

royal family fled.' mr garza soft breeze
aww mac large bulletin board open common room
aether isle of elaidir generated fireplace
miss locke mob of sheep nash
smell of seawater large golden clock
last terms jaelyn hendrix flight of stairs
smaller rectangular structure dry soil heated games miss locke.'
chair large wooden door stench of manure
wooden archway old boot print whole way here.'
trail of freckle swirled windows frame black spiked hair card games
list of vacancies
coat of arms year of sunlight air of caution master hendrix
double door eye contact jaelyn garza games of fetch.'
nash maudud.' firm wooden fence pile of paper left shadowed pattern
quick bite grand staircase

Aberlen Archives

Kaiya Pedder

Chapter Two

Jaelyn Garza was interesting, to say the least. He had a light trail of freckles spread across his nose and there was dirt trapped under his fingernails and smeared on his trousers. He seemed to favour his left leg, walking as if one were longer than the other, and he was *very* thin. He'd been quiet all morning. McKenna thought she'd got a reaction out of him when they had passed the blacksmith's, but whatever she saw had vanished almost immediately.

'Most people take up either summer or part-time jobs to help out with things across the island. There's a list of vacancies on the bulletin board at the academy, but I'm sure Ramos would take you on if you're interested,' she said.

He stared at the signpost – a silhouetted anvil with *Ramos* written on it in block letters – that rocked back and forth on the side of the building. He opened his mouth to speak, but quickly closed it again and shoved his hands into his frayed pockets.

McKenna huffed – it was like talking to an empty shell – and swung around on one foot and guided him out of the village, towards the farmlands. They hiked up the narrow path; old boot prints were marked in the dry soil. The stench of manure grew stronger with every step, and sheep bleated from over the hillside. A soft breeze ruffled the loose strands of her hair. She glanced at Jaelyn. His hair was stiff, coiled together like forest vines, and the slimy smell of seawater still drifted around him. She slowed her pace to match his and suppressed a gag as the vile odours invaded her nose.

'So, how was the trip over here? I know travelling by boat isn't for everyone.'

He shrugged.

‘You were travelling on the Minotaur, right? My friend, Atticus Hyun, his Dad’s the captain, you probably met him on board. He’ll be in a bunch of your classes so at least there’ll be two familiar faces.’

He remained silent, staring down at his tattered boots.

McKenna fumbled with her hands; she would have preferred wrangling with twenty high-strung first years over this. ‘Do you know what classes you’re gonna take? You must have been thinking about it the whole way here.’

He shrugged again.

Her smile became even more strained. For a moment, she seriously contemplated slipping him a truth serum. At least that would get him talking.

They approached a firm wooden fence that separated them from a large field. She climbed onto the bottom rail and balanced her forearms on top, leaning out as far as she could. Jaelyn waited behind her, watching the organised chaos with minimum interest. Mobs of sheep were being chased towards a red-panelled barn by three farmhands. A pair had deviated from their flock and ran around the perimeter as if to tease their pursuers. A tuft of black spiked hair stood out amongst the white fluff and McKenna threw one arm in the air, waving vigorously. ‘Nash!’

Scarlet eyes locked with hers and he smirked. He yelled something to his colleagues and sprinted towards McKenna. If she thought Jaelyn smelt bad, Nash reeked of a mix between a wet dog and rotting compost. He sprang onto the fence next to her.

‘Jaelyn Garza, this is Nash Maudud.’

Nash gave him a two-fingered salute and Jaelyn said nothing, studying him with an air of caution.

McKenna hopped down from the railing. 'He'll be the most annoying part of your time at Aberlen.'

Nash gasped and brought a hand to his chest. 'Aww Mac, I didn't realise you thought so highly of me.'

She sneered and Nash kicked at her arm. Jaelyn had yet to take his eyes off him. He stared at his pointed ears and sharp canines. If Nash had noticed, he didn't seem to care.

'Nash is from Kōiver,' she said.

Jaelyn's posture loosened ever so slightly. 'How long you been here?' His voice was hoarse as if he'd been gargling nails.

Did he *actually* just speak? McKenna thought. It took all her self-restraint to stop her jaw from dropping to the floor.

'My sister and I came over during the Raid of the North. Managed to get out before the shit hit the fan.' Nash absently rubbed his palm against a faded scar that curved around his left eye. 'So where are you from?'

Jaelyn stiffened, and for a long while nothing was said. He hesitated before responding. 'Hiranine.'

'Really? Mac, isn't your family from there?'

'Yeah.' She lowered her voice and frowned. 'What's it like now?'

'It's uhh.' His voice quivered. 'It's not great. Dad says it's only got worse since the royal family fled.'

‘Your Dad?’ she said. ‘I didn’t see anyone with you at the docks.’

Jaelyn looked away and it felt as if a sinkhole had opened in her stomach.

‘He stayed behind.’

There it was. The words tumbled out before she had a chance to process them.

‘I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to –’

‘S’okay. We’re all in the same boat, right? It’s why we’re here.’

She hummed her reply and they fell silent. Nash drummed his fingers against the railing and the sound tore through her like a jagged knife. He leapt down from the fence. ‘I should get back to work. Mrs Davia will kill me if she catches me slacking.’ He turned to McKenna. ‘See you at Widow’s Fall later?’

She relaxed slightly and backstepped away from the farm. ‘Of course. Enjoy your game of fetch.’

Nash sniggered. ‘Piss off.’ He jogged back towards the barn and waved. ‘Nice to meet you, Jae.’

The tour was concluded by midday. They stopped at the bakery to grab a quick bite, had another painfully awkward introduction – this time with Evie – and headed over to the academy. The building was in the shape of a horseshoe and stood four-stories tall. The swirled window frames left shadowed patterns on the stone paving, and a large golden clock was bolted on the centre wall. Neatly trimmed bushes surrounded the foundations, decorated in exotic never-wilting flowers. Tucked behind the main building was the gym, a smaller rectangular structure not nearly as old as the former.

McKenna and Jaelyn walked up the red-tiled steps and into the entrance hall. The walls were a faded yellow, its colour drained from years of sunlight, and corridors were separated with ornate wooden archways. A large bulletin board was pinned opposite the front door, overflowing with posters for school clubs, last term's newsletters – that really should have been taken down by now, and job vacancies from around the island. A flyer displaying Aberlen's coat of arms caught McKenna's attention.

RECRUITS WANTED

Fight for a better future. Enlist in Aberlen's Army today!

Find us at 804 Raven's Avenue.

Must be age sixteen and up. Aether required.

Four more years, she thought. She directed Jaelyn to the closest corridor. 'Come on. Master Hendrix's office is on the top floor.'

They climbed up a grand staircase and she hung onto their earlier conversation. *We're all in the same boat.* Of course, she knew how fortunate she was; she was reminded of it every day. Living almost her entire life on the island, it felt like a protective bubble had been wrapped around her, shielding her from the harsh reality beyond the shoreline. She knew it was unreasonable, but she couldn't help but feel guilty. Most people, if not everyone, on the island were refugees; forced out of their homes and separated from their loved ones. Hendrix had invited her family to move to Aberlen when she was a few days old. They'd scarcely avoided Dralind's invasion only one month later. She was very, *very* lucky.

They reached the first floor and entered a large open common room. A group of the new fifth-year students occupied the couches to the left of the staircase. An

aether-generated fireplace crackled in front of them. The embers burned blue, red, and green, and sent coloured shadows dancing across the walls. Two more students sat by the window, locked in a heated game of *Misfortune* – a card game from the mermaid isle of Elaider. Deon observed the match, one foot pushed against the wall. He nodded to her and she grinned back. Jaelyn had already started towards the next flight of stairs and she hurried after him.

They clambered up two more floors, walked through an eerily dim-lit corridor, and stopped outside the large wooden doors to Hendrix's office. McKenna knocked three times and folded her arms under her cloak. A chair skidded across the floorboards and fast-paced steps grew closer. The double doors swung open and Hendrix greeted them with a tired smile.

‘Ah, Miss Locke. And Mr Garza, was it?’

Jaelyn nodded and Hendrix shook his hand.

‘Welcome to Aberlen. I trust you were given an enjoyable and informative tour?’ He ushered them over to his desk and sat back in his chair.

‘Yeah,’ Jaelyn said.

Hendrix laughed. ‘Well, I won't keep you long.’ He flicked through a pile of papers and handed one to him. ‘This is the signup sheet for your optional classes this year. Pick any two that suit your fancy. Don't worry, you're in no rush. Come to my office on your first day and we'll get you settled. If you have any further questions, don't hesitate to ask either myself or a student representative.’

He nodded again, seemingly only half paying attention as he skimmed through the page.

‘Now, if you would be so kind as to wait in the corridor while I have a moment with Miss Locke.’

She looked to the floor and cursed; she’d completely forgotten about *the talk*. Jaelyn excused himself and when the door clicked shut, Hendrix leaned back and gestured for her to sit in the chair across from him. ‘I wanted to talk to you about your options for this year.’

The sinking feeling returned in her stomach. ‘What about them?’

‘I’m afraid you haven’t been accepted into Developing Your Aether, which unfortunately means you also cannot attend Aether in Combat.’

‘What do you mean? Why not?’ she said, not fully registering his words.

The wrinkles on his face had never looked so heavy. His voice remained calm and slow. ‘The class has reached its capacity. Therefore, we cannot take on any more students.’

‘But Sir, if I don’t get into that class how else am I going to learn how to use aether?’

‘There’s more to life than just aether. Most people don’t ever learn how to use it. Your brother didn’t.’

‘I am not my brother.’ She pushed herself from the chair and began pacing wildly. ‘Mum and Dad put you up to this, didn’t they?’

‘Miss Locke –’

‘Why can’t you just drop someone else?’

‘Miss Locke, if you would please calm down –’

‘No, I’m serious.’ She marched back toward him and placed both hands on his desk. ‘Hendrix, this is me we’re talking about. You know I’ll put ten times the effort in than anyone else.’

He scowled. ‘That’s Master Hendrix to you.’

She flinched at his tone, her cheeks burning red. Hendrix nodded to the chair and she slumped back down.

‘There are plenty of other options that you could quite easily excel in. Myron has told me you have been an incredible apprentice at his alchemy shop, and I believe you came top of your class in History – neither of which require aether.’

She said nothing, refusing to make eye contact.

‘McKenna, I am truly sorry, but this is how it has to be.’ He flicked through the papers again and handed her the options sheet. ‘If you have any further questions, you know where to find me.’

She snatched the paper and stood, heading straight for the doors.

‘And Miss Locke.’

She turned, a bitter frown on her face.

‘Would you mind taking Mr Garza to the nurse’s office? He was looking rather pale, don’t you think?’

‘Will do,’ she said quietly. She yanked the double doors open and stomped out. They swung shut with a resounding *SLAM!*