

DREAMSTRIDER

Also by Lindsay Smith

Sekret
Skandal



DREAM STRIDER



LINDSAY SMITH



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*For Dahlia, Ellen, and Leah,
who always push me to chase my dreams
(and add more kissing scenes)*

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Prologue



I always dreamed too big, too bright, too much. Every night, in the dank corners of the tunnels, the knobby spines of other tunnelers digging into my own, the Dreamer filled my head with promises of a better life. A life of sunlight and beauty—a place where I'd have purpose, and I could serve the Dreamer and his faithful people in the Barstadt Empire. He filled my head with hope.

But hope might as well be poison to a tunneler like me. We're not meant to become anything more than what we are: the unseen, unheard hands that carry out the menial tasks for Barstadt's dazzling daytime world. Hope seeped into my bones and weighed them down. For who wants to scrub at grime, sink her hands into painful limewater, and pocket away crumbs, day after day? Not when her nightly dreams hint at a life of real beds and warm stews as she defends Barstadt from nightmares and the enemies at its borders. I was poisoned with such dreams, and I had no way to flush them out.

Then Professor Albrecht Hesse offered me the antidote.

My tunnel's ganglord rented me to the university for cleaning duties, but in Professor Hesse, I found a friend. He knew so much about the Dreamer, and Hesse was more than happy to teach me, chatting with me throughout the night while he monitored his experiments and I tidied his lecture rooms. I was bursting with questions about the Dreamer and the meaning of my dreams, but the more Hesse taught me of the sleeping world, the more I realized I knew nothing of the waking one. Soon I begged him to teach me to read and to write, to explain the history and politics not only of our home, the Barstadt Empire, but also its colonies and other neighbors in the Central Realms. But dreams—it always came back to my dreams, where I earned glory and fortune protecting Barstadt from pirates, enemy armies, gang leaders, monsters, and any other evil my sleeping mind conjured up.

“You dream so vividly—far more than my jaded students,” Hesse told me one evening, while he read over my meager attempts at recording my dreams and I rushed to finish my cleaning tasks. “A gift like this should not be wasted.” He offered me a chair. “How would you like to learn to make your dreams come true?”

As if there were any answer I could give but a desperate yes.

Hesse pulled a red leather journal from his desk drawer and sketched a girl sleeping in a city. “Every night when you sleep, you dream in the world of shallow dreams.” He drew a trail like a tether from her down into a forested land. “But there is a shared dreamworld, as well, for the Dreamer's most faithful.

That world is called Oneiros. It exists in perpetuity, watched over by the Dreamer. The souls of the Dreamer's most devout can enter Oneiros, bound to their bodies by a slender cord."

I was bound by a thousand ropes in those days. Paying tithes to the tunnel enforcers and turning over most of my earnings to the gangs. Hunting for crumbs to feed myself and my half-brothers and sisters. Enduring the cruel scrape of my mother's nails as she stared through me and begged me to bring her another wad of Lullaby resin to let her sink into dreamless sleep.

"I can take you to Oneiros, if you like." Hesse pulled two vials from his laboratory stand and held one out to me. "The world of your dreams."

I considered all the ropes that bound me to this world, but it was my dreams that decided for me. Perhaps Oneiros could make them feel more real. Perhaps in Oneiros, I could find a way to make them so.

I took the vial.



One minute I was sitting in Hesse's study, and the next, I was tugged away, like the lurch of sudden sleep. Sunlight surrounded me, golden, liquid sunlight dripping down my skin. To a girl from the tunnels, that sunlight I'd rarely glimpsed in the real world convinced me I'd do whatever it took to make this my life.

I ran first, sprinting across the vivid jade grass, over flowers

that twinkled as though their petals were made of jewels. But my feet were weightless—I stretched my legs and leaped in great bounds until I was flying, arms wide, soaring into the fresh, clean air. A vast quilted land unfolded beneath me—fields and forests and whitewashed stone cottages. Mountains loomed in the distance, and in a valley to my right spread, a city with a central spire. Trailing behind me, more felt than seen, was that golden tether from Hesse’s sketch. But this rope didn’t try to restrain me—it only kept me whole.

As I flew toward the spire in the sparkling city, I recognized the two golden posts at its crown, thrust skyward: they represented the Dreamer’s Embrace, guiding his faithful toward their dreams. I landed atop the crown and, as I scanned the beautiful world around me, tears stung my eyes. For the first time in my life, my dreams seemed within reach.

In a soft gust of air, Professor Hesse landed beside me. “What do you think, Livia?” he asked.

I blinked away the tears as I turned to answer him. “I think I like it better than the real world.”

Hesse smiled, but it looked forced. “So do I.”



We entered Oneiros rarely, at first. Hesse taught me how to navigate it only after all my work was done and we were sure my gang masters wouldn’t find out. But I hungered for the dream-world with an ache that deadened everything around me, and Hesse was only too happy to indulge my pleading for another

journey, while the dust thickened along the university's baseboards and the floors dulled with grime. At the end of each trip to Oneiros, I hurried back to the tunnel entrance, too many chores left undone.

But one night, I lingered in Oneiros after Hesse departed to tend to his work, and I returned to the waking world much later than usual; thin tendrils of sunlight were already stretching across his office windows. In a panic I grabbed my cleaning rags—I'd be punished by the gang lieutenant if I wasn't at the tunnel entrance before sunrise. Just as I was about to hurdle out of Hesse's office, though, I was stopped short by the sharp sounds of an argument in the next room.

“—but you said yourself she isn't ready. I don't think it's worth upsetting the gangs over one little tunneler.”

“She's clumsy and careless, I admit. Stunted by life in the tunnels. But she's learning. She's not ready yet, but she's the best prospect I have,” I heard Professor Hesse say. “I can't keep her from her duties to the gangs much longer. Someone's bound to complain. We have to choose now.”

My breath ached in my lungs. Clumsy, careless, stunted—Hesse had always showed me nothing but kindness.

“I don't suppose you could hire her directly from them? Give you more time to see whether she's really suited to our work?” the other voice asked. “We can't give her this kind of power over the sleeping if there's a chance we could lose her back to the gangs.”

“No, if we ascribe too much value to her, it'll attract the gang leader's interest. I prefer we give her temporary papers—purchase

her outright, and if she demonstrates her worth, then maybe when she's older we can grant her her freedom," Hesse said.

"*If* she demonstrates her worth," the other man echoed.

I spun away from the door, squeezing my eyes shut. I'd never heard Hesse speak this way before—so callously, with none of the patience and kindness I was used to from him. I knew my life was worth less as a tunneler, but to hear him, of all people, speak of me like a belonging—the way the gang lieutenants spoke of me—

"Hey, it's all right. You can't take them too seriously."

I nearly leaped out of my skin at the sound of the voice. A boy perched on top of Hesse's desk, chin propped in his fist. He was only a few years older than me, dressed in the impeccable suit of a young aristocrat, but with a wry smile that belied his formal clothes.

"I'm Brandt," he said, looking me right in the eye. Dark blond hair thatched his tawny face, hanging into his eyes without diminishing their intensity.

I forced myself to look away. "I'm—I'm not supposed to be talking to you." I shrank back from him, pressing against the wooden door.

Brandt hopped off of the table and stepped toward me. He moved with an ease I could only dream of—confident and unhurried. "It's okay. I know all about you—your secret's safe. Hesse says you're an incredible dreamer." He held out one hand to me. "That he can barely keep up with you in the dream-world."

I started to reach for Brandt's hand, then thought better of it and pulled myself to my feet. "You've been to Oneiros, too?"

"Are you kidding? I'm no good at dreams. My skills lie elsewhere." Brandt plucked a piece of parchment off Hesse's desk and began folding it as he talked. "I can lift the mustache right off of a constable, though, and persuade a banker to give away all his coins."

"You can't either," I said, crossing my arms.

Brandt smiled at me, lopsided. "Well, maybe not yet, but it's good to have dreams."

He finished folding the blank sheet into a paper sculpture of a lily. I scowled at him as he held it out to me. "What are you doing here?" I asked.

"We're going to work together. Hasn't Hesse told you? He's got big plans for you."

I stared, something tightening in my gut. "For me? But . . . why?"

"Because you're special." Brandt tilted his head. "There's no one else who can do what you do."

"I—I'm afraid you're mistaken." I backed toward the door, twisting the cleaning rag in my hands. "I'm just a tunneler. And I have to get back underground."

Brandt took another step toward me. "But what about your dreams?"

I froze. My dreams stirred inside me, restless, unable to stretch their wings.

"I heard you have dreams of doing great deeds for the

Dreamer and Barstadt,” Brandt said. I turned around to face him. “Is it true?” His expression softened, open and warm. “Because I can’t dream like that, but I’d love to hear about them.”

For all his ease, the tunneler in me was suspicious. I didn’t survive in the tunnels without suspicion in my bones. “Why? What can you give me in exchange?”

He tilted his head. “Well, I can show you what you need to know about the Ministry.”

“The Ministry?” I asked.

But then the door swung open, and Professor Hesse and another gentleman stormed into the office. Brandt tensed, snapping to attention like a soldier, but Hesse went straight toward me and clutched me by both shoulders.

“Livia. You told me once that you wished you could be free of the gangs.” Hesse’s face tightened as he studied me. “Is that still what you want?”

I stared back, trying to reconcile the callous man I’d just overheard with the kindly Hesse I’d always known. Which one was the truth? “Of course it is.”

“You’ll have to work hard,” he said. “Not for the gangs, but for Barstadt. For the Dreamer himself. Are you willing to do that?”

My heartbeat throbbed in my ears. Barstadt was a land of growth, of achievement, of expansion. How could a malnourished little girl possibly embody those things? Yet the Dreamer hinted at greatness for me. For all of Barstadt. “I am.”

Hesse nodded, glancing over his shoulder toward the other man. “Good, good. Livia, this is Minister Durst from the

Ministry of Affairs. He's going to purchase citizenship papers for you."

I swayed backward. "My papers? But I—" My head spun; I felt my knees buckling beneath me. "You mean I'm going to be free? I don't have to live in the tunnels any longer?"

Minister Durst pursed his lips. "Not quite. The Ministry of Affairs will retain the papers for safekeeping until you're old enough to determine your own fate. But you'll be free of your masters in the tunnels, and we'll take charge of your training along with Hesse." He tugged at his coat lapels. "It's quite an honor to work for the Ministry. And we are honored to have someone with your potential."

"But what *is* the Ministry?" I asked.

The minister turned toward Hesse. "I thought you'd taught her the most basic of—"

"We're the Emperor's secret police," Brandt said, words spilling from him eagerly. "We keep tabs on the aristocrats and the gangs, disrupt criminal activities, conduct spy work abroad . . . I mean, I haven't done any of that *yet*, but I will." He grinned at me again, that wide gas-lit smile. "We can learn together."

"Spy work?" But if Hesse thought I was clumsy, slow-witted, daft . . . "I'm not sure I'm cut out to be a spy."

Hesse snorted. "Don't be foolish, child. What you offer is somewhat different."

Brandt stepped forward. "Anyone can be a spy," he said. "But no one can use the dreamworld like you can. What you're going to do is something much better than basic spy work."

"No. I'm afraid you're all mistaken. I'm just a tunneler.

And—and I really need to return.” I looked down, face burning, and found the crumpled paper lily in my hand.

Hesse’s grip eased on my shoulders. “But Livia, you can be so much more. I’m going to teach you how.” Hesse smiled then—a real smile, the sort I only ever saw from him when we were in Oneiros. “I’m going to teach you to dreamstride.”

Part One



DREAMS

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Chapter One



I'll never get used to those first few moments of dreamstriding, when I open my host's eyes and look down at my own body crumpled before me. Today, it's in the hay of a stable hundreds of fathoms from home: fear tightens my jaw even in sleep, honey curls spill over my ruddy, freckled shoulders, and my chest flutters with shallow breaths I no longer control. I want nothing more than to burrow back into my shed skin.

But before I can return to myself, Brandt and I have a mission to complete. Everything depends on me and my skill.

While the Ministry employs dozens of spies like Brandt, each better trained and with sharper reflexes than me, when the mission is this critical, I'm the one person they can't afford not to use. I've endangered lives with my clumsiness, blown informants' covers with my slow wits, but this cursed gift forever guarantees me a spot on the team. Yet I wish anyone else could have been given this skill. It pulled me from the sewage-laced tunnels I was born to and gave me a purpose, the life I'd longed for, but

the weight of failure hangs heavy on my soul. I wish I could give this gift to someone more deserving.

But there is no one else. I call myself a dreamstrider because there are no other dreamstriders to protest.

While my body sleeps, I inhabit the body of General Cold Sun, a top military commander in Barstadt's neighboring kingdom across the southern strait. The Land of the Iron Winds. Our sources report that the Land of the Iron Winds is preparing to attack Barstadt, but we've not been able to gather proof or plans. And so this is what all of Hesse's research into the dreamworld led to: while the general's consciousness sleeps in Oneiros, I can fill his skin, walking and talking as if I'm him.

At first, Cold Sun's skin hangs awkwardly around my soul like a wet shift, impossible to shrug into place. His joints move all wrong, like he's a crude marionette, and I'm not used to seeing the world from his height—the tops of doorframes loom dangerously close, and I have a view of the cowlicked crown of Brandt's head. But slowly, I adjust. I steal into the gaps between his heartbeats and the rhythm of his breath. I ease into the general's muscles, his bones, his very marrow. For the next few hours, while the mothwood smoke we piped into his carriage keeps his consciousness dormant in Oneiros, his body is mine.

"Oh! Livia! Why, I can hardly tell a difference." Brandt grins up at me as he wriggles into the valet's outfit.

I try to twist General Cold Sun's face into a scowl, but it quickly breaks into a grin. "A flattering look for me, don't you think?" My words grate through the general's vocal cords like coarse sand. I help Brandt scatter hay over my abandoned body,

covering up that cold, vacant face, as well as the unconscious general's valet, whose clothes Brandt's now wearing. "Let's find out what the Commandant's planning."

Brandt leads us from the stables, and in only a few paces, his confidence melts into the guise of the meek, hunched little manservant we'd drugged inside the general's carriage. Unlike me, he can become someone else without leaving himself behind. But this is what it means to dreamstride—this is the freedom Hesse promised me. I hold the tether from General Cold Sun's body. So long as I hold that tether, my soul can control his body in the waking world while his soul slumbers harmlessly in the dreamworld.

As we round the stables, Brandt halts with a sharp inhale. A towering fortress of black metal juts from the earth before us, turrets like claws raking through the rust-hued sky. We've reached the Citadel, the seat of power for the Commandant—the supreme commander, general, and for all intents and purposes, god—of the Land of the Iron Winds. It smells sharp like a smith's furnace, molten and a little bit like blood.

"Now to see if our spies were lying to us or not," Brandt says. Foreigners are barred from entering the Land, and all subjects are forbidden from leaving. Everything we know about the Citadel and the Commandant was smuggled out of the Land at great cost. Entering it terrifies me, but Brandt is electrified. He was born for this—the chase, the subterfuge, the danger. I can almost see the plans spinning like a weaver's loom in his mind. I have no such gift. If I were in control of my own stomach, I'd probably be emptying it right now.

The Citadel's front entrance is cut into the vertical ridges of the fortress, a heavy portcullis raised over it, with guards on either side. They shift their weight as we approach, halberds swinging from hand to hand like great pendulums. The glowing doorway behind them casts their faces in shadow and stretches their horned-helmet silhouettes across the slate path.

"Compatriots," the first guard barks. "Speak to the winds, so the trees may filter the truth of your words."

I barely manage to conceal a shudder. We've studied the reports about the speaking style of the Land of the Iron Winds, but it still gives me chills. "I present General Cold Sun, whose loyalty to the Commandant no winds can erode." Brandt's Iron Winds accent is flawless—airy as a loaf of Kruger's bread and duller than dirt. He keeps his eyes on the ground and his hands clasped before him.

"That is for the Iron Winds to decide," the guard says. I can't read his expression—in part because of the failing light, and in part because our Ministry instructors stressed that a general should not make eye contact with a mere guard. "The Commandant is expecting you. Please proceed."

My racing thoughts echo through the general's hollow body as we cross the threshold, and I sense it in Brandt as well. In each of our missions, we reach a moment when we've bound ourselves to the whims of fate, and the only way out is to survive whatever lies ahead. I used to think Brandt and I functioned best in this moment—our strengths harmonizing, his hand ready to catch mine in our intricate waltz that has foiled gang leaders and corrupt aristocrats. But since the Stargazer Incident, I can

only pray that we work so well this evening. I know Brandt can play his part. But the question is, can I play mine?

The portcullis slams down, and a locking system clicks and whirs into place behind us. As we pass through the hall, I glance up at the vaulted ceiling paneled with thousands of mirrors, all throwing back the reflection of General Cold Sun with Brandt beside him. I can see other figures, too, lurking in the corners—the tufted hats of hidden guards, tucked behind the corridor’s ribs.

Focus, Livia. One misstep and I’ll get Brandt killed, and my soul trapped in Oneiros, far away from my body’s tether—and the Nightmare Wastes are a deadly prospect I’d rather not dwell on. Brandt raises his head, breaking character just long enough to give me an encouraging nod. It’s time.

Now, I have to figure out where in the nightmares we’re supposed to go.

I cast my thoughts back into the forests of Oneiros. When I am in another’s body, my consciousness straddles two worlds; my subject, however, stays asleep in the dreamworld. General Cold Sun’s consciousness threads through the woods in the form of a calm, cool stream. As long as he stays asleep, his body is vacant enough for me to occupy. But to find the information we need, I’ll have to disturb his slumber. I can’t press too deep into his memories—I have to let them trickle out naturally. I’ve practiced this countless times. I can get away with small ripples—he’ll remember the glimpses of wakefulness as only a hazy memory—but every disturbance will tug at his consciousness and risk waking him up.

If the general wakes up, he can cast me out of his body, leaving my soul untethered in Oneiros. And if that happens . . . I say a quick prayer to the Dreamer to protect me and dangle my fingertips in the stream.

General Cold Sun's thoughts trickle past me, chaotic, like the illogical knotted yarn of a mind on the edge of sleep. I sink my hand deeper into the stream and spread my fingertips wide. I have to sift through the thoughts and bring them to order.

I channel General Cold Sun's consciousness and let his deeply ingrained habits take over. His instinct is to charge down the hallway before us, and I follow his lead: he remains oblivious of the guards, paying no mind to the strange bared-teeth sharp corners and polished black stone of the Citadel. With Cold Sun's guidance, I stride with purpose straight for the compound's heart, focused only on the Commandant himself.

"Come," I bark. The voice from the general's mouth startles me, harsher than I'd intended. Brandt falls into step behind me. My feet—General Cold Sun's feet—know the way, and his thoughts lap at my fingertips to guide me.

Our journey through the Citadel coils on itself like the roots of a tree. I quickly lose my sense of direction, but the general's instincts seem to be carrying us along the right path. We approach a suite of guards flanking double doors.

I clear my throat, waiting for them to open the door. Brandt fidgets beside me. I glance toward him, about to scowl, until I realize he's trying to prompt me. Oh, yes—they want the passphrase. I dip deeper into the general's stream of thoughts within Oneiros to coax the passphrase from him. The water runs faster

the deeper I sink into it. “You shelter the Commandant as a roof shelters us from snow,” I say.

“But even roofs can collapse, General. We shall never fall.” The captain of the guard snaps his boots together and stands aside.

The heavy doors creak open.

Thick shadows fill the hall before us, punctured only by wrought-iron chandeliers, their chains twisted around columns like vines. The smell of cold metal washes over us. At the far end of the chamber, on a raised platform, a figure sits bathed in candlelight. We stride toward him in near-darkness. No, not one figure—two, but the second springs away from the first and disappears down the platform in a flurry of sparkling gems. Sapphires, diamonds, flecks of silver.

Brandt and I glance at each other, my suspicion mirrored on his face for only a moment before he resumes his role. Was that a Barstadter who just slipped away? Our aristocrats stud their faces with jewels, cultivating elaborate, swirling designs on their forehead, cheeks, and throat as they accumulate power and wealth. Perhaps we aren’t the only Barstadders in the Land of the Iron Winds after all. The very thought chills me through.

We’re too far away to make out the Commandant’s face, but we know what to expect from our informants’ sketches and smuggled bits of artwork: cut-glass cheekbones and a pointed, gaunt jaw. Yet when we reach the base of the platform, we find a soft-faced man not five years my senior. I flinch, struggling to keep the general calm despite my shock. This young man with the faintest tuft of a goatee on his bone-pale chin can’t possibly

be the same Commandant who's ruled the Land of the Iron Winds since he seized power thirty years ago and enforced the Iron Winds code of strength and victory at all costs. My mind churns over the possibilities—maybe he overthrew the previous Commandant, or maybe he's the first Commandant's son.

Whatever the case, we've been trained to lure information from the wrong man.

"General," he says in an uneven tone. "You walk against the wind, but you do not fall."

General Cold Sun's pulse starts to canter. Not falling to the wind sounds like a good thing, but the Commandant is looking at me like there's something I should do. Am I supposed to be kneeling? I glance toward Brandt. He's not urging me to kneel, so I stand as tall as I can and try to remember our training. I've rehearsed for this moment even if the Commandant's identity has changed.

"I shall never fall with the Iron Winds at my back," I say. The general's voice ricochets through the rows of columns, then echoes back toward us in the dead air. The Commandant stands unmoving, unblinking, and panic cinches tight around me. What have I done? Everything in me wants to abandon the mission and flee, but I force myself to hold the general's breath and wait for a response.

Slowly, the young Commandant smiles, then charges down the stairs to grip my hands in his own. "You are early," he says, before giving both my hands a hearty shake with his. He's much shorter than Cold Sun and pudgy in the midsection. No, this is certainly not the old, gaunt Commandant.

“I did not wish to keep my Commandant waiting when victory is so close,” I say. The Commandant lifts his eyebrows for a fraction of a moment—have I misspoken again? We were told the old Commandant demanded complete and utter subservience at every turn, but maybe this Commandant distrusts excessive posturing. My head hurts just considering the possibilities. These personality games are Brandt’s realm. I know his instincts won’t fail us; that boy could talk our way out of the grips of Nightmare himself. But Brandt can’t pose as the general for me.

The Commandant holds one arm out to his side. “Come, then. Let us waste no more time.”

I climb the dais on wobbly legs. The barrel-chested General Cold Sun must weigh three times what my body does, and though walking usually works out the kinks, stairs are another matter entirely. Sweat builds under the general’s armpits; in Oneiros, the stream is flowing faster now. I pray to the Dreamer that Cold Sun’s slumber will hold.

The Commandant escorts me to a low wooden table at one end of the platform, where a scroll painted in shades of brown and black is weighted down across its surface. It takes me a moment to recognize the design as a map of the Itinerant Sea, where it swoops up the western edge of the Land of the Iron Winds and sneaks through the narrow strait that separates the Land from the Barstadt Empire in the north. Black iron figurines in the shapes of horses’ heads, pikemen, war vessels, and cannons line up along the Commandant’s edge of the table.

I lean forward, scarcely able to contain the excitement

skittering through me. It was all worth it—my uncertain dream-striding, the outrageous expense in smuggling us into the Citadel, our months of preparation to infiltrate the Iron Winds' culture. Because our informants were right.

The Land of the Iron Winds is preparing to invade Barstadt—and I'm looking at the battle plans.

The Commandant shuttles three of the war vessels to a port city on the western shore. I squint to make out the stylized lettering of the city's name. Grast. "The Second Fleet will await your troops in Grast in one month's time," the Commandant says. "Will they be ready by then?"

Were this the older Commandant we'd prepared for, I would know it's not a question at all, but an order, unless I fancy getting Cold Sun's head conveniently detached from his body for him while he sleeps. This Commandant, however, seems more casual than the man described in our reports. Nonetheless, I'd rather err on the side of caution. I suspect one doesn't become Commandant without an explosive blend of shrewdness and egomania.

"Whatever the Iron Winds . . ." I glance toward Brandt, but he's looking through the living space on the other side of the dais, searching for additional clues while the Commandant's focus is on me. I cast about for a suitably formal word. "Demands."

The Commandant nods. "And what of the battle preparations I proposed?"

A spicy curse springs to my tongue—well, the general's—but I stop from voicing it. I knew I'd have to sink deeper into the

general's thoughts sooner or later, and this is far too important not to take the risk.

In Oneiros, I dip my bare feet into the stream and settle them into the loose dirt at the bottom. Suddenly a cloud passes over the sun, flooding the forest with darkness. The birds cease their chatter. Am I interfering too much with Cold Sun's thoughts? I fight to rein in my panic. *Focus, Livia*, I remind myself. *Direct the stream and nothing more.* The battle preparations. How did the Commandant send them to Cold Sun? By raven, by horseback messenger? *Hurry, General, yield your secrets. Awaken just enough to provide the answer.*

The stream churns, frantic, agitated by my probing. *Elite squadrons*, it cries. *Troops from the west.* But the water is leaping up, crashing against the banks—I've pushed too far; I'm letting him wake too much. He'll remember this conversation as more than just a hazy dream. I need to hurry and leave the Citadel before he wakes up completely.

"We shall have two of the elite squadrons prepared for Barstadt City's dockside gates." I'm rushing through the answers I gathered from the general's thoughts. "And the ground troops will arrive from the west." *Please, Dreamer, don't let him awaken.* But then another thought of the general's reaches his lips before I can stop it—"You're not seriously considering the mystic's proposal, are you?"

Brandt's back is to me, but I see him pause, hands withdrawing from whatever he'd been reaching for. The Land of the Iron Winds is supposed to be stern, revering subservience to the Commandant above all else. Nothing in our research indicates

they are given over to mysticism about anything but the Commandant's supremacy.

"That isn't your concern," the Commandant says. "If his aid ensures our victory, then I must seize such an opportunity." But the Commandant's gaze lingers on the heart of the Land of the Iron Winds map, a hatchmarked patch of earth labeled only as "Quarry."

The general leans forward with a determination I'm not controlling. "It's madness, you know." The stream rushes faster now, threatening to sweep me under, as his thoughts pour out of his mouth before I can rein them in. "We should leave the dreamworld to the Barstaders who understand it. We have no right to meddle in metaphysical gibberish—"

"You think I don't know that?" the Commandant hisses. "But the mystic has shown us proof of what he can do. If he can pull *that* off with the entire fleet, then Barstadt's navy won't stand a chance."

I strain to get ahead of Cold Sun's thoughts—I could take advantage of this outburst of information by asking the Commandant what exactly he means to pull off—but the general purses his lips, squashing my words down.

The Commandant's eyes take on a glassy sheen as he continues. "The mystic's dream interpretations are too uncanny. His messages from my father . . ." My mind whirs. Does he mean the old Commandant? Perhaps he's not dead after all, or else this mystic is pulling off quite the con. "And he foretells a great victory for us, atop the spine of a mighty warbeast. The

Barstadt Empire shall tremble and bow under our fearsome gale!”

Is the warbeast some new weapon the Iron Winds has designed? Dreamer curse their allegorical speech for muddling it all up! I want to poke further at that thought, but General Cold Sun steers the conversation, my grip on his consciousness slipping once more. “This mystic is a charlatan, preying on us. I’ve never known you to be one for superstition. It doesn’t behoove your father’s philosophy: man as god, Commandant as controller of the Winds of Fate. Strength and victory above all.”

The Commandant’s hand trembles; his fingers dance across the sharp edge of a tiny ship’s sail. “I fear if we don’t give him what he wants, he will turn the warbeast’s power on us.”

The general’s shoulders tense; I want to learn more about this mystic, but Cold Sun is on the verge of waking. I lift one foot out of the stream in Oneiros, trying to let him settle back into sleep, and let his thoughts wash over my other foot. *Barstadters. Agents. Traitors*, they say. “And what of our agents within Barstadt City’s walls?”

The Commandant swishes his hand, as if the question was beneath him, but he betrays himself with a glance over his shoulder, toward where the jewel-spangled figure disappeared. “Yes, yes, they will carry out their tasks. You needn’t worry about them.”

But my efforts to ease back from Cold Sun’s consciousness didn’t work. Within Oneiros, the stream is bubbling, rising, heating up, threatening to boil over. I’m out of time.

I try to move Cold Sun's arms to signal Brandt, but the general's body fights against me. I'm getting squeezed out as his consciousness tries to return. In Oneiros, steam pours off of the water as it rises from its banks, sharp and acidic against the dark earth. There's no doubt he can sense me now. I splash back onto the forest floor, but it's not enough. The stream turns red—molten.

“Commandant—” General Cold Sun speaks freely now. “I fear that I am—We may have been—”

Brandt rushes forward from the shadows, the perfect portrait of the concerned valet. “General, we must return to our carriage. Take you to a physicker.” He casts a glance toward the Commandant. “I'm afraid our fortress has not been spared the latest fever coursing upon the winds.”

Dreamer, bless Brandt and his calm, quick mind. Red lava oozes from the stream in Oneiros, turning the trees into columns of fire. The general's instincts war against mine; even as I fight to stride down the long corridor leading out of the Citadel, he tries to turn the other way. Bile tickles the back of my throat—it's more his, now—and dimly, I feel Brandt's hand gripping our elbow.

The Commandant is shouting at us, but I can only hear the shapes of his words, not their substance. We must be violating twelve different social customs right now, but whatever punishment the Commandant has in mind for us is nothing compared to the danger that awaits me in Oneiros if I can't get back to my body in time.

My vision blurs as if an earthquake is jostling my sight away from the general's eyes. He's forcing me out. I'm adrift in Oneiros, bait for the hungry void that I dare not tempt. The Nightmare Wastes feed on fear and doubt; they swallow up souls that are lost from their bodies, and forever trap them in emptiness. I have to cling to the general, keep control of my soul until we reach my body—

Until I can—

Rest your head, and join us in eternal rest . . .

The Wastes reach out for me like the embrace of winter frost. *Come, they beckon. Forget these worlds. Forget your dreams and your life that can't compare.* A simple request, as insistent as sleep tugging at my eyelids. *You needn't struggle any longer. Surrender, and suffer no more.*

"Livia, please, stay with me," Brandt pleads, as he guides me through the Citadel. Then he says, softer, "Dreamer, please show us the way . . ."

The Wastes chuff at me like wolves checking their prey. Their tug is so strong, stronger than it's ever been before. Where once the Wastes whispered behind my back, they now seem to have surrounded me, their urges twisting around my limbs like rope. *You'll only fail again. Surrender to us, pay the price for your weakness . . .* It tempts me more than it ever has before.

Hay, I smell hay and the tang of manure flooding General Cold Sun's nose. *Please, Dreamer, protect me for just a moment longer.* I can't feel the general's feet or his hands; I don't know if we're close enough yet for my soul in Oneiros to seize the

tether to my own body. His consciousness presses in on me like all-consuming flames. And still I cling to his body. I can't be cast out, open to the Wastes.

Then I catch a glimpse through Cold Sun's eyes—I want to weep at the sight of me, crumpled in the stall. I take a deep mental breath and prepare to seize my body's tether to return to myself. Just a bit closer.

But the general's body swings around, and he turns on Brandt, his thoughts crackling like flames. *No!* I try to scream at Brandt, because I'm not certain we're close enough for me to seize the lead to pull me back into my body.

Cold Sun is awake and forcing me out.

“What is the meaning of this—”

Brandt cocks his fist, swings it at us—

And everything goes black.