

HOLLANDOS

EYES OF THE PRINCE

PROLOGUE

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CHAPTER 1

Prologue: The Hero of Hollandos

The young prince gazed from the palace balcony. His eyes fell upon the capital below. Amstos sprawled like a sea of orange rooftops, spread across thousands of differently coloured buildings. Though the sun was setting, this vast city never truly slept. Bustling streets wound through the chaos, alive with citizens hauling carts, riding bikes, driving wagons, and selling goods. He leaned further over the balcony, his eyes following a band of musicians, before drifting to a group of children running past them. His heart raced, knowing that one day they would all look up to him.

After admiring his future domain, his gaze drifted upwards, towards a single green star blazing in the sky. Emeros. This was no ordinary star. It was one of the Seven Stars, representing the virtue of duty. A passion burned within him as he stared at it. Emeros always loomed above him, casting its green light high up in the sky, as if waiting for the day he would become king. His path would be the path of duty, as was that of all great rulers before him.

‘Are you coming?’ asked a deep voice.

The prince flinched, stepping back from the balcony and into the study. Bookshelves and paintings lined the walls, and at the centre sat his father. King Frederick’s mighty black beard shimmered in the flickering light of the fireplace as he looked at him. Usually, he would tell his son which book to fetch for their nightly reading. But tonight was different. Tonight, he invited the prince to choose the tale he wished to hear.

The prince could hardly believe it; he seldom got to pick. But when he did, he never hesitated. He nearly tripped over the thick royal carpets as he dashed to the cabinet and grabbed a hefty book with a crown painted on its cover.

His father chuckled softly. ‘You’ve heard this tale countless times. Is there not another story you’d rather explore?’

The prince shook his head. Though he’d heard it a hundred times, it was the only story he ever wanted to hear. None compared to the legendary saga of King Viktor Kroon the First, except perhaps the one about the Outsider Uprising. But that was a tale for another night. The prince eagerly placed the book in his father’s hand and climbed into his lap, nestling against him.

Frederick smiled warmly, admiring his son. He flipped open the heavy cover and began to read in his deep, steady voice. ‘Dire news had reached the capital of the Netherlands: the Prince of Orange had fallen. War was closing in on them, and the master of the port, the Herringshark Captain—’

‘King Viktor!’ blurted the prince.

‘Not yet,’ replied his father. ‘The *Herringshark Captain* took matters into his own hands. He rallied his people, vowing the entire fleet would depart within a week and

carry them all to safety. In desperation, thousands flocked to the harbour. Long lines stretched across the city as citizens waited to board the overloaded ships, placing their faith in his promise of a new land.'

The thought of Amstos's streets empty, of shops closed and laughter gone, made the young prince curl up tighter. He could never abandon his home.

Frederick continued reading about the long voyage. How the brave settlers sailed for months seeking land. Many people starved, while others cast themselves into the sea in desperation. And storms raged ceaselessly, claiming hundreds more.

'One endless night,' read the king, 'they braced for the worst. The Herringshark Captain tried to save them, but even he couldn't protect everyone. At his darkest moment, when all hope seemed lost, he looked to the heavens and pleaded for the storm to pass.'

The prince placed his hand on the book, his eyes wide. 'Then he saw the Seven Stars! They guided him!'

His father nodded, smiling with pride. 'Indeed, the same stars that still watch over us.' He paused until his son removed his hand, then continued. 'The captain followed the holy stars and at last, they found land. He marvelled at the bright shores of this colourful new world, where the water was as blue as the sky and the flowers bloomed in a sea of red and pink. The air brimmed with possibility. There, he declared a new home for his people.'

'Hollandos!' said the prince.

His father pulled him closer. 'Hollandos. A name inspired by the land they sailed from and the people who had endured so much, the Original Settlers.'

The prince listened eagerly to the next part of the story. The settlers journeyed south, building a city called Herringtide. Some ventured further, forming villages along the western shore.

Frederick cleared his throat. 'As the years passed, it became clear that storm-filled Herringtide could no longer sustain the growing population. Thus, in the fifth year of their settling, the captain searched once more for a new beginning. After weeks of wandering, he found a great lake. He knelt, ran his hand through the grass, and knew this was the place: perfect for trade, fishing, even a mighty port. It was there he founded our capital, Amstos – the heart of the new world.'

'Amstos,' whispered the prince.

'The walls rose high and gathered thousands of people. Herringtide, too, thrived, and the western villages blossomed. Yet,' his father's voice grew serious, 'tension arose. There was conflict over livestock, food, and wealth. They needed a leader. Not for Amstos alone, nor for Herringtide, but for *all* of Hollandos. Once again, the people turned to the Herringshark Captain.'

Frederick leaned forward. 'On the day of his coronation, the Seven Stars blazed above. The people watched in awe as the holy light shone upon the captain. And from the heavens, our sacred Starcrown formed upon his head.'

Carefully, Frederick lifted his crown and placed it on his son's scruffy black hair. 'Seven mighty points, each stretching towards the sky, set with gemstones echoing the colours of those holy stars: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, purple, and pink. A symbol to guide all in Hollandos.'

The prince's chest rose with pride as he felt the crown's weight. He gazed into the mirror hanging on the wall, seeing the gems shine brightly on his head, as if they knew his destiny.

'From that day forth, Viktorsday, the captain was known as King Viktor Kroon,' said Frederick, placing his hand over his son's heart. 'He saved our people. He founded our kingdom. And now his legacy lives on in *you*.'

Prince Viktor beamed. 'How I wish I could meet him, Father. Just once.'

Frederick gazed around the chamber. Twelve majestic pieces of art lined the green-planked walls, depicting the provinces of Hollandos and their unique landscapes and cultures. 'As do I. But four centuries have gone by since King Viktor passed away, long before either of us was born. He was a great king. A true father of our kingdom.'

'Yet to me,' said Viktor, thinking of everything King Frederick had accomplished, '*you* are both the finest king and the finest father!'

Frederick raised an eyebrow. 'Wait a moment. Who else *could* be your father?'

Viktor's eyes widened, then they both burst into laughter, shaking with joy until their eyes watered. But the moment ended too soon, as a heavy knock echoed through the room.

King Frederick lifted the Starcrown from his son's head and set it back upon his own. 'Enter.'

The doors creaked open. A pale man stepped in. He was short and plump, yet his majestic brown hair complemented his silver livery collar. It was Mayor Peter Jann Timberend, Frederick's most trusted advisor. He strode forward and bowed gracefully.

'Your Grace,' he said gravely. 'Forgive the interruption. You must come at once.'

Frederick's fatherly smile gave way to a stern expression. 'What transpires?'

'It is the queen.'

'Thank you.' He turned to his son. 'I shall take my leave now.' He set the book aside and gently lifted the prince off his lap, then knelt to meet him at eye level. With a soft smile, he said, 'I shall return shortly, Viktor. In the meantime, will you take it upon yourself to don the attire of our great first king? If you do, I shall find you in your chambers, and together we will explore the wonders of Hollandos.'

'I will!' Viktor beamed. This hour usually meant bedtime. But tonight seemed different. He had chosen the story, and now his father was allowing him to play at night. What other surprises lay ahead? Perhaps he'd be gifted his own steel sword, or even a royal steed. High with anticipation, he bolted off to his room.

He ran through the halls of the esteemed Prism Palace until a gentle female voice called out and halted him mid-sprint.

'Why the rush, Your Highness?' asked one of the servants.

'I shall be King Viktor!' he declared proudly.

She let out a warm chuckle as she swept the floor. 'Will you rule alongside your father, then?'

He straightened up, raising his chin and flexing his slender ten-year-old arms. Mimicking his father's deep voice, he said, 'There shall be *two* kings! Which means our people shall be twice as joyful. We shall feed the hungry and vanquish all evil. That is the duty of a king. And with two kings, none shall stand against us.'

'It would be an honour to serve under such kings,' she replied, curtsying.

Viktor grinned, but he didn't have time to linger. He dashed onward and burst into his room. Towering green walls loomed over the white wooden floor, and a sprawling tapestry of Hollandos covered the far wall. On his oak desk lay meticulously organised books on magic, various faiths, and the reigns of past kings and queens.

He charged towards his costume chest and took out his royal outfit: a flowing green cloak that swept past his ankles, a sturdy wooden sword, and a special paper crown shaped like the Starcrown.

Viktor swung the sword, imagining himself as a hero battling enemies, like King Viktor before him.

Minutes passed, and the fight drenched the prince in sweat as he defeated his imaginary foes. Being excellent was exhausting; he needed a break. He sheathed his wooden sword beneath his arm and plopped down at his desk.

From the stack of books, he grabbed his favourite: *The Lineage of Hollandos*. He quickly flipped through the pages, their edges worn from the number of times he'd read them, stopping only at his father.

King Frederick II Kroon, the Beloved. Born on the 23rd of October, 385 AS. Son of Irene and Maurits Kroon. Husband of Queen Amelia, father of Prince Viktor Kroon.

Seeing his own name in a book filled with brave kings and queens fuelled him. He was the heir to the Starcrown, the people's favourite Kroon, and his father's pride and joy. He was unstoppable. And nothing would ever change that.

The passage continued: *The Old Queen, Juliana II, suffered a stroke two years after the death of her only son, Maurits, and his wife. The Seven Stars then turned to the*

fourteen-year-old Frederick and blessed him on Viktorsday, 17th of November, in the year 399 AS. His reign has seen the repayment of Amstos' crippling debt and the creation of several crucial landmarks: the Pink Bridge, linking the mainland to the province of Lillios; the twin harbours, Bolthaven and Torchhaven, making travel to the province of Vulkos more accessible; and the Veluwos Blockade, sealing off the fallen valley, which is rumoured to shelter rogue wizards.

Rogue wizards... Viktor's eyes lingered on the words. He'd read them a hundred times, yet the idea of rogue wizards still puzzled him. Magic was a blessing, not a curse. Why would anyone use it for harm? He, of all people, understood this. Viktor was the first Kroon since his great-grandmother, Queen Juliana, to be gifted with magic.

Viktor stood and formed a V with his fingers, trying to conjure up a spell. His fingertips tingled, but only mere sparks came of it. Despite that, he persisted. If he practised enough, one day he could even be better than the most powerful wizard alive, Magister Kenau.

He tried again. And again. Each attempt filled the room with a crimson glow, which looked impressive, but reeked of charred wood. His energy slowly drained, and his body grew tired.

Flopping back into his chair, Viktor felt frustrated. In this moment of unrest, he realised his father hadn't returned yet. He stashed the book away and straightened his paper crown. If his father wouldn't come to him, he would go to his father.

He crept out into the hall, readying his sword. The prince scanned each corridor and tiptoed across the soft carpets, ducking past servants and guards. He moved like a shadow.

For such a vast palace, the route to his parents' chambers was surprisingly short. As he approached, he noticed the big oak doors were ajar, and heard voices murmuring within.

'—and summon the good people of our kingdom for a momentous announcement,' declared his father.

'At once, my king,' came the reply, followed by firm footsteps drawing near. The heavy doors creaked open, and Peter Jann stepped out. Behind him strode a towering woman, clad in full plate armour black as midnight with orange trim. An emerald-encrusted great-sword hung at her side. It was Dame Aletta, commander of the Starguard and a Knight of Mineraalos.

They passed right by Viktor, oblivious to the boy standing in the shadows. Though not everyone missed him.

'Perfect timing, Viktor! Please come in,' his father called from within.

Viktor blinked and stepped inside the room, unsure. He found his father and a group of other people gathered around his mother's bed. He joined them and stood frozen as

he stared at his mother lying on woollen pelts, blood and sweat covering her, as if she were about to die. In her hands lay something very small, wrapped in soft blankets.

'My dear boy, please come to me,' she said in a fragile voice, tears welling in her eyes.

Trembling, Viktor climbed onto the bed and settled beside her. He stared into her weary face. 'Are you unwell?' he asked.

'No, my prince,' she replied. 'Quite the opposite.' She shifted the blankets in her arms, revealing a tiny, delicate baby nestled within.

The king moved to her side and placed a steady hand around the child. 'Behold your sister. Her name is Emma.'

Viktor gasped. The word *sister* echoed strangely in his head. He'd known she was coming. Everyone in the palace had spoken of the queen's blessing. But now she was here, actually here, he felt his chest tighten. Was he not enough? Why did they even need another child? He turned his face towards the shadows in the corner of the room and muttered, 'Great.'

The queen pulled him close with her free arm. 'You are my greatest joy, Viktor. Nothing will ever change that.'

Then why am I getting a sister? he thought, looking at the bundle called Emma.

His father placed a firm hand on Viktor's shoulder. It felt different from usual, less comforting, more like a stern king placing his mark upon him. 'One day, you shall be responsible for the safety of millions. The people will look to you for strength, for guidance. But tell me, my son, do you know who will admire you the most?'

Viktor hesitated. 'I do not know... is it you, Father?'

Frederick chuckled softly. 'No. It is your sister, Emma. From this day until your last, she will look up to you as her hero.'

Hero? Viktor's frown deepened. What was the point of being a hero to one helpless baby when he could rule an entire kingdom? Without a word, he slid off the bed, ignoring his mother's gentle call. He turned to his father and asked, 'Now, shall we play together? I am King Viktor!'

The king smiled wearily. 'I wish I could, King Viktor, but we must postpone our adventure in Hollandos for now. There is a significant announcement to make, and your presence is most required.'

The prince's excitement faded, overpowered by the disappointment of his father breaking his promise to play with him. The exhaustion from his attempted magic was finally catching up to him. His eyelids fell, fighting sleep, but he didn't know how much longer he could stall the battle.

'Would you kindly return to your chamber and change from your kingly attire back into that of a prince?' said his father gently but firmly. 'We wish to share the

wonderful news of your sister's birth with our people, and your presence there would make it even more special.'

'But, Father—'

'At this very moment, Viktor.'

With a heavy sigh, the prince turned away and shuffled back to his room, each step slower than the last.

As he dressed in his finest clothes and carefully set aside his kingly cloak and sword, murmurs of anticipation drifted in from outside. He hurried to the window and peered down at the crowd below. Even so late at night, thousands had gathered outside the Prism Palace. For a fleeting moment, Viktor felt heroic. Until he realised they had come for his sister, not for him.

The door swung open, and his father stood framed in the doorway, the Starcrown gleaming atop his head. 'Are you ready, Viktor?'

The prince nodded softly, steadying himself before joining his family. His mother now looked like a majestic queen, while his father cradled the newborn in his arms. 'Do you want to hold her?' he asked.

Viktor crossed his arms and shook his head as he stared at Emma. *You wanted her, so you can hold her.*

'Viktor, you can do this,' encouraged his mother. 'She wants to be close to you.'

Still, the prince hesitated until his father gently placed Emma in his arms. Viktor's hands trembled as he held his fragile sister, but when he met her eyes, something changed. There was no weak baby staring back, only a fierce princess.

His shaking stilled. He stood taller, as if some invisible weight had lifted from his shoulders, and finally embraced his sister. 'You can count on me,' he said proudly.

Emma stared at her big brother. He swore he saw her nod before her eyes closed once more.

I will protect you, promised Viktor silently. *I will be your hero.*

They made their way to the front of the palace, where the steady voice of Peter Jann rang out across the plaza. 'People of Amstos, behold his Majesty King Frederick Kroon, Second of His Name, King of Hollandos, of Amstos, and Volkaania, bound by the Seven Stars and Guardian of the Twelve Provinces. His grace is accompanied by Queen Amelia Kroon and their son, Prince Viktor Kroon.'

Alongside Dame Aletta and Margo of Vlymos, the Starpriest, the royal family stepped out of the Prism Palace, flanked by their loyal Starguard. They stood before the grand stone statue of the first king, King Viktor Kroon, whose mighty presence loomed over the plaza like a guardian.

Prince Viktor gasped as he looked upwards, catching sight of the night sky. Besides the bright moon, the Seven Stars blazed vividly in red, orange, yellow, green, blue, purple, and pink. He was used to seeing the single green star, but all seven together? He had only seen them united when the entire city poured into the streets on Viktorsday.

The crowd erupted in cheers and whispers, filling the square with excitement. King Frederick stepped forward, raising his hand to silence the plaza instantly. He looked up and proclaimed, 'The Seven Stars have blessed our kingdom with a most beautiful princess!'

The king and queen moved aside, allowing their son to step forward. Prince Viktor met his father's proud eyes and the gleaming Starcrown, then shifted his gaze to his sister. Proudly, he puffed out his chest and stood tall as he presented Princess Emma to the assembled crowd.

King Frederick's voice rang out loud and clear. 'Hollandos! Greet Princess Emma Kroon!'

'EMMA! EMMA! EMMA!' the crowd roared in unison.

Chapter 1: Murmurs at the Molenpoort Mill

The vendor pressed two cones into Bente's hands, one heaped with strawberry, the other with the far less popular blue-mint.

'Thanks!' she replied with a grin.

At once, the sticky treats began to melt in the heat, dripping all over her fingers as she hurried through the park. A breeze caught her auburn hair, and sweat trickled down her forehead. The sun blazed overhead, relentless, as she jogged along a winding path beside a wide pond. Ducks swam in the water, and at the edge rested a lone willow, with the broken old mill looming behind it.

She spotted Luna from a distance, sitting alone on their favourite park bench. Her girlfriend's cyan-dyed hair moved under her headphones as she bobbed her head to the beat. Her pale skin contrasted with her usual all-black, worn-out clothes. People who didn't know her probably thought she was part of a heavy metal band or something.

Bente stopped in front of her and held up the cones like trophies. 'Surprise!' she puffed, still catching her breath.

Luna pulled down her headphones with a lazy hand and gave her a dull expression. 'But it's almost dinnertime,' she muttered flatly.

'Exactly. Which means we need dessert first. Emergency heatwave protocol!' replied Bente, grinning.

With a reluctant sigh, Luna took the sticky blue cone and stared blankly ahead. No smile. But Bente knew better than to expect one. Silence was Luna's way of showing affection. She plopped down beside her like an exhausted rag doll, her drenched red shirt clinging to her back. The pit stains nearly matched her sneakers now. 'Enjoy, babe. And hey, after this, we go straight home like you wanted.'

The girls sat in comfortable silence, soaking in the late summer sun. Bente devoured her treat, already crunching the bottom of the cone. Luna simply stared into the distance, zoning out like she often did.

Then came a smug voice. 'Well, well, who let these two losers out of the mental ward?'

Bente's body stiffened. Her jaw clenched as she turned to see the Queen Jerk herself: Tessel. Like her two dumb friends, she had a haughty smirk on her face, which Bente frequently fantasised about punching. Just seeing the trio made her fists itch.

'Hey, Bentee,' sneered Tessel, twisting Bente's name like it didn't belong to her. 'Have you always looked like a drenched troll?'

That's not my name, thought Bente. It's Ben-tuh. It's always been Ben-tuh.

Tessel's harassment often went beyond verbal taunting. Bente remembered the way Luna had cried after her gang wrecked her bike, or called her a skeleton, or tore open her backpack in the middle of the hallway. The memory still made her stomach turn. Luna even had to change schools because of them, to one far outside of town, forcing them apart.

'Shut your mouth!' snapped Bente, jumping to her feet.

Tessel snorted, exchanging a look with her pack of slimeballs. 'What are you, her little bodyguard now?' She pointed her finger towards Luna. 'Going to protect the skeleton?'

Bente's gaze drifted back to her girlfriend, who hadn't even looked up. She just stared at her shoes, clenching her cone tight enough to crack it.

'Leave us alone!' growled Bente, her fists trembling.

Tessel tilted her head, sneering. 'Or what, Bentee?'

'Or I'll fight you!'

'You're so *pretentious*,' snarled Tessel. She examined her glossy nails, then gave Bente a nasty look. 'Thank God I don't have to see that freak's face at school anymore. Hopefully, you'll be next.'

Bente's stomach twisted. If it weren't for her mother, she *would* have transferred too. She wanted to be with Luna. To protect her.

She raised her fist to strike, but paused. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Luna walking away. Head low, shoulders slumped. Hand still clutching the cone, blue ice cream melting down her wrist like she'd forgotten it existed.

Tessel burst into laughter. 'Look at her. Your freak is leaving, *Bentee*.'

Every muscle in Bente's body screamed at her to hit Tessel right in her smug little smirk. But instead, she gave the bullies a death glare and sprinted after Luna.

She caught up with her quickly. Luna walked onward with a dull expression, as if nothing had happened. Bente blocked her path, breathless and frustrated. 'What was that? Why did you walk away? She deserved a smack to her *stupid* face!'

Luna simply shrugged as the last of her melted ice cream, along with the cone, slipped from her hand and fell to the ground.

Bente placed a hand on her girlfriend's shoulder and asked, 'Don't you care that they get away with it?'

As always, Luna just balled her fists and looked the other way.

It felt like a defeat. Tessel had won again, and the one person Bente fought for didn't even seem to care. But she wasn't ready to let the moment die in silence. With a dramatic pose, she puffed out her chest and threw her fists in the air, pretending to fight an imaginary Tessel like some sort of superhero. 'Bam! Next time, I'll floor her and protect you with my fists of justice!'

Luna rolled her eyes and sighed, yet let out a tiny chuckle. 'Sure, but first... dinner.'

Bente beamed before kissing Luna. She'd take a sigh and a chuckle as a full-on victory. 'Hey,' she grinned, 'you know what would be cool?'

'What?'

'Imagine this: we rule the Netherlands. Like, actually rule it. I'd be the fierce warrior Bente, and you'd be the brave Queen Luna. We'd throw all the jerks in prison, especially that—'

...You must save Hollandos...

Chills crawled down Bente's spine. That voice hadn't come from Luna, nor from her own thoughts. The cry for help had echoed from somewhere distant, yet felt unsettlingly close. Her heart kicked into gear as she blinked and looked around, her eyes scanning for the source.

...Come back to us...

She turned towards the sound, her gaze drawn to the broken windmill beyond the pond. Overgrown with moss and ivy, the structure stood in a state of decay. It had seven sails, a strange number for a Dutch mill, as most had four. The builders seemed to have constructed it wrong intentionally.

Everyone in Molenpoort knew that mill. Knew to keep their distance. Few who entered ever came back. They said it was haunted. Cursed. Bewitched. Off-limits to anyone who valued their life. However, she couldn't stop looking at it. Was someone or something trapped inside?

'The mill,' replied Bente, her eyes still fixed on it. 'Did you hear someone calling for help?'

Luna shrugged, as if she wasn't paying attention to either Bente's story or the voices.

Bente waited, hoping to catch the voices again. But there was only silence. She shook her head and muttered, 'Never mind.' Then she squeezed Luna's small, sticky blue hand and led her onward. Together, they walked home through the baking heat.

The small town of Molenpoort felt more like tropical Spain than a typical cold-and-rainy Dutch village. The sun forced them to play a game of hopscotch through patches of shade as they strolled through the neighbourhoods.

After hopping from one shadow to another all the way home, Bente and Luna finally reached the narrow street of semi-detached houses where Bente lived. Each looked identical, with orange bricks and a blue front door, but her parents' house stood out thanks to the little cat flap.

As they approached the house, a mighty beast emerged from it. The chunky white cat waddled into the sunlight and greeted them with a loud, raspy meow, like a lion greeting his pride.

'Abell!' squealed Bente. She rushed forward and scooped him up, stroking his thick, glossy fur. 'You're getting fatter every day, you know that?' she muttered lovingly, giving him a big smooch before setting him back down with care.

As she turned, she spotted Luna with her arms crossed, standing awkwardly in the blazing sun, clearly unimpressed. Bente gave a lazy grin, then fished out the house key and walked up to the front door. A shiny green plaque beside it read: *Family Roodhof - Barbara & Marcus, Bente, Kasper, Nora.*

She had just slipped the key into the lock when—

'Bente Ashley Roodhof!'

Her mum, Barbara, stood in the hallway like a tomato come to life. Her hair up in a tight bun, her cheeks blazing red, and a thick finger aimed at her daughter.

'Do you know what time it is? I served dinner over *thirty minutes ago!*'

Bente groaned. 'We were just out enjoying the sun. Maybe *you* should try it sometime.'

'*Excuse me?*' Barbara took a firm step towards her like she was about to cast a curse. 'You should be grateful you're getting dinner at all.'

'I'm fifteen, Mum! And Luna just turned *sixteen*. We're not babies anymore; we can make our own choices!'

'Then stop *acting* like one!'

'You're so annoying!'

'Excuse me?!'

Bente didn't stick around. She stormed past her mother, up the stairs and into her bedroom. Her own little kingdom looked like a thrift store explosion. Clothes littered the floor, piled up like dunes of fabric. Drawings covered the walls, many of them featuring Bente as a warrior, superhero, pirate, and even a space ranger. The centrepiece was a giant foam sword mounted above her bed, made two years ago, after someone tried to break into the house.

She flopped onto the bed and rested her head in her hands.

'Rude,' said Luna flatly as she entered the room.

'I *know*, right? She didn't even say hi.'

'No, you.'

Bente frowned. 'Fine, I'll apologise la—'

'*Now*, muffin.'

Bente rolled her eyes so hard it almost hurt. *Absolutely not*. She wasn't going to say sorry for standing up for herself. Barbara could suck it.

Luna gave her a long look, then sighed and retreated to the corner chair, pulling out her phone.

Bente yanked off her gross, holey socks, and peeled away her sweat-soaked shirt and trousers, tossing them into the nearest pile. She slid under the crimson sheets and curled up, her eyes drifting towards Luna, who was still scrolling.

Seriously? she thought. Bente rolled over, turning her back to her girlfriend. *I stand up to Tessel, and this is what I get? Cold shoulders and guilt trips?*

After mentally roasting Barbara for a solid minute, her thoughts circled back to the cries she'd heard echoing from the old mill. They had felt *so* real. But maybe she was just losing it. The string of sleepless nights she'd had wasn't helping, and if she kept spiralling like this, tonight would be no different. Frustrated, she buried her face in the pillow and forced herself to drift away. Eventually, miraculously, sleep came.

'Time to go, Bente!'

A voice rang through her ears and yanked Bente from her slumber.

She sat up, her eyes burning as she looked at the bright, sunlit ceiling. For a split second, she thought it was the strange voices from the mill calling her again. Her head throbbed with a dull headache.

'School!'

No, they weren't the mysterious voices. It was her mum. And it was morning.

She kicked off the blankets and leaped out of bed, panic mode fully activated.

'Where are my trousers?!' she roared, frantically digging through the endless piles of clothes.

Luna had already dressed and was calmly sipping from a water bottle in the corner, as if she had all the time in the world. She rolled her eyes, walked to the cabinet, pulled out the missing trousers, and tossed them to Bente.

'Lifesaver,' mumbled Bente, giving a lopsided grin as she struggled to jam both legs into the trousers while simultaneously wiggling into her t-shirt. With her head still halfway through the neck hole, she called out, 'Good morning, by the way!'

'Let's go, muffin.'

They bolted downstairs and found the dining room already occupied by Bente's family, who were sitting around the table in various stages of grumpiness.

'Well, look who finally decided to show up,' grunted her dad, Marcus. He stood up, towering over the table like a troll late for construction duty. He stomped off to work, the floor trembling beneath his heavy steps.

Her mother gave a half-arsed lecture about yesterday, while Kasper, her little brother, completely ignored her. He was too busy fussing with his messy brown hair, trying to cover the faint scar on his temple. For years, he used to remind her every other day that it was her fault he had it. But since he turned thirteen last year, he just pretended she didn't exist.

Whatever. Bente dropped into her chair and inhaled the cheese sandwich on her plate. 'Thanks, Mum, that was amazing!'

Barbara didn't bite. 'Next time, get up earlier and make your own. You don't want to be late *again*.' With that, she grabbed her keys, called Kasper, and left the house without another word.

'*You don't wanna be late again,*' mimicked Bente under her breath with a snort. She stared at the mess of dishes, then looked over at Luna. 'Can't your mum adopt me?'

'It could be worse,' replied Luna with a shrug.

'Easy for you to say. You have two cool parents *and* an even cooler sister.'

'Divorced parents.'

'Still better than whatever my family is.'

Luna didn't argue. They quickly rinsed off their plates and stepped outside. The air hit them like a slap, crisp and cold. Summer seemed to have packed its bags overnight. They zipped up their jackets, grabbed their bikes, and headed to the pavement.

'Good luck at school, babe!' said Bente, beaming. 'Maybe today you'll figure out what the *point* of physics even is.'

Luna stared down, aggressively fumbling with her bike. 'I wish we still went to the same school,' she mumbled.

Bente's smile faltered. 'So do I.'

It still hurt. Tessel and her awful friends had driven Luna out of their old school, the only one in town. And now, it felt like the same cruel cycle was starting all over again in her new one. Only this time, Bente wasn't there to protect her.

'I hate them,' said Luna, her voice sharp as she mashed the wheels of her bike on the pavement. 'And they all hate me.'

'It's only been a week. Give it time. That's what *you* always tell me.' Bente stepped in front of her, placing a hand on her arm. 'And if anyone even looks at you the wrong way, you call me. I'll be there before they can blink!'

Luna gave her a long look, then finally cracked a tiny smile and leaned in for a quick kiss. Without another word, she smiled and rode off to the city.

Bente watched her go before turning and heading in the opposite direction, towards yet another day of school.

The route to Bente's school was short, as it stood in the centre of Molenpoort. She left her street, pedalling past rows of brick houses, each with its own form of front garden: some brimming with nature, others paved with lifeless stone. Beyond them stretched a field where lazy black-and-white cows grazed, which opened onto the park.

Normally, she cut straight through the centre. But not today. Not after what she'd heard yesterday.

Instead, she detoured through the park, riding over the damp grass alongside a row of giant oaks. Her path curved towards the pond. Across the still water, she caught another glimpse of the old mill.

It looked peaceful in the morning dew. Beautiful even. Three of its seven tall sails stretched into the sky, almost vanishing in the mist. But they didn't turn. They never did, like a sleeping giant. Not even the fiercest storm could move them.

But Bente didn't believe for a second that the mill was asleep.

She veered right, her tyres running through the grass, before stopping on the other side of the pond. She parked her bike, and for a moment, she simply stared. Then, with shaky legs, she pressed forward, creeping closer to the looming structure.

The nearer she came, the taller it seemed, its sails towering over her. Moss clung to one side, slowly spreading rot. And mushrooms pushed from the seams as if the place was decaying from the inside out.

She'd never been this close before. Not once in her life.

The blue front door stood out against the rot, its paint still vivid and untouched. Her gaze lifted. High above, carved deep into the wood between the sails, was a single letter: *H*.

She didn't know what it meant.

Bente stepped closer. Her fingers hovered over the door handle, tempted to twist it, to find out who, or what, had been calling for help. But then the old stories came flooding back: the people who went missing inside, never to come back out.

She froze. Her heart raced. To break the tension, she reached for her phone. It was five past eight, not even ten minutes until school started. Her mum would kill her if she were late again.

After one last second of hesitation, she turned and hopped on her bike, then headed for school. She didn't look back, yet she couldn't shake the feeling that something inside the mill needed her.

Charlemagne High School stood just outside the town centre and looked like it once served as a fortress. Probably still would if boredom could kill. Bente parked her bike and hurried towards history class, praying not to be marked late again.

The next hour felt like six. Mrs van Dyke rambled on about the Eighty Years' War, which, to Bente, was exactly how long the lesson was taking. She couldn't bring herself to care about stories from centuries ago. Her mind drifted. She tapped her pen and gazed out the window, staring at the old mill looming behind the trees. *Are there really people in there who need my help?*

After being force-fed information about the assassination of Prince Willem of Orange in the year 1584, someone finally raised their hand to break the tedious slump.

'Yes, Tom?'

'Did he ever, like, fight in a battle?'

'Not directly,' Mrs van Dyke replied. 'Willem wasn't known as a sword-wielding knight. He was a strategist, a leader. His plans *saved* thousands of lives without him ever needing to lift a blade himself.'

Saved thousands of people? thought Bente. If this man saved so many people without using a sword, he was a true hero. She wondered what her life would look like if she were like him, but *with* a sword. Maybe she could use it to save *millions* of people. She would slay bullies, evil dictators, and even terrorists. She could create a world free of pain and be the next hero.

'His real courage,' Mrs van Dyke continued, 'was standing up to a powerful empire, convincing others to believe in a different future.'

'So, he saved everyone?' asked Tom.

'Not quite,' she replied. 'The war took many lives. After Willem died, people fled in ships. But those who stayed fought bravely for him. He became a symbol. Even in death, the Prince of Orange helped them win independence from Spain.'

Bente stopped tapping. Something about that stuck with her. Willem, the man who stood up for what was right. Not because he was strong, but because he was brave.

What if she could be just like him? A person who didn't only fight bullies, but gave others the courage to stand up to them, too?

She imagined herself standing high upon a hill, sword raised in the air, wind in her hair, leading the charge—

BRRRING!

The bell shattered her thoughts, ending her valiant stand and snapping her back to reality. Bente drifted through the halls at a snail's pace, her mind still at the Prince of Orange. One day, she would be a hero, just like him. She knew it.

After changing, she strolled into the gym, still tying her shoes and putting her hair into a bun. Her red gym shirt was inside out, and her shorts were on backwards. The rest of her classmates were already standing there, readying their dodgeballs.

Mr Meijer, her PE teacher, caught sight of her and grinned. 'Nice of you to join us. Team red.' He tossed her a ball.

Thankfully, it was the right team. Across the court stood her arch-nemesis Tessel, on team green. Bente took a firm position and locked on to her enemy. This was her chance to mess up that pretty face of hers.

She wound up and launched her first throw. And missed.

'Shit,' muttered Bente under her breath as she told herself she was just warming up. But the next throw missed too. And the next. Her hands trembled with frustration.

'You're doing this on purpose!' her teammate snapped. 'Stop standing there and hit them!'

Mr Meijer walked over. 'Is everything alright?'

She didn't answer. Even though she really liked Meijer, who was easily her favourite teacher, the shame felt too heavy. She was the *best* player in the class, and yet right now, she was blowing it.

Bente darted across the room to grab another ball. Her team looked like a mess, and it was her fault. They needed her to act. She turned back to Tessel and readied her ball. This throw wasn't just a throw: it was for Luna, for all the times that arrogant brat had made her life hell.

She hurled the ball like a missile and hit Tessel dead centre. 'Yes!' shouted Bente, pumping her fists.

'You'll regret that, freak!' barked Tessel.

That only fuelled her more. Bente threw another ball, *hit*. And another, *smack*. The strikes kept landing. One after the other. Her body moved as if it were on autopilot, driven by the frustration she had built up from yesterday.

The next thirty minutes were a constant rain of hits. Bente stood tall in the middle of the gym, owning the court for her team. She lifted the ball high once more to hit Tessel, then it happened.

The room fell silent, and the lights dimmed. Her heart raced with panic. She stood alone before the old mill, facing an eerie figure shrouded in darkness. His pupils were gone, his eyes glowing an unnatural green. He raised one arm, pointing straight at her, and shouted something she couldn't understand.

'Who is that?' she whispered.

Then he charged.

She froze, overwhelmed with fear, and slammed her eyes shut. *It's just a dream. It's just a dream.*

Suddenly, a bright flash seared her eyelids. She opened her eyes. The mill was whole again, almost new. The seven sails were turning, slowly at first, then faster. Light burst through the windows, flooding the gym. It cast the figure away and blinded Bente, sending her spiralling into nausea.

A few seconds of numbness followed before the gym and her classmates snapped back into place. She stood there, confused, the ball falling from her hand.

'You're such a loser!' shouted Tessel gleefully.

And before Bente could react, a ball slammed into her face. Hard.

Smack.

She hit the floor with a heavy thud, blood gushing from her nose. Mr Meijer rushed over, kneeling beside her with a tissue. 'Bente, are you okay?'

'I don't know,' she blurted out.

He helped her to a bench just outside the gym. She pressed the tissue against her nose, her thoughts spinning.

'What happened?' he asked. 'It looked like you had a panic attack.'

'No, it wasn't that,' said Bente, shaking her head. 'I saw...' She stared at the ground in confusion. Her heart was racing. The figure. The mill. And the blinding light. 'I... I swear it was real.'

'I suggest you go home,' said Mr Meijer, staring at her with concern. 'You look like you could really use some rest.'

'But what about my classes?'

'I'll talk to your teachers. Do you want me to call your parents?'

Bente shot up, still holding the blood-soaked tissue against her face. 'Please don't. I'll go home myself.'

'Okay,' Meijer said kindly as he reassured her with a pat on the shoulder. 'Just take care of yourself, alright?'

Bente walked back through the gym towards the changing rooms, her head hanging low. Her classmates stared in silence, a few snickering, Tessel being the loudest of all. Bente quickly changed and grabbed her stuff.

Outside, she hopped on her bike and rode off, her thoughts spinning as fast as her wheels. First the voices begging for help from the old, cursed mill. And then that vision of the figure standing before it and charging at her. *What in the world is happening?*

She rode back home questioning whether anyone would even believe her. Mr Meijer had looked at her as if she was losing it. Luna probably wouldn't care, nor would her mum after what had happened to Bente's sister. The only one who might care was her friend Sunny. He always supported her, no matter how crazy life got.

When she got home, instead of resting, she grabbed her pencils and paper. She had to get the image down while it was fresh in her mind. The figure looked dark and twisted, with his green eyes. And then the image of the mill that followed.

'Bente!' a voice boomed from the hall.

Oh no.

Her mother stormed into the living room and marched over to her daughter with clenched fists.

'Hey Mum,' muttered Bente as she continued to draw.

Without a word, her mother snatched the drawing away. 'Enough of this nonsense! Upstairs. You need rest.'

'But Mum, it's barely one!'

'Now, Bente.'

She felt betrayed by Mr Meijer. He must've called her. 'I think I saw something during—'

'I don't want to hear any more of your dreams,' snapped Barbara.

'No, listen! It was real, I swear!'

With a sharp rip, her mother tore the drawing apart and tossed it onto the table. 'Will you *ever* listen to me? Or have you still not learned anything after what happened to your sister?'

'I hate you!' screamed Bente, her voice cracking as she grabbed the torn pieces and stormed upstairs. She slammed the door, threw the drawing on her desk, and collapsed on her bed. Her blood boiled. Her mother always used her past against her. Always.

She lay still, staring at the ceiling, her breath slowly calming. But the image wouldn't leave her – the cries, the figure, the mill. What did it all mean? She couldn't just stay idle and lie in bed. She had to find out.

Quiet as a shadow, she crept downstairs, successfully bypassing her Mum. She slipped out the door, grabbed her bike, and frantically pedalled back to the park.

Despite the summer sun shining bright, dark clouds formed above and cast rain down upon Bente. As she rode past the pond, she felt ever more distressed by the strangeness of the day. That's when it happened again: the cries.

...Save us...Save Hollandos...

Hollandos? Bente glanced towards the mill, then turned and pedalled straight to it. After parking her bike, she looked up. The rain was forming some sort of rainbow, the colours shining down upon the mill. It felt almost magical. She ran up to the blue front door and placed her trembling hand on the handle.

...Hollandos is in terrible danger....

Her whole body tensed. She gasped, but instead of releasing the dusty door handle, she turned it.

The door creaked open with a moan, and the sour, musty reek of old grain hit her immediately. Bente coughed and stepped inside.

'Hello...? Is anybody here?' she called out, her voice shaking. There was no one. Only spiders, shadows, and broken furniture. The room felt dead. Cold and lifeless.

'I'm here to help!' called Bente, louder this time. But there was still silence.

She walked further in, her legs trembling beneath her. A steep wooden ladder led up to a trapdoor, and in the centre of the room stood two stacked, round stones, topped with a sturdy oak beam that disappeared into the ceiling. They were clearly millstones, the heavy grinding stones once turned by the sails. But the sails didn't move, so neither did the stones.

KRRRRRR

Bente jumped. The screech came from the stones. They shifted, just barely, but enough to make her skin crawl. She edged towards them and blew away a thick layer of dust. Letters carved into the surface slowly emerged to form a word:
Hollandos.

Hollandos again? she thought, wondering what it meant. She wiped the rest of the grime off, and the letters began to glow like embers. Above her, hidden gears moved.

Dust trembled on the floor, and the room lit up with bright light that shone upon the old walls.

Bente stumbled back, startled. The millstones turned, creaking loudly. She looked up, noticing the sails were moving behind the window, something she hadn't known was possible.

The stones rotated faster and grew louder. Bente bolted for the door and yanked the handle. But it wouldn't budge. She was locked in. There was no way out.

Dust rained down from the rafters, and the beams above groaned. The stones roared like a thunderstorm as they spun uncontrollably fast. The surface erupted in bright light. Around the room, flares of red, orange, yellow, green, blue, purple, and pink swirled like flames.

She had never seen such energy. It felt like standing inside a cosmic storm. How was this possible in Molenpoort? So beautiful yet so terrifying. Was she dying?

...Help us... Save us...

'I'm here!' shouted Bente boldly.

The light wrapped around her as if it were embracing a long-lost friend. The room twisted, and the world folded inward. Then, a last burst of white light lit up the mill, blinding Bente.

She held her breath as the world spun. Bright, endless light engulfed everything. This wasn't a dream. This was real. Silence dissolved every sound, as if she were submerged in a bubbling hot tub, being carried far from reality.

...It has to be you...Only you can save Hollandos...

Without warning, the light vanished.

Bente found herself planted on solid ground. Her body trembled, not fully grasping what had just happened. Slowly, she lifted her head and gasped.