

Two Boats Together

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Chapter 1

Bad News

The Doila are a wide-spread tribe of travelers who spend most of their lives on boats and never touching dry earth.

—Bastor da Kasin, *The Forgotten Tribes of Lesser Men*

Astol chanted as he walked along the narrow beam between the two masts of the *Queen of Salt and Sapphire*. A leather lead secured around his waist dragged an iron ring mounted around the beam with the rattle of some mechanical dog following after him.

The chant was echoed by the rest of his family on the ship. He could hear his two brothers singing out in the same mixture of spoke word and musical tones that exercised the lungs and the back of the throat.

Jabil was coiling ropes, the thick cords of his arms almost as thick as the weathered loops of hemp that glistened in the salt water. His long black hair was pulled back into a bun, a stern style that matched his personality.

His other brother, Brui, was on the opposite of side with one foot balanced on the railing and the other against one of the stays that kept the aft sail in place. Brui's hair was in a fish tail, with little sparkles of blue and silver glittering in

the sun. Like their elder mother, he was a bit flashier with his style even out on the ocean.

Astol looked back at the lead attached to the ring. He reached out and snapped his fingers.

The leather untied itself, coiled up, and then shot itself from the beam to wrap around another ring that had been mounted near the top of the mast. The end slipped around itself into a strong knot and secured him into his new position.

Astol tested it twice before he leaned over the edge of the beam and began to walk down. The ropes over his chest and waist dug into his body with the comfort that they wouldn't let him fall.

His steps were slow and steady. He wasn't afraid of the fall but he needed to inspect every inch for signs of rot or weakness. A broken mast could mean death on the ocean in a storm.

He almost missed a shiny spot. With his weight digging into the ropes around his waist and chest, he stopped and bent over, inverting his body so his short hair hung like a brush underneath him.

A wood-boring beetle was trying to find a home. It moved slowly, as if it was afraid to be fifty feet above the deck.

Astol crushed it with his finger and then pocketed the corpse. Then he carefully looked for holes or signs that it had made its home. He didn't find any, but he couldn't just assume. Reaching into his pouch, he pulled out a stick of red wax and circled the area in wide circles.

"Found something?" called his younger mother. He looked down as she walked up the side of the mast. Like himself, she was slender and delicate but her skin had the texture of leather from a lifetime on the seas. The deep brown had a touch of red to it, a burn that would never fade. She

crouched down next to him as if he was lying on the ground instead of hanging from a rope.

“Beetle.”

“Up here? That isn’t good. See its home?”

He shook his head.

She reached up and kissed his forehead. “Come, you look up. I look down.”

Then she started to inspect the mast with the same intensity that he had looked. Both of them had been trapped at sea twice with a broken mast during a storm, that was how they were rescued by the men who became his brothers.

Below, Brui started a new song. A winding, somber tale of a ghost trying to escape the gods of the underworld. It was also one of his favorites to start because it meant he got to sing the part of the foolish king.

Astol’s younger mother joined in instantly as the role of the ghost. Her higher-pitched voice easily carried over the winds and through the sun that beat down on him. She winked at him and then resumed her search for the beetles.

After a few seconds, he joined with the others. His favorite part was the solider who would sacrifice himself.

They sang and toiled for the song and well into the next. It wasn’t until the last bit when he finally spotted three perfect holes in the mast. They weren’t there the last time he inspected the mast. He sighed and got out his yellow wax and circled the openings. More searching the area and he found more beetles crawling in the cracks of the weathered wood.

Astol swore as he fished out his wax marker. He circle the bore holes with wide circles in silence, the stark silence as disturbed as his thoughts.

His mother came up. Seeing the marks, she stopped singing to swear herself. "That looks bad," she said in a low voice.

Astol tapped the mast with his thumb to agree.

She got out her own wax marker. It was yellow compared to his red. She circled it also, going down a few feet lower and a foot higher. "Just in case. I'll go tell Opil."

Kissing him on the forehead, she turned and walked down the side of the mast to the desk toward his elder mother.

Opil was at the aft, standing on the furthest part as she peered out across the ocean. The wind whipped at her blue and white dress. It also teased her long, loose hair in a fan of black with blue sparkles.

Unlike the others, Opil rarely sang. She was their spotter, the one looking for dangers on the waves. She also hated the sound of her voice.

Opil and Astol's younger mother spoke.

Astol gave them a minute before rappelling down the mast. Midway down, he had to stop and hook one arm around a thick ring. Snapping his fingers, he untied the leather at the top and brought it down to secure it in place before finishing his trip down to the deck.

Bruì came up next him and patted his back. "Bad news?" "Wood beetles."

"Damn." Then he smiled as he stepped back to face Astol. "Think our moms will head straight for the *Diamond Cutters*? I heard they had a pretty good cleaner."

Astol blushed almost instantly. The *Diamond Cutters of Ten Thousand Days* was Lain's ship.

Bruì grinned and peered. "What was his name?"

Astol glared at him. "You know his name is Lain." Lain, another broad-chested man, had an easy smile and Astol found himself stammering whenever they were close. It

had been a month since he spilled most of dinner with a misplaced hand while trying not to humiliate himself in front of Lain.

“Stop teasing him,” warned Jabil as he swung down and landed lightly next to them.

Bruì shrugged. “Why not? Little brother found love. Are we not to celebrate?”

Astol blushed even hotter. Lain was gorgeous and difficult to resist. He hoped that he was also interested in Astol, but it was hard to tell past his own flustered thoughts.

Jabil poked his brother. When Bruì just grinned, he poked him harder before punching his arm.

Bruì laughed, his muscular form easily taking the blow that would have bruised Astol’s slender form. He patted Astol on the back and then headed toward their mothers. Jabil and Astol followed.

By the time they stopped near their mothers, Opil was back to looking across the ocean.

“What’s the news, mothers?”

Opil didn’t look back. “Let Gria explain, I’m looking for the *Diamond*.”

Bruì chuckled and Astol blushed hotly. He tried not to think about how Lain felt next to him, or the way their hands always seemed to touch.

Astol’s younger mother pointed a finger. “Be nice to your brother.”

“Yes, Mother Gria,” Bruì said in a tone that indicated he wasn’t sorry in the slightest. He smirked and bumped his shoulder against Astol.

Opil glanced over her shoulder and then back. She didn’t look amused.

The boat bucked.

Astol grabbed for his brothers, the nearest steady objects. Next to the railing, Jabil smacked his hand firmly on

it while Brui braced against a rope. The three of them barely moved.

Another wave slammed into the boat.

Opil's lip curled into a smile.

Then one struck hard enough to spray high into air. The water looked like diamonds as it arched up.

Jabil reached out and grabbed Astol by his hips. With a chuckle, he yanked his smaller brother free from Brui just as the water came crashing down to drench Brui completely.

Only a few droplets caught Astol.

Bruil laughed and threw back his hair, spraying everyone with water. "I'm sorry, mothers."

Gria gestured to Astol with one hand.

Still laughing, Brui turned to his younger brother. "I'm sorry, little brother, that we are about to visit the man you really—"

The wave caught him on the side, throwing him back toward the stern in a wave of water and laughter.

Chapter 2

Good News

With the time and distance that separates the Doila ships, relationships are fluid until the point lovers join together on the same boat.

—Rimi of the Black Knife Across the Sun

Two days later, Astol found himself sitting on the topmost beam of the aft sail and watching the bright blue boat that approached theirs. The *Diamond* was a wide-bottomed boat with only a single sail with two spurs spread out in the back dragging nets. It was a small crawler shared with three family members: Lain and his two sisters, Kimai and Nira.

Kimai was the captain of the ship. She had water powers like Opil but with an attitude closer to Brui. Her hair was also woven into a long tight braid that reached almost to the small of her back. She twirled it as she flipped two colored flags in her hands.

Astol's two mothers were standing near the edge. Gria, his younger mother, had flags of her own that they were using to coordinate the two ships as they circled around each other.

He watched the man standing near the stern of the *Diamond*: Lain. Lain was broad-shouldered with large hands

and short-cropped hair. Unlike Astol's brothers, he also had a dense beard of black and light blue. While the two boats nuzzled together, he stood easily on the railing swinging the mooring rope with one hand.

Astol's heart beat faster as he listened to Brui and Lain trading verbal jabs. From his height, he couldn't hear most of the words but the playful tone was unmistakable even from on top of the sails. Both Brui and Lain had been friends from long before Astol joined the family.

He wondered if Brui had told Lain about Astol's affections. Just thinking about it brought a burn to his cheeks. He clutched the beam underneath him and double-checked the safety rope.

The leather fluttered with his magic, tightening and coiling over once before growing taut.

He smiled at it and felt a little better. It didn't matter that it was moving under his own magic, it was a nervous tick.

"... Astol?" The tail end of Lain's question rose up in a brief silence of the wind.

Astol inhaled and gripped the beam tighter. He peered down to see that the two boats had moored together and the brothers and sisters were lashing them until it was time to part ways. His chest and stomach ached as he watched Lain looking back and forth across their ship.

Brui said something and gestured up.

Astol let out a whimper.

Lain looked up, the wind blowing through his hair as he scanned up the mast.

Pulse pounding his ears, Astol looked around but there is nowhere to go. He turned back just as Lain's gaze caught his own.

Astol's whimper turned into a whine.

Lain smiled, his teeth bright in the sunlight.

Gasping, Astol held up one hand and gave a shaky wave. He smiled though it would be as visible from on top of the sail.

Lain waved back and the gestured for Astol to come down.

Astol almost fell. He had to grab the beam to avoid the dizziness that slammed into him. He wanted desperately to get closer, to feel the warmth of Lain's chest against his own.

Somehow, he managed to snake out his lead to brace himself then stumble down the mast. His feet slipped near the bottom and he thankfully landed on his rear behind a pile of boxes. Scrambling to his feet, he came around and right into Lain's hug.

"Astol!" said the powerful man as he swept Astol off the ground and squeezed firmly.

Astol lost himself against the instant feeling of warmth and protection. It was also hard and soft at the same time. He felt himself getting harder and had to push himself away to avoid embarrassing himself further.

"It's been too long, Astol. I missed you."

Astol pressed his cheek against one arm. He looked up at the weathered face. He didn't want the moment to leave.

"How long as it been?"

Bruil leaned over. "About three months since he dumped dinner in your lap."

Astol blushed even hotter.

Lain smiled broadly. "I remember that. It wasn't what I was hoping was going to land there." His eyes flickered to Astol and then to Bruil.

Bruil stood there, smirking.

Lain shook his head and turned back to Astol. He was still hugging the smaller man and their mouths were dan-

gerously close to each other. "I heard you had a bug problem?"

Astol opened his mouth but no noise came out.

Bruï tapped Lain's arm. "Maybe you're squeezing him too tightly? I think his face is turning red."

"Oh! Sorry." Lain released Astol who stumbled back.

Catching his breath, Astol glared at his older brother.

Bruï smirked.

Jabil came up and smacked him in the back of his head.

On the other side of Bruï, Nira punched him in the arm. She was much shorter than everyone but Astol. She was also at least three months pregnant but that didn't stop her from reaching out to hold hands with Jabil.

Bruï looked at them with a hurt expression. "What?" he said with feigned innocence.

Then Lain reached over and smacked the back of his head.

Spinning around, Bruï glared at his friend. "What!?" he said in a raised tone.

Lain didn't say anything.

However, Gria did. Her voice rose out. "Get over here, Bruï! Right now!"

Jabil shooed Bruï. "Go on, be a pile of rotted fish over there."

With a glare, Bruï pushed his way out of the knot of friends and headed straight for Kimai and their mothers.

Lain cleared his throat.

Nira turned to Jabil. "Standing up is wearing me out. Got somewhere cool to rest?"

Jabil's smile reached his eyes. "Come on, the kitchen area awaits, my goddess."

She rolled her eyes but let him draw her away.

Astol looked helplessly as he was quickly left alone with his crush. He looked at Lain, unsure of what to say.

Lain gestured. "Chores before play. Where are these bugs?"

"Up the aft mast, about fifty feet up."

Lain looked up and then shrugged. "As long as you are holding me, there is nothing I'm worried about."

Astol's cheeks burned.

After a few seconds of stammering, he went and gathered up enough ropes for the two of them. It was a more complicated harness to carry the larger man's weight, but his magic could handle it. With a few snaps of his fingers, the coils of rope crawled up the mast and secured themselves against the rings.

Roping a harness around Lain was almost as humiliating as falling. Astol couldn't concentrate enough to use his magic to loop the rope along the hard thighs or around Lain's chest, so he was forced to do it with his hands.

The heat from Lain's body and the soft chuckles escaped his lips only added to his struggles. After he failed to tie a knot three times, he had to step back and take a deep breath.

"Just take your time," said Lain in a low voice.

Astol looked up helplessly. The rope in his hand quivered.

"A deep breath?"

Obediently, Astol inhaled and exhaled.

"There you go. Now, just finish up this last knot." He reached out and took Astol's hand and drew it closer.

"That isn't helping," whispered Astol.

"Why?" Lain smiled.

Astol had no idea why he decided to answer. "I... get clumsy."

"You are very graceful. I've seen you."

"Not around you."

There was a brief pause and then Astol realized what he had just confessed. With a gasp, he looked up with wide eyes.

Lain only smiled.

“I-I didn’t mean to say that. I’m sorry.”

“Would it be better if I kissed you?”

The world froze in an instant.

Lain leaned forward. “Actually, I’ve been waiting to kiss you for three months now. So, do you mind if I steal one?” His breath was hot against Astol’s face.

Astol didn’t know how to respond. He opened his mouth and closed it. He was sure he was about to burst into flames just from his feelings.

Lain drew closer, wrapping his arms around Astol and pulling him close.

The feeling of being enveloped by strong muscles was overwhelming. It was everything Astol had thought it would be like.

“Astol?”

Astol whimpered. Then, he surged forward to kiss Lain. The touch of his lips was an electrical surge that coursed through his body. He trembled as he pressed his palms against Lain’s chest to avoid falling over.

He never wanted to move again.

Opil cleared her throat.

Astol and Lain shoved themselves apart. With a blush searing his cheeks, he looked at his older mother.

Opil pointed to the mast. “Chores before play,” she said. A spray of cool mist rose out of the ocean behind her and blew across the deck.

When it painted his face, it felt good. He could have sworn it steamed.

Opil shook her head and headed back to the aft where Gria and Kimai were still speaking.

Astol cleared his throat. "Sorry."

"Sorry for kissing me?" Lain said playfully.

"No! No," he gulped. "Yes. No... wait. Every time I'm near you, I can't seem to speak right."

Lain stepped forward with a smile on his lips.

Despite Astol's desire to step forward, he backed away. However, he misjudged his position and his back smacked against the mast. He let out a whimper as he tilted his head to look at into Lain's eyes.

"We should get those beetles," Lain said with a smile.

"Oh, yeah!"

Thankful with the chance to focus on something else, Astol peered up and then snapped his fingers. Ropes came to life, pulling their bodies tight together before hauling them from the ground.

"Besides, I want to kiss you again without your mothers stopping me."

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About D. Moonfire

D. Moonfire is the remarkable intersection of a computer nerd and a scientist. He inherited a desire for learning, endless curiosity, and a talent for being a polymath from both of his parents. Instead of focusing on a single genre, he writes stories and novels in many different settings ranging from fantasy to science fiction. He also throws in the occasional romance or forensics murder mystery to mix things up.

In addition to having a borderline unhealthy obsession with the written word, he is also a developer who loves to code as much as he loves writing.

He lives near Cedar Rapids, Iowa with his wife, numerous pet computers, and a pair of highly mobile things of the male variety.

You can see more work by D. Moonfire at his website at <https://d.moonfire.us/>. His fantasy world, Fedran, can be found at <https://fedran.com/>.

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Fedran

Fedran is a world caught on the cusp of two great ages.

For centuries, the Crystal Age shaped society through the exploration of magic. Every creature had the ability to affect the world using talents and spells. The only limitation was imagination, will, and the inescapable rules of resonance. But as society grew more civilized, magic became less reliable and weaker.

When an unexpected epiphany seemingly breaks the laws of resonance, everything changed. Artifacts no longer exploded when exposed to spells, but only if they were wrapped in cocoons of steel and brass. The humble fire rune becomes the fuel for new devices, ones powered by steam and pressure. These machines herald the birth of a new age, the Industrial Age.

Now, the powers of the old age struggle against the onslaught of new technologies and an alien way of approaching magic. Either the world will adapt or it will be washed away in the relentless march of innovation.

To explore the world of Fedran, check out <https://fedran.com/>. There you'll find stories, novels, character write-ups and more.

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