumped to his feet and ran down to the approaching Giuseppe. The Stories swarmed, hissing at Leonis's presence. A cyclone swirled around her, wisps of blue magic trailing out from her skin. Her color drained, stripped of power. She fell to the ground, too still amongst the chaos.

Giuseppe and Kiyoa took control of the scene. Or at least they tried to. Sparks struck the Temples from the Book's pages, and the Stories were already searching for new victims. Giuseppe held out his palms to the sky as he chanted words over and over. The Stories screamed in response. They morphed together and took Zaurak's shape. His figure wasn't solid, and it wasn't entirely him. In fact, it wasn't him at all. Naias had no knowledge of the exact Stories inside the Book, but he was sure Zaurak's story had nothing to do with this monstrosity. The Stories were clever though, knowing the people wouldn't attack a figure who appeared as their most valued hero.

Teleporting from one location to the next, they toyed with Giuseppe, who still stood, trying to regain control of the Book. It wasn't until the Stories unmorphed and attacked Giuseppe all at once that Naias had true doubts about what he'd done. They didn't need much force to knock Giuseppe off his feet, but once they did, they knew it wouldn't take anything else.

"Giuseppe!" Kiyoa cried out when his mentor landed on the stone floor, falling to his side. Naias ran to his brother, watching the old man's lips move and Kiyoa's weakened reaction.

With nothing holding them back now, the Stories split apart, their ghostly figures departing into the sky. Every single one of them



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vanished far beyond the Temples' reach, falling down to what lay below—*the Below*.

Gone.

Unleashed.

The Book's cover fell to the ground at Naias's feet. Limp. Without magic. Without Stories to tell.

"Stars above," Kiyoa cursed.

Naias tossed his head back, realizing it wasn't just the Temples that went dark. "No," he whispered, "they're not."

Up above, the stars had vanished from the sky, leaving silence and darkness in their wake.



## THREE



# BARTERING WITH THE BANISHED

## NAIAS

A cracking sound came from above and all around. The typically invisible barrier Leonis created to keep terrors outside of the Temples lit up with a light blue glow. Like glass, the dome that surrounded the Islands of the Sky creaked, and large cracks formed throughout the barrier. Each crack stretched out, then frayed into hundreds of smaller cracks. It held sturdy for only a moment longer, and everyone held their breath, waiting, waiting, waiting.

There was no loud crash. No quaking. No warning. Like a waterfall of glass, the barrier collapsed. The magic fizzled out as each shard fell, the dome falling inward, raining over the Temples, and disappearing before anyone could touch the dying magic.

“The barrier,” someone whispered amongst the crowd. “It’s fallen. We’re—we’re all in danger.”



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“Bloody Beasts,” Kiyoa muttered. Before Naias could react, Kiyoa grabbed him by the collar of his shirt. “Are you an idiot, or a stupid idiot?”

“Kiyoa—” His voice was frail. There was a chance an apology sat somewhere on his tongue, but he couldn’t be sure. Not with this new darkness that hung over them. It ran a claw down his spine, and Naias shivered.

“What the bloody beasts were you thinking?” Kiyoa spat.

A gust of wind pulled them apart, and their knees slammed into the cobblestone as their arms were pressed tight against their sides, tied down by invisible ropes.

Another rumble came from across the dock, and a figure emerged, towering over the brothers. Two starlike orbs appeared from above, and Naias immediately recognized their glow as Leonis’s eyes. Her hands began to glow as well, and she offered a low hum that sent her energy coursing throughout the Temples. Quicker than a heartbeat, all the Yrian crystals flickered back to life. Their green glow stung at Naias’s skin.

“After all I’ve done for you,” Leonis muttered, her words sharp like daggers. Her heels clicked against the stone as she approached Kiyoa. Using her magic to lift Kiyoa off the ground, she wrapped a hand around his neck. “Lose face by standing up for you only moments ago. Put all my trust into you on that stage. Tolerate your role as an apprentice when it’s the last thing you ever deserved. And this is how you repay me? Open my Book, kill my BookKeeper, release my Living Stories?”

“Protectress—”

“I should have done away with all of you Apuzzos from the start,” she said with a curling lip. Slowly, her free hand balled into a fist, the motion sucking the air from Kiyoa’s lungs.

“P-please.”

“Don’t waste your breath begging. It didn’t work for your brother back then, and it won’t work for you now. As your creator, I can easily become your destroyer,” she whispered, and even though her words weren’t directed at Naias, they still made him gag. “Give me one reason I shouldn’t kill you.”



“Because it wasn’t his fault,” Naias called out, still squirming against her magic. “The Book was in my hand when the latches came undone.”

It wasn’t entirely true. Naias had lost his grip on the Book before it opened. Kiyoa’s fingers were the last to touch the Book with it intact. But Naias wasn’t willing to let his brother take all the blame. Besides, he’d faced Leonis’s wrath before. What was the worst that could happen?

Without removing her hold on Kiyoa, Leonis cast a sidelong glance at Naias. One of her eyebrows arched as she fully recognized him. “You’re both to blame. Don’t think I’ve forgotten about you, Antonius. Tell me,” she said, finally dropping Kiyoa and fully turning to face him, “what don’t you understand about the word *banishment*?”

The courage from moments ago disappeared. He couldn’t move, let alone speak. Like he was nine years old again. The Patron looming over him, storms in her eyes. His brother on the sidelines, suffering because of him. A crowd of onlookers muttering about his disgrace. And Naias, the root cause of all the problems. Another mistake that would never be forgiven.

It was astonishing, really, how quickly Leonis transformed. She had just been smiling during the celebrations—of course, it’d all been a facade.

“More importantly, what made you come back?” she asked, circling him now. Each click of her heels drummed in his ears. “You know the Book of Sky Diamonds was the greatest lifesource for the Temples. What, did you decide to get rid of it, in order to get rid of me? Was that your plan for revenge? My, my.” She tutted. “I’m surprised you even had the brains to come up with an idea like that.”

She couldn’t have been more wrong. None of this was about revenge. At least not for him. “I’m not an idiot, Leonis.”

She looked him up and down. “Clearly. Otherwise, you’d be dead.” She shrunk down to see him eye to eye. “How exactly did you survive?”

He swallowed hard, ignoring his sweaty palms and the itch in the back of his throat. “I’ve had help.”



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“The same help that got you through my barrier? I know you couldn’t have done *that* alone.”

Naias looked over at the crowd. The people all watched with angry wide eyes, the kind that painted him as a monster. A glance at Kiyoa, who was still on his hands and knees, told him that his brother viewed him the same way. A monster. A villain. Wreaking havoc at the most inconvenient times.

They couldn’t have been more wrong, and he’d prove it to them.

Clearing his throat, Naias made sure his voice stretched across the scene. “I’m only here for one reason. Patron Ignauqventaur sought the Book of Sky Diamonds. Why, I don’t know, but that doesn’t matter. We made a deal.”

Leonis scoffed. “Foolish boy. And what, pray tell, did my brother offer you?” When he refused to answer, she chuckled. “It doesn’t really matter, does it? You failed, and now you’ll never get your reward.”

“I almost got away,” Naias sneered, still fighting against his invisible restraints.

“Yes, of course, with your little boat. I had it confiscated as soon as the dockworkers reported a mysterious old skiff that hadn’t been seen in years.”

His jaw dropped. “You took—? If you’d left it alone, none of this would have happened!”

“You’re a threat to the Temples, of course I had to do something about it, and look what you’ve done now.”

“I’m not a threat. I’m just a boy trying to make do with an unjust punishment. It was all a mistake.”

“You can’t seem to stop making mistakes.”

“I was only a child! I had no idea what happened. It was an accident.” Rage burned on his tongue, daring to spit out flames at any person or thing that got in his way. He’d always kept that fire inside him in check, but her disregard beckoned the worst out of him.

Pursing her lips, Leonis shrugged apathetically and said, “But a crime nonetheless. Since banishment wasn’t good enough for you, it seems you’ll have an even heftier price to pay.” Like she had with Kiyoa, she lifted Naias up into the air, closing both her fists. Instead of stealing his breath, her magic pressed against his skull. His blood

boiled and his heartbeat pounded in his ears. Her eyes flashed white, going for the kill.

The familiar whispers of the Book blared in his head, the voices sending shivers down his spine and prickles through his skin.

“No!” Naias screamed in a voice that wasn’t his own but a combination of hundreds.

His ears popped, and the whispers silenced at the same moment a burst of silvery blue light rushed through his skin, lashing out against Leonis and knocking her off her feet. Several bystanders rushed to catch her, but she ripped away from their grasp, holding her head as she watched Naias return to the ground, freed from her restraints. His skin prickled, and his thoughts raced.

What just happened?

He looked up, trying to catch his breath. Everyone watched him, jaws hanging open. They’d all seen what he felt. Magic stretching off his skin and striking their Patron. But Naias didn’t have magic. Not anymore, at least, and when he had, it was only the gift of flight. Nothing that could harm a Patron.

“Star magic?” Leonis hissed. “But that’s impossible.”

Leonis grabbed his chin and forced him to look her in the eyes. Her furrowed brows eased, and her eyes widened at whatever she saw in him. “Why would the Stars choose to protect you?” Pain flashed across her face, lighting up her eyes a bright yellow. She clutched her heart, sinking to the ground again. No one came to her side this time, and when she recovered, tears welled in her eyes as she looked up to the dark sky. “Zaurak,” she spoke to the absent Patron, “why him?”

Naias looked up to the sky as well, heart sinking at the sight. With all the confrontation, he’d forgotten the stars were no longer up above. Leonis said the Stars used their magic to protect him. *Why would they want to protect me, after what I’ve done?*

He didn’t understand until his foot brushed against the tarnished Book of Sky Diamonds. The Stars saved him because they needed him. Needed him to be a hero.

A smirk crept over his face. “You can’t kill me, Leonis, because you need me.” He flapped the leather cover in her face. “You’re dying without the Book intact, right? Someone has to fix it. All those



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Stories entered the Below, and I'm the only one with enough experience in the Below to even consider going after your precious Stories. So here's what's going to happen." He paused, and the confidence the jungle had ingrained into him straightened his back, broadened his shoulders, raised his voice. "I'll go on a quest to save your Book. You're going to give me one of those neat flying ships, and a crew—not that I need them. I just think they're cool."

Leonis curled her lip. "Like I'd ever sacrifice a whole crew for the likes of you. You'd probably have them all killed within minutes."

"Well, it seems your Stars trust me, so you really ought to, too, if you want to live, that is."

Fists clenched, Leonis brought herself to her feet, once again towering over him. But her scare tactics wouldn't work on him anymore. "I don't know why the Stars care so much about you, but I won't let you get away with this. You want a boat, fine, you can have your pathetic skiff back, and you *will* bring back my Book."

"And when I come back," he said, stepping closer, "you'll let me return to the Temples, declare me a hero, *and* give me a constellation."

"Don't press your luck," she growled, snatching the Book's leather covers out of his hand. "We don't know the extent of the Stars' protection, or how long it'll last. Bring me my restored Book, then we'll see what kind of reward you deserve. And *you*—" She spun around to face Kiyoa.

Kiyoa looked up. He'd been hunched over Giuseppe's body, who was now lifeless, according to Leonis. He wondered how long Kiyoa had been next to the old man. Tears streaked his face, but he didn't give the impression that he'd been crying. "Protectress?"

"You're the only reliable BookKeeper we have left. You'll join your brother in restoring the Book. Don't fail me again, or I'll make sure you never live up to Giuseppe's name."

Kiyoa blinked twice before responding. "Naias? Journey? Wait, what?" He looked down at Giuseppe, and his body stiffened, almost shouting the words, "You want me to go with *him*?" He pointed to Naias, then looked off into the distance. "*Down there*?"

"You'll leave at dawn," she announced, then she snapped her fingers and two brawny men restrained both Naias and Kiyoa. "Now

get them out of my sight. Make sure they don't get into any more trouble." With that, she turned away, walking through the stunned crowd, head bowed in shame or fear or pain. Or maybe all three at once.

A large grin covered Naias's face as the two men led them away. "Venturing together, repairing a sacred book. Sounds like fun, doesn't it?"

Kiyoa lunged at him, and if it hadn't been for the much larger man holding him back, Naias swore Kiyoa would have pummeled him to a pulp. "Nothing with you sounds fun. You'll always be a curse." Before Naias could respond, Kiyoa spat, "Happy birthday, dipshit," then pushed forward without giving Naias another glance.