

They were close. And they were getting closer. She could hear the rasp of their claws scraping solid stone. They were coming up the walls. How did they find her? The sounds grew louder, like they were coming from inside her head. No! She had to get away from them! She could hear her mother crying for her, as if from a great distance, her voice echoing, questioning...confused. Where was she?

“Asta!” she heard her mother’s voice again, no, it was deeper. Who was calling her?

“We have to get her out of here... right now.” A man’s voice now, low but powerful, steady.

“Asta!”

“Mother!” Asta cried out loud, her eyes shooting open with a start.

“Asta, get up honey, please, we have to GO! NOW!” cried Rhianna. Her white hair fell over Asta’s face as she shook her fiercely awake, and it took Asta a moment to focus on her orange eyes, bright and intense.

“Rh—Rhianna? What’s happening? I thought I—”

“I’ll explain everything on the way, I promise,” said Rhianna as she stepped back, “but we have to get going right now, OK Asta?” She pointed to the foot of the bed, where clean jeans, a baggy shirt and Asta’s Adidas sneakers sat neatly. “Quickly!” Rhianna instructed.

Rhianna moved to the wardrobe in Asta’s bedroom, flung it open, and started pulling clothes into an open gym bag on the floor. As Asta sat up in bed, she noticed a figure looming in the doorway looking out who turned and looked at her. Aacaith. the Dampener. Tall. Powerful. Dark. What was he doing in her room?

“They’re close.” Said Aacaith to Rhianna, ignoring Asta. Asta looked dazedly between Aacaith and Rhianna then she heard it. The footsteps weren’t in her head, or in her dream. They were real, and they were getting louder.

“What’s happening Rhi?” she asked, the tension in the room jolting her awake. The rhythmic pulse of their heightened physical responses hit her chest like a physical blow. They were scared. She became aware that she was wearing only a sweat soaked T-shirt that clung to her skin and hid almost nothing of her figure. She pulled the blanket up to cover herself and Aacaith quickly turned to look out the door again. Redness climbed up his neck to his cheeks, and Asta heard his heartbeat quicken. The rhythm matched the sharp panic she now noticed in Rhianna’s breathing.

“When you’re ready, we need to go.” He said, his voice betraying nothing.

“We’re ready. Right Asta?” Rhianna said, turning to look at Asta, her eyebrows raised. Asta quickly got up and threw on the clothes laid out for her as Rhianna zipped the bag closed, and stood.

“We’re under attack,” said Aacaith, glancing over his shoulder before stepping back into the room and looking at Asta, then Rhianna “and we’re helping you escape.” He closed the door behind him and slid the lock closed. “We—You, me, and Maze, are escaping.”

“OK,” Asta replied, “Who—?”

“Hunters.” he said in a calm tone, but his racing heartbeat said he felt more. Much more.

“And as to how,” interjected Rhianna as she pulled a palm-sized, mirror-finished sphere from her cherry-red leather jacket and held it out to Asta, “we’re going to use this.” Asta looked at it intently.

“What is it?” she asked, stepping toward the other woman’s outstretched hand.

“Hope.” Said Aacaith as he too stepped closer to complete the circle.

“Put your hands on it, both of you.” instructed Rhianna. As their hands closed over the orb, the sphere shone blue light between their fingers, before the light steadily grew into a bubble that encompassed their hands, their arms, and the space around them. The air inside the sphere felt muted and cold like the forest in the morning after fresh snow. Asta felt a shiver travel, not down her spine, but up her arm. She looked up at Rhianna, who was looking over Asta’s shoulder, her face frozen in fear.

The window over Asta’s bed exploded inward, and noise threw her mind into chaos. A huge, dark figure hurtled directly at her, and Asta screamed in mindless terror.

And then there was nothing.

~ * ~

Abducted by Stars

The Last Soundweaver

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Asta collected the sound of a dripping gutter and folded it into the melody she was creating around her head. The hum of a city full of traffic, tires swishing through puddles, bicycle bells chiming as messengers weaved their way between the cars, and

the bubbling, flowing sound of *people* all came together into a beautiful chorus playing just for her. She smiled as the morning sun glinted off a puddle, lighting her face up for a brief moment like she was back on stage, singing again.

The memory pricked at her, and she lost her smile like the puddle lost the sunlight. A frown formed on her forehead, and the notes of the song drifted away to get stuck in the nooks and crannies of The City of Dreams. Asta cast her hearing down the block to catch the soothing hum of neon lights above the door to her “Mecca”: the Happy Hatter Café. Her work and her safe space.

She picked up her pace, and by the time she’d reached the door and looked inside, her smile was back. Inside was busy, as usual. The sounds of people talking over pastries, hot breakfasts, and coffees sparkled brightly over the swoosh of hot griddles, the metallic tings of pastry trays, and the homely hum of the morning rush.

“Hey! Asta!” a rich bass voice called to her. Tavah, the baker whose sweet nature made everyone feel like they belonged here at the Happy Hatter, gave her a big wave. She gave him a beaming smile and a wave as she headed past the serving counter. “No hello for Tavah today?” he fired after her with a wink. She gave him a smirk and a shrug with her hands raised as if to say, “*I guess not!*”

“Ah well, smile is always enough for me, eh?” he said before turning back to the bemused customer who had been halfway through his complex coffee order.

Asta made her way through aromatic clouds of delicious fresh pastries, frying bacon, and the earthy tang of espresso to the back room, and was finishing tying her apron on when Gretchen, Tavah’s wife came to her. “Asta, some guy came in looking for you yesterday evening.” She handed her a note. “He was kinda wild looking. I mean, he wasn’t *bad* looking, just... he seemed wild, if you know what I mean.” Asta didn’t know what she meant, but some undertone of caution in the old woman’s voice crept along her scalp, making her want to scratch the itch. She took the note with a nervous smile and looked up as the oven dinged its call that pastries were ready to find warm mouths. “Ah, good! Fresh batch! Come,” Gretchen said, moving off.

Asta followed her, stuffing the note into her jeans pocket, forgetting it almost instantly as she lost herself in the bustling noise of the Happy Hatter. What to others was a cacophony of clangs, sizzles, bings, shouted orders, and friendly greetings was like sinking into a deliciously warm bath to her. It made her feel comfortable, so as she bounced around the coffee shop like an echo, she would discreetly weave sounds for people. Quiet a private conversation for friends confiding here, fend off kitchen noise for someone on a phone call there. It was second nature to her here, and the sounds flowed through her without the creeping anxiety she felt growing in her these days.

It had started a few months before, just after *It* happened. Capital “I.” She tried not to think about it too much, but that was like telling a fish not to swim. She used to be bubbly Asta Soosaar, full of smiles, full of song, bursting with *sound*. She didn’t sing anymore. She didn’t even speak. She couldn’t. Not after her Volume almost... No, not almost. She’d nearly killed her best friend.

“Hey, uh... miss?” Asta started. She’d lost herself there for a second. “Miss?” She looked at the young woman at the table by the window who was talking to her and smiled. “I was asking if I could get a croissant from you, or if I had to go up to the

counter?” she asked slowly, obviously aware that Asta was not totally present right now. Asta sighed and focused her eyes, shaking her head slightly, blinking like an owl. She raised a single finger and raised her brows questioningly. “Yeah, uh, just one please...” the customer said, and Asta gave a quick nod and turned to go fetch a croissant for the woman. What was *with* her today? She took some deep breaths as she busied herself getting the order together, and—she looked up again, and it was dark outside. She blinked and shook her head slightly. The cafe was quiet. It was near closing time. She’d zoned out in the familiar hubbub of the cafe, and the afternoon had flitted past without her noticing.

“You here, girl?” asked Tavah, his voice quiet and gentle, coming from near the door of the cafe. He’d flipped the sign to “Closed” and was untying his apron as he walked toward Asta. She sighed deeply, and this time the smile didn’t really reach her eyes. She felt tired. She hadn’t had a decent night’s sleep in... When was the last time? She couldn’t recall. She nodded to him and untied her apron as he approached. As she folded the apron, a crumpled piece of paper fell to the floor between her and her boss. She quickly bent and scooped it up, “Ah yes. The boy eh? You know him?” Tavah asked, and Asta immediately gave him a kind of shrug and shake of her head. “Hm,” grunted Tavah. “He trouble, you tell Tavah, eh?”

She smiled and gave him an indulgent look. She hated being treated like a helpless little girl, but Tavah and Gretchen were sweet to her. And they never made a big deal about her not being able to talk to them. Tavah used her share of words anyway. Tavah took the apron from her hands. “Go,” he said with a small flick of his big head toward the door “Almost sunset.” Asta gave him a small smile and a look of thanks before she headed to the door and out into the comforting cacophony of the always busy city.

Outside, the sidewalk had dried during the day, the stormy clouds of the last week having vented themselves enough for the time being. Asta looked up at the sunlight hitting around halfway up a tall skyscraper a few blocks away. Good. There was still time if she hurried. She started heading west toward the sun, toward the coastline of the sprawling seaside city. She crossed a few streets, moving with familiarity through alleys, past buskers, dodging cars and crowds to make her way to the marina. It was going to be a stunning sunset. As shadows lengthened across the city, she found her way to Harbor Street, the main road to the marina. When she stepped out of the alley she’d cut through, the sun hit her face, and she closed her eyes in bliss.

Enjoying the fading warmth of twilight on her skin with her eyes closed, she suddenly felt a chill behind her and turned quickly, the shadows of the alley seeming even darker now that she was in the light. She’d felt that feeling again. The ineffable knowledge that somewhere in the shadows, eyes had settled on her... and lingered. She shivered it off and tried to tell herself she was just imagining it, just being paranoid. Ever since her... accident... she couldn’t shake the feeling of being seen—no, *watched*. She stepped further into the light, wanting to get away from the darkness as soon as possible. She steeled herself. *Get yourself together, Asta*, she admonished herself in her thoughts. *You really can’t afford to be this skittish. You’ll hurt someone. Again.*

The smell of the sea permeated into her as she stood at the railings along the promenade. She loved this part of the city. Miles of walkways ran along the sea edge, followed on the other side by wide lawns where people exercised, walked their dogs, ate picnics, and just basked. There weren’t that many people sitting around this late, though; even though the clouds had retreated, the city needed a few sunny days to fully

shake off the chill. Asta watched waves march to the shore below her for a while. The roar of the ocean played a rhythmic bass to the trill of the city's lively sounds, and the sound filled her until she felt less empty. Less... echoey. She needed to be full of sound.

Her silence, imposed by fear, was maybe the worst fate she could think of for a soundweaver, but she couldn't let herself explode like that again. She had known she was powerful but had never felt *dangerous* before. Her ability to weave sound had always been a sort of... extra sense. Sure, she could reach out and play with sound the way some people might weave fabric, intertwining it into little games, like having an extra invisible hand more than anything. Even now she could reach out and feel the shape of the city from the sounds that she pulled toward her from all around. She closed her eyes and followed the curling crest of a wave with her sound sense, keeping her Volume low. Receiving, not broadcasting. She tapped her finger on the railings and followed the sound along the texture of the metal, feeling the way it held the cold of the sea.

From across the lawns, in the shadow of a low tree, hazel brown eyes in a dark-toned, square face took in Asta's relaxed pose. She was pulling sounds toward her, he noted. He could feel it. Her pull. She had almost seen him earlier. How? Had he pulled too strongly on her Volume? He was sure she was growing more sensitive. He was almost certain that he'd cloaked himself completely in the alleyway, and he'd been almost a full city block away! He'd have to be more careful. For both their sakes. He watched Asta step away from the railings and shrank his bulky shoulders slightly further into the rapidly deepening shadows of early evening. He preferred the dark. Easier to blend in. He waited until she'd crossed the road and turned up Harbor Street before stepping out of the shadows to follow her.

"Higher!" shouted Asta through wild breaths of laughter. Kerides, her "big" brother, grinned up at her as she arced into the sky on the swing he was pushing for her.

"Okay! You all heard her! She said higher!" he yelled out to no one in particular. "Hold on!" he instructed Asta. "Dad, watch this," he added over his shoulder to his parents sitting on a picnic blanket behind him, cooing into the pram that held the twins. "No hands, look!—*Dad!*" he said, slightly louder.

His father made a sort of "mm?" sound without turning his head.

"Never mind," Kerides said under his breath. With his hands in his pockets, he touched his tongue to the back of his teeth and let out a comically upturned whistle, like the ones the clowns made when they pretended to slip on nothing at all. The sound followed the arc of the swing holding his sister as it reached the bottom of its movement and it barely bucked as the air around it wrapped it gently and added more speed to the swing. Asta's eyes went wide with fright as she went a *lot* higher than he'd anticipated. His annoyance at being ignored by his father had added a little too much force than he'd intended, and he watched as the swing went up, and up, too high.

Asta's grip slipped from the ropes of the swing, and the pressure of the seat disappeared from underneath her as she began to fall. The lurching feeling of a world gone suddenly sideways almost caught her breath in her throat. The ground loomed terrifyingly, and the familiar feel of her brother's air control disappeared. She was suddenly cold. She heard herself scream, but it sounded distant, detached. It was her

mother's voice. She was screaming Asta's name. Why was no one catching her? She was falling. Didn't they see her falling? Why had Kerides let go of her? Why did he push her so *high*?

Fear sparked up and through her body in an instant, and she felt the pricks of sweat on her skin as the wind rushed past her. There! Someone was running toward her—they would catch her. But the figure rushing toward her was dark. Tall and dark. It was not her mother. It was a shadow, and Asta was helplessly falling into its outstretched arms, and she didn't want it to touch her; she didn't want it anywhere near her. Pure, abject terror blossomed in her chest as she fell into the vast shadow, her mother's screams of dread drowning out all thought. As Asta opened her mouth to scream into the open arms of darkness—she sucked air like a drowning rat through her painfully clenched teeth and her eyes slammed open.

Don't scream! her voice sounded in her head. She was panting, the baggy shirt she slept in clung to her sweaty skin, and she suddenly felt the coldness of the air through the soaked material. She'd had the dream again. That damned dream! She felt tears falling past her high cheekbones to the pillow. It hurt. The memory of the dream hurt so much, yet she was powerless to stop having it, night after night. Asta rolled onto her side, curled up tight, and wept. Silently, she let all the emotion flow out of her into her pillow, into the dark. She lay like that for a long time, exhausted, as the flow of tears slowed and finally stopped. Her eyes ached as she opened her eyes, but they immediately found the hole in the wall. The hole she'd made. That time she'd woken up screaming, and that was why she couldn't—absolutely *couldn't*—let herself scream again.

Thank God she was alone here. It was a small comfort that there was no one around for her to hurt, but it was a comfort. One of very few she had. Asta shivered in the cool night air, the heat of emotion having faded, leaving her in a soaking shirt. She was about to get up to change when something made her go completely still. The hairs on the back of her neck raised, and it had nothing to do with being cold. Something was off. No, something was... missing. What was it? She was alone out here—she knew that—but somehow she *felt* alone. Actively alone. Not like there was no one else nearby, but more like someone was distinctly *not there*.

Asta's breath came very shallow, and her heart started to race. She probed outward, listening to the familiar sounds of the poolhouse: the gentle hum of appliances, the small rattle in the kitchen window where it never quite closed properly, the gentle lap of the pool water outside, and the quiet whisper of wind that crept through the hole in the wall. It all seemed normal, but something was missing. She stopped trying to peer into the night and closed her eyes, letting her Volume rise until she could sense the room around her. She let it all absorb into her, feeling awash in the minuscule stirrings of the night.

There! In the corner. There was nothing there, and that was exactly what frightened her. In the far corner at the foot of her bed, next to her wardrobe, there was absolute silence. It wasn't the absence of sound so much as the utter and total stillness that so unnerved her. The world was full of sound, and sound was movement, rhythm, *change*. This was a stillness that was completely unnatural, and she could feel it not being there. Well, she couldn't exactly just lie there and do nothing! It wasn't like she was going to fall asleep in the state she was in.

Slowly, her eyes closed, Asta slipped her feet from under the covers, and carefully, smoothly, moved from lying underneath her duvet to sitting with her feet on the floor. She stood, listening intently as she padded toward the corner of her room. She opened her eyes because she could scarcely believe her ears. There was nothing there, but she reached out, bending over slightly.

Her fingers felt... nothing. Her sense of wrongness rapidly gave way to confusion, taking on a tinge of genuine concern. Was she losing her mind? Were her powers malfunctioning? She didn't know enough about her soundweaving powers to know if something went wrong with her, much less what to do about it. *I must be finally losing it*, she thought before stepping slightly back from the corner. Her instincts were still screaming fear at her.

She stepped closer and grabbed for the corner again, and this time her hand touched something. It was warm. That was all she registered before she panicked. The dream. The lack of sleep. The months of anxiety. It all burst out of her at once. Asta screamed.

She saw bright brown eyes widen. They were in the dark face of a bulky, hunched man who was *in her room!* She was just about to be confused when her body was blasted backward with such force that she simply left the air in her lungs filling the space she'd just occupied—as she, the man, and the wall simply weren't there anymore. The same anxious feeling of being watched that had followed her for months followed her body's flight.

Her body struck the roof and darkness took her.