

the Star
Shepherd

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Illustrated by
Dan Haring



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young readers

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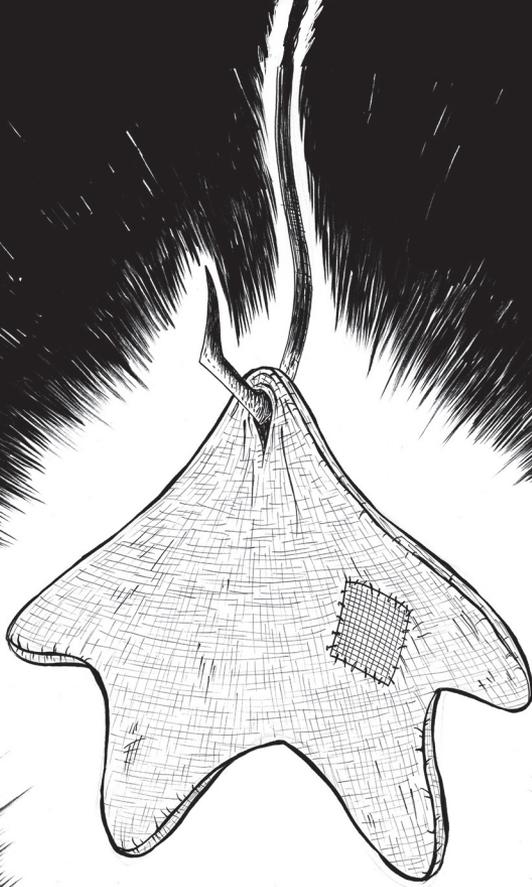


For London, Asher, Reagan, and Presley

—Dan

For Logan, my own starboy

—MarcyKate



“I’ve loved the stars too fondly to be
fearful of the night.”

—SARAH WILLIAMS, “THE OLD ASTRONOMER” (1868)



N

SELTO

THE BLACK
LANDS

COUNCIL TOWER

DALUTH

LAKE
AYSON

PEGIAN SEA





RADAMAK MOUNTAINS

ERGSADA
VALLEY

ROMVI

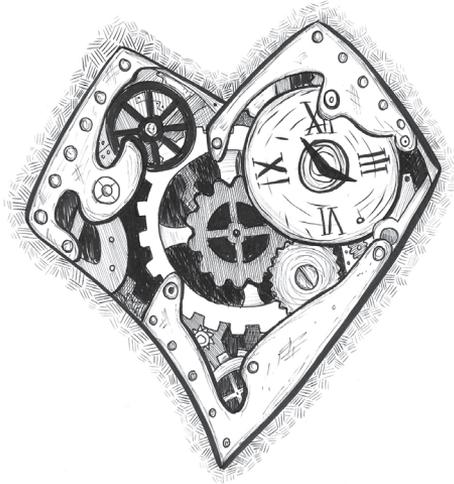
DIMOSE RIVER

DRENN

KYRO'S TOWER

LAKE VOSRINTH

KELAYA



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 knew 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 spiderlike *vrित्रax*; scaly *zintrins*, 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.



CHAPTER TWO

LATE IN THE AFTERNOON THE NEXT DAY, KYRO TOOK Cypher and headed for the nearby village of Drenn with a pocket full of coins and a heart that was even heavier. He still hadn't heard one word from his father about his retrieval last night. Only "Go to the market today" and "Have you seen my goggles?"

Sometimes he'd catch his father staring off into space so absentmindedly that he couldn't possibly be paying attention to the stars. When he'd finally notice his son, he seemed surprised to find Kyro even existed.

But at least Kyro had Drenn. Life passed normally there;

people had regular jobs, like bakers and smiths and fisherman. No other Star Shepherds.

And that was how the town liked it. Kyro suspected they would have liked it even better if there were no Star Shepherds near them at all. It was hard to miss the suspicious looks and whispers when his father passed by. It was much better when Kyro came to town alone.

To the rest of the world, Star Shepherds were oddities, relics of forgotten times. Some claimed to be descendants of the Seven Elders, while others, like Kyro's father, had abandoned their old lives to become Shepherds.

And the rest of the world laughed at them.

Most people viewed fallen stars as good luck. They were made from a rare element, one that would fetch a pretty price from the right buyer. The idea of sending it sailing out of reach was mind-boggling for many, and downright infuriating for others.

Kyro had heard the rumors that his father was hoarding stars in his tower out of greed and not sending them back to the sky at all. It wasn't true, of course, but every unkind word scratched at him like thorns.

Still, when the forest broke behind him this afternoon, his heart began to lift until he felt lighter than he had in days. The gates of Drenn lay ahead, its wooden wall surrounding the village in both directions until it hit the main road in the east and

brushed against the forest in the west. Sometimes he thought of Romvi, the village where he was born. Drenn reminded him of it. All those houses, all those bustling people—it was impossible to be truly alone. He missed that.

If he was lucky, his friend Andra might be working in her father's bakery this afternoon. She always made Kyro laugh. Laughter was in short supply back at the watchtower.

He walked through the village gates, Cypher padding after him with his snout in the air and tail wagging. Short houses with red-shingled roofs stretched out in row after row on either side. The main thoroughfare led to the village square and the marketplace. Beyond that were the docks and the bay that led to the ocean. Kyro could already smell the salt on the air and feel the activity vibrating through the streets as he neared the marketplace. He jangled the coins in his pocket nervously.

He really, really hoped Andra would be there today.

His first stop was the grocer, run by an old man who treated Kyro with a withering tolerance. They needed groceries to survive, and Kyro was always sure to be extra polite to the man, but it never made a difference.

Stands of many-colored vegetables and flowers lined the outside of the grocery store to tempt passersby. When Kyro entered, the grocer looked up for a moment, then sighed. Kyro's cheeks flamed. He gathered the items they'd need to last them

the week and set them on the counter. The old man eyed Kyro's groceries from his chair behind the counter.

"Four silvers," he said, without getting up. Kyro handed over the coins, then took his things and left. Only Andra and sometimes the blacksmith would talk to him. Every other shop was the same story as the grocer.

Kyro stopped at the butcher, then the tailor to pick up the jacket Tirin had managed to rip on a tree branch last week. Finally, he only had one stop left: the bakery.

His hands grew slick as he approached the sweet-smelling little shop. He hoped Andra, with her dark hair and clever eyes, was waiting for him behind the counter and not her father. Bodin could be a bit...grumpy. Especially when it came to Kyro and his father.

He paused under the bright-green awning, and when he opened the door, the familiar peal of the tiny bells rang in his ears. The girl at the counter's face lit up. "Hello, Starboy!" she said.

Kyro scuffed his shoe on the floor. Andra always called him that, but it didn't sound mean coming from her lips.

"Did you finally get to rescue a star on your own?" she asked. Kyro had admitted some weeks ago that he'd been hoping his father would let him go on his own soon, and she'd asked every week since. This was the first time he could say yes.

"I did, and it's back up in the sky now where it belongs."

Kyro tried to act excited, but his father's lack of a reaction had tainted the proud moment.

"Was it as glorious as you'd hoped?" she asked.

"It sure was." He silently kicked himself. Why hadn't he thought of something better to say?

"Are you here for your usual?"

"Yes, please."

She began to put a few rolls and loaves in a bag for him, when a large, round man wearing a dirty apron stomped out from the back room of the shop. Kyro's insides squirmed. Bodin glanced back and forth between Kyro and his daughter and scowled.

"Your mother needs you out back," Bodin said, taking the half-packed bag from his daughter.

"But I was almost—"

"Now," Bodin said. With a sigh, she headed for the back of the shop, but not before sneaking a parting wink at Kyro.

He flushed red from head to toe and fumbled for the remaining coins in his pocket. "Hurry up, boy," Bodin said. Kyro managed to hand over the coins, and Bodin gave him the bag of goods.

"Now, business is business and all, but you best leave my Andra alone, you hear? She doesn't need the likes of you filling her head with silly notions about stars."

Kyro couldn't find the words to respond. His throat felt

thick, and he swallowed hard. Then he shuffled back out the door with Cypher at his side, Bodin's glare burning into his back.

Leave Andra alone? But she's the only one my age who'll talk to me. She's the only one who's kind.

Kyro's heart sank into his shoes, but as he passed out of sight of the bakery's windows, he heard "Starboy!" from the alley behind it. Andra hung out the back door, waving furiously in his direction.

He laughed. "Hey," he said.

"Sorry my father's such a grump." She walked over with her hands behind her back. "I thought you might like something to celebrate saving the star. Hold out your hand, and close your eyes."

"All right," Kyro said. Something warm and sweet-smelling wrapped in paper was pressed into his palm. When he opened his eyes, Andra had disappeared.

Maybe today wasn't so bad after all.

Kyro hummed on his way out of the marketplace, taking a bite of the chocolate cookie she had given him while Cypher ran in a figure eight between his legs. But as he took the turn toward home, something caught his eye, and he paused to squint at the sky. He snapped on his starglass goggles and even adjusted them twice, but the object remained. In fact, it was getting closer every second.

The bright, beaming thing swooped over his head and crashed into the market behind him.

Andra, Kyro thought. His cookie forgotten, Kyro raced back to the marketplace, jostling through the townspeople streaming from their shops. Smoke curled from the direction of the bakery, and when he turned the corner, he found the green awning alight with flame. A few feet beyond lay a smoldering crater.

A star had fallen. In the daytime. Kyro had never heard of that happening. Though it was nearly dusk, it still didn't make any sense.

Bodin roared from his shop with a huge bucket of water to douse the burning awning before the fire could spread any farther. The crowd murmured and gasped as they drew closer to the crater.

"A star!"

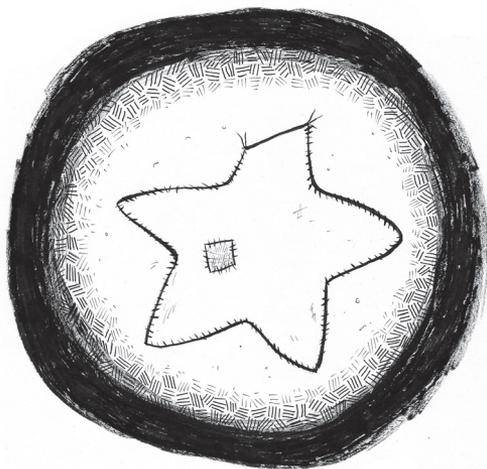
"Luck has smiled on our village!"

Bodin grumbled something about luck under his breath that made Kyro's ears redden. Cypher yapped and tugged the hem of his pants.

Cypher was right; Kyro needed to save that star. But that might mean giving up his groceries...

Before he could decide, a new voice rang out from the back of the crowd. His father's familiar form cast a long shadow over the flagstones of the market.

Tirin had arrived to collect the star.



CHAPTER THREE

MURMURS AND GROANS RANG OUT LIKE CLASHING BELLS.

“Why should Tirin keep it?”

“Star Shepherds, always hogging the luck for themselves.”

Bodin stepped forward, wiping his hands with a towel. Andra’s eyes were wide and worried as they darted between her father and Tirin.

“Go home, Star Shepherd. The star landed in our village. We’ll keep it and any luck that comes with it.” He motioned to his singed awning. “I’ll need it to fund the repairs to my shop.”

Kyro knew he should stand by his father, but he was afraid it would only make things worse. Bodin had no fondness for

him. Cypher bounded over to the crater and growled at anyone who came near.

Tirin frowned, oblivious to the unhappy villagers. “It is my sworn duty to return all fallen stars in my domain to their rightful place in the sky. I must do so before it burns out.”

Kyro edged closer to the crater. The light from the star had begun to dim. The idea of allowing it to sputter out made his skin feel tight and uncomfortable. Despite what the villagers might think, he knew the legends were true and starlight was the only thing keeping evil away. He shuddered as the shadow creature from the night before reared up in the back of his mind.

His father still argued with Bodin, but behind them, Andra urged him to snatch the star. Kyro hesitated, but when his father stepped toward the crater, a villager grabbed him by the shoulders. He tried to shrug him off, but another man joined in. Soon the crowd transformed into a mass of flailing limbs.

Cypher barked. Kyro scooped up the smoking burlap sack and clutched it to his chest, still balancing his groceries in his other arm.

“Over here!” Andra motioned for him to follow her. This time he didn’t hesitate at all.

She led him into an alley, then took his arm and half ran, half dragged him along. He stumbled after her.

“Where are we going?” he asked.

Her dark eyes twinkled like the night sky. “The side gate near the woods is closest. They’ll be the first to respond to the uproar.”

“But my father...” Guilt stung Kyro. He should have stayed to help his father.

“Your father would want you to save the star, wouldn’t he?” Andra said. Cypher yipped his agreement. “See, even your dog knows that’s true.”

They turned another bend and waited in the alley just to be sure the coast was clear. The guard post was abandoned.

“Thanks,” he said.

“Go save that star,” Andra said. “I’ll try to help your father, all right?”

Kyro shifted his weight from foot to foot. Andra laughed. “Go, Starboy.”

His cheeks warmed as he trotted toward the gate. When he looked back, Andra was gone.

Kyro was alone again. Cypher nudged him with his wet nose and wagged his tail. *Well, perhaps not completely alone*, Kyro thought.

They ran back through the woods. Soon the familiar spire of the watchtower rose up before him. At first glance, it seemed like telescopes dotted the roof haphazardly, but they’d been strategically placed. That was how his father knew the star had fallen and arrived so quickly in the village. But Kyro was the



one who had saved it. A small smile broke across his face. With a little help from Andra, of course.

He opened the door to the workshop and set the star on the workbench. Only then did he realize something was odd. Usually the burlap cases were torn, where age had worn the threads and the casings had torn off the hooks. But this one was different—it had a clean slice. He'd been in such a hurry that he hadn't noticed it.

Curious, he pawed through the pile of discarded casings his father kept to use as fire starters. Sure enough, not one had a clean slice.

Something like fear wormed its way through Kyro's belly.

The light in the workshop grew dimmer, and he straightened up. He didn't have time to worry about this now. The star was almost out.

Just as Kyro lifted the molten heart from the burlap casing, his father burst through the door, eyes wild. Bits of twigs and leaves stuck out of his hair, and his hands twisted as if they searched for something to grab on to. Kyro's heart slid into his feet. Hopefully Andra hadn't seen his father this way.

"Oh, thank heavens, you have the star." Tirin gulped in air. "Not a moment too soon."

His father opened a new casing, and snapped it closed the second Kyro placed the heart inside. Then he ran it outside with hardly another look at his son.

The sun was setting, and by the time Kyro reached the catapult, the star was loaded and the gears churned. Another noise caught his attention. Cypher growled at the woods.

The first villager reached the clearing as the star was flung into the heavens. Tirin leaned on the catapult. Kyro would never tell his father, but relief filled him too.

High above, the star stopped, and twinkled, and settled into place.

More villagers streamed from the tree line, frustration coloring their faces shades of angry red. The village leader, Shane, a man about his father's age with short peppered hair, stepped forward, scowling.

"You had no right." He pointed his finger at Tirin's chest. Kyro held his breath, and Cypher huddled closer to his leg.

"I'm the Star Shepherd of the region. I must fulfill my sacred duty. The stars are what keep all of us safe," Tirin said.

Kyro's heart sank into his shoes. The villagers were not pleased to hear this either. They grumbled, and shouts of "Fool!" rang out from the crowd. Kyro wanted nothing more than to hide inside, but he couldn't leave his father to their mercy.

"You *are* a fool," Shane sneered. "We never asked you to watch the stars here. We could've used some luck and a little coin. That's more helpful to us than another star in the sky. There are plenty of them to spare."

“Every star is critical,” Tirin said. “Any gaps in the starlight net could have dire repercussions.”

“We don’t believe in old wives’ tales about monsters. And our village has no place for those who advocate for them.” Shane stalked back to the path. The rest of the people followed, but not before hurling a few more insults in Tirin’s direction as he returned to his workshop.

Ice ran over Kyro’s face as their meaning sank in. Star Shepherds weren’t welcome in the village anymore. What had his father done?

And why did I have to help him?

