

ASCENDANT

IZAIC YORKS



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The Tribes

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Hasbal

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Nakiaan Ocean

Rocky Shores

Garnet

Fools Bay

Vuttunpiorov

The Interior

Vuttunpiorov

The Interior

Fanged Isle

Nakiaan Ocean

NAKIAA



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To Britt, who demonstrates courage daily in the face of adversity.

PROLOGUE

Sash silently slipped from the waters and up the hull's ladder, his team following close behind. Snowflakes flitted down from the sky, like hundreds of white fairies heralding wintertide. It was the darkest day of the year, the sky an endless expanse of coal-black emptiness.

Upon reaching the railing Sash grimaced and looked back one last time. In the distance, Hasbal, the City of Paradises, stood out against the shadowed hills it was nestled within. Many also called it the City of a Thousand Lights, and tonight they were right. Hasbal was aflame. If Sash failed, then by morning it was possible that everything he loved about his home might cease to exist. Whether by slow wither, like a branch in decay, or a swift merciful death, in the end, either result would be the same: a city of ash.

Sash peeked over the railing. Two guards stood watch at the door. Their blue trench coats were embellished with brass buttons, accompanied by boots with thick treads for slick surfaces, and topped with black tricorne hats. Bored, they calmly talked amongst themselves, standing guard at a door. Lucas's intel was correct—these pirates were under the command of the Dread Captain Falimer. They were armed with simple pistols, cutlasses, and a lifetime of sea-seasoned brutality.

Still, it shouldn't be a problem.

Methodically scanning the rest of the sloop, Sash only saw one other, and they were busy rolling up a thick line of rope. It was a skeleton crew, likely just enough to slip into the harbor and out. Not including the ones

left behind—half their men were still stranded on the docks. Sash had no doubt Lucas had already taken care of them.

Pointing, he signaled for the others to sidle around the boat, staying just out of sight beneath the railing. Deftly leaping over the weathered wood, Sash hid behind a stack of crates and waited for the others to fall into place. The two pirates were directly across from him, and the third lingered at the bow.

Kiln flashed Sash a hand sign from his perch, and he nodded in return. Operation Jormund was a go.

Kiln lunged across the deck, startling the pirate at the bow. But before the man could so much as whisper, let alone shout for help, Kiln had garroted a piece of linen around his mouth. At his touch the linen turned into a twisting wreath of metal that clamped his jaws into place, muffling the pirate's disquiet. Kiln planted a fist into the pirate's neck, and as if helping an old friend, laid the man gently to the ground. Pulling away, rubied lines spouted from a severed vein as the blade in Kiln's bracers retracted, like a tortoise into its shell. Taking the pirate's hat and jacket, Kiln melted once more into the shadows with the nod of a friend, and the prowl of a killer.

Sash looked back up just in time to see Timothy and Ash dragging the bodies of the other two pirates away from the door.

It was time.

Sash stood from his hiding place and strode over to his companions. Dressed in the same flowing, double layered silken blacks that they wore, he cut an imposing figure under the dim yellow light of the lanterns. His grim expression mirrored theirs, his white eyes stark against his dark skin. They marked him as an Iridan—or soulless, as some might say. Sash had always found that insult strange, given the definition.

"Put those on," Sash said as the others stripped the bodies of their caps and jackets, "and assume the posts."

Sash looked ahead. Falimer's Brig lay in the distance.

"It won't be long until they intercept us to take the hostage. We do not want to give them any reason to cut and run. We get the boy back and we wrap this up by sinking Falimer."

"Are you sure about going down there alone?" Ash asked as she pulled long coils of her hair back with strips of silk before donning the tricorne cap.

"Yes, tell him," Timothy said, with the near wistful pitch that he was so known for. "One of us should go with him as backup."

Kiln shook his greying head; he was in his early twenties but time was already unkind to the man. "And how many Liege Guards have you faced, Timothy?"

"None, but—"

"I don't want to lose any more of you," Sash said firmly. "You three and the few we have left are all that remain. I will not let us fall tonight. I will let none of it fall."

"And what if there's more than one Liege Guard?" Ash asked, but Sash shook his head.

"We have to believe in our people," he said, "Lucas has never delivered false intel before, and tonight will be no exception."

"We know our jobs sir, you get the prince," Kiln said, raising a fist to his lips in salute.

The others did the same and Sash reciprocated. A green glow cascaded across the deck of the sloop as the aurora broke through the clouds, dancing across the wintertide sky. *Thank the Almighty, we could use a bit of luck*, Sash thought. Reaching for the doorknob Sash found it to be locked—but it did not matter for it was not made to keep an Ascendant out. Touching the metal knob, he watched as it morphed into a small but plush sheet of cloth. Tearing it away he dropped it to the ground as it materialized back into metal. The knob rolled across the deck, and Sash pulled the door open, slipping within.

The first room was bare, and a simple set of stairs led further down into the hull. Unintelligible voices drifted up from down below. Sash frowned at the codespeak, a language formed in response to the Ministers. Sash could understand tidbits of what they were saying but not all. The language was a rapidly growing one and according to Lucas it could change weekly.

Keeping the pads of his feet soft, Sash slowly made his way down the stairs. The Almighty must have been with him because not a single step creaked as he slunk down to the hold, around the stairs, and into the shadows. Peering around the corner, he watched as two pirates heatedly argued amongst themselves, one of them waving his pistol about haphazardly. Behind them was yet another door, but this time a muffled crying echoed through the wood.

The prince was close, and so too was the Liege Guard.

Sash uncurled two lengths of silk from his belt. It was time.

Springing into the light, he appeared to the men like a ghost.

"What the—" one of the guards began to speak.

But he never got a chance to finish the thought.

Sash twirled into the air, whipping the silks around him in a frenzy. His Touch turned it to metal which bit right through the first guard's neck. Blood misted across the room, splattering the floor and walls.

The second guard was quicker to react, however, raising his cutlass in time to block the second silken blade.

Sash dashed forward as the man swung at him. Dropping the cloth Sash Touched the incoming cutlass and turned it into a harmless twirl of ribbon.

One second.

Sash ducked under the man's elbow, sweeping his feet from beneath him. Down the pirate went, crashing to the ground

Two seconds.

Fear played across the man's weaselly eyes, yet he wasn't the kind of man to lock up under pressure. Pulling the hammer back on his pistol the pirate took aim.

Three seconds.

Sash kicked the pistol wide, but not wide enough. Smoke burst from the throat of the weapon and sparks rang from the flash pan.

Four seconds.

Sash's next action was pulled by the threads of fate, as he raised a hand, flaring his Touch.

Five seconds.

The bullet floated harmlessly to the ground as nothing more than white confetti, just as the pirate's cutlass reverted to metal.

"Ascendant!" the man screamed just before Sash silenced him with his bracer knife.

So much for secrecy, he thought darkly. Stepping over the body he grabbed the door and pulled it open. Apparently, the Liege Guard had been smart enough to realize a lock wouldn't keep him out.

The room within was well lit, with bookshelves and portraits adorning its walls. At the center of the room lay the hooded figure of a child. The prince sat huddled behind a burly figure dressed in thick folds of padded armor, wooden batons in hand, the ends sharpened into wicked points. Sash already knew that the knight's armor was not leather, but instead thick wads of paper carefully pressed together, effectively nullifying his ability to Touch. The room—outside of what the prince wore—was removed of nearly all metal and cloth. Behind the Liege Guard was a large broken window.

"You came. The last True Ascendent, and all because of one boy," the Liege Guard said, stepping forth. Though muffled, something about his voice seemed familiar.

"You know he is more than just a boy," Sash challenged, carefully edging closer.

"Of course," the Liege Guard tutted, "He is the speaker to the Iridans, and so long as they believe King Jieger failed to protect him, Hasbal shall burn."

"What kind of monster wants that?" Sash spat, "Good people will die because of this."

"Is anyone innocent when they stand beside slavery? When they refuse to see evil for what it is? You're Iridan I see. Are you so brainwashed that you can honestly stand beside those monsters?"

That voice! Where do I know it from? Sash shook his head—now was not the time—and raised his silks.

"The only monster I see, is one who would kidnap a child to see a city burn."

Sash flung his arms forward turning the silks into metal with Touch, but the Liege Guard was ready. Countering, the man ducked within the first silk to close the gap, a dangerous move for Sash. In close combat he was weak against an enemy carrying neither metal nor cloth. The Liege Guard thrust for Sash's abdomen, only for Sash to drop one of his metal-silks and Touch his shirt first. The sound of wood striking metal ricocheted as the knight's baton met Sash's impromptu armor. Slamming his bracer blade into the Liege Guard, Sash pulled back sending tufts of paper fluttering about in a strange ode to the snowflakes outside.

"Nice try," the Liege Guard said, "but this cuirass is the best the press makes."

"I know the make," Sash grunted. In the confusion he had entangled the Liege Guard's legs in a thin length of silk. Touching it, he turned it into a metal clamp. One strong yank and the Liege Guard collapsed upon the floor. "And I intend to have words with those who minister it."

Aiming his blade for the slits of the Liege Guard's helmet, Sash lunged for the killing strike. But the knight raised a bare palm to the incoming blade,

and where Sash expected gore was Touch, turning Sash's own knife into a harmless twirl of cloth.

"How," Sash gasped as a fist landed solidly upon his face. A wet crunch shattered the bridge of his nose as he stumbled across the room. Grasping a wall for support he spat out a globule of dark liquid.

"How did you do that, you're not a—"

"Aren't I?" The man Touched Sash's knife back to silk. As the Liege Guard pulled himself up to his full height, frantic feet thumped down the steps.

"I think that will be the rest of your team," he said, removing a glove to reveal a black bracer, identical in every way to Sash's.

"I'm going to guess that they found the clues I left on the pirates. They think you've set up this whole thing as part of an elaborate Iridan scheme."

"Who are you?" Sash asked trying to recognize the voice. He knew him, and he knew that he knew him, but it was just out of reach, a half-memory dancing on the tip of his tongue.

"One thing at a time," the man said, before ruthlessly stabbing the prince and bringing a cold silence to the boy's muffled cries.

"No!"

Sash leapt to his feet. Dashing forward he thrust his other knife, but the man easily parried the blow. Slapping Sash's hand to the side he kicked the Ascendant's silks from the floor and into the air. Snagging the cloth, the Liege Guard wrapped it around Sash's wrist and tugged him into a sprawling mess upon the ground. More blood filled Sash's vision as he whipped his foot back at the man, turning the point of his heel into a sharp piece of metal. The Liege Guard caught his foot and Touched it back to cloth, twisting Sash once more to the floor.

"Goodbye, my friend," the Liege Guard said. As he climbed onto the windowsill, he removed his helmet. "You should at least know who betrayed you."

Sash's eyes widened as he looked upon the man's snowy eyes. Lucas looked back at Sash sadly, his raven hair whipping about in the wintertide wind.

"You can still escape. I filled the cracks of the floor with oil," he said, tapping the lanterns aside the window. "We believe in the same thing. Trust me when I say this is the best way to reach our goals. Good luck."

And then he leaped.

Sash's team rushed into the room behind him.

"Almighty," Ash gasped, "Please say it isn't true."

"He's dead. And by one of our blades," Timothy said as he studied the Prince's wounds.

"Lord Ascendant," Kiln said grimly as he slowly stalked toward Sash's back. "I don't know why, but the game is up. You are under arrest. Don't make us do this the hard way."

Sash could hear the fear in the man's voice. After all, he was the only true Ascendant to have survived the Eves War. Cloth turning to metal whistled through the air as fate and instinct tugged Sash into a bursting roll and carried him out of harm's way.

Ash pulled strips of star-shaped silks out of her pocket to throw at Sash, but he was a step ahead. Touching his shirt he turned it once more to armor, the blades clinking harmlessly off it.

Spotting the lantern Lucas had mentioned, Sash dashed to where it was steadfastly bracketed to the wall. Touching the lantern Sash turned the casing to silk, allowing the oil light and glass to shatter on the floor and set the room ablaze. Sash took a running leap and dove out the window, plunging into the frigid waters below.

Dark swells met him as he broke beneath the waves. Instantly his skin felt as if it had been set aflame with the cold as the taste of brine filled his mouth. When he surfaced he looked back in time to watch the hold combust in a ball of flame, festooning the waters around him with shards of wood. He had to duck back under just to avoid the worst of it. Resurfacing, he heard

heavy flaps like drapes being unfurled in the wind as four dark shapes could be seen in the sky, gliding away; it was Lucas, no doubt having stolen their butterflies.

It had all been a setup, Sash realized, as Lucas shot a smoldering flare into the sky and the distant Brig turned away.

Far off the City of Lights burned, and the Almighty's aurora faded from the wintertide's sky.