

THE AETHER STONES SAGA
BOOK ONE



THE BOY OF
DUST AND
ASH

JOSHUA NEAL

XIV

Devi's body hung in the air, silhouetted against the fullness of the moon. Though it felt as if he was still and motionless, he was falling – falling towards the all-consuming waves of the Tharakun Sea. The night felt eerily peaceful, and it seemed to Devi as if the world, for a moment, had stopped spinning, as if the clouds in the air hung there with him and the stars beyond had ceased to blink. Devi felt weightless. He felt free. Then, it was as if the world had been ripped from under him.

Devi's arms and legs began to flail as he plunged towards the water that was waiting for him below, and a sense of regret deeper than any he could imagine exploded within him. He closed his eyes and tried to bring his limbs under control. If he was going to slam into the water, he at least wanted to give himself the best chance of survival. He straightened his legs and pinned

his arms to his sides. When Devi finally felt the impact of the water, however, it was not hard and unyielding as he had expected. Instead, it was soft. It caressed him like a cloud, enveloping his entire body, vanishing the sky and blinding his senses.

Devi felt himself continue to fall, but he did not hear the rush of water at his ears, nor did he feel the pressure slowly building as he plunged deeper and deeper into the sea. Instead, he still felt light, as if he had not yet hit the water at all.

Devi opened his eyes, ready for the saltwater to sting them. He was still enveloped in darkness, yet he felt no pain. Blind as he was, it was difficult for Devi to pair the inertia he felt in his body with the outside world, but he felt as if his fall was beginning to slow. Then, Devi finally landed, his body crumpling into a heap on solid ground, and the world around him was visible once more.

It felt to Devi as if he had been falling for an age. As he laid flat on his back, however, the top of the Salt Cliffs looking down on him, he realised it could only have taken him a few seconds to make the drop. What Devi also saw as he laid gazing up at the moonlit sky was a large, black sail, only half-loosed and flapping fitfully from its narrow mast. Devi laid at the base of the mast, and he realised the cloud that he had been momentarily enveloped within was the sail above him, and it had

caressed his fall, dropping him softly onto the deck of the ship to which it belonged.

Devi forced his body slowly upright. He found himself on a small ship, similar to those he had seen sailing the Tharakun Sea for as long as he had been in Narkasee, and identical to the one he was sure he had seen Reya sailing the day before. He searched the deck of the ship for Reya and quickly found her in the bow. She was bent over a stiff, wooden winch, which clacked loudly as she forced its handle anticlockwise. A thick, metal chain slowly snaked around the base of the winch as it turned until a loud thud brought it to a halt.

Devi rose to his feet, and he immediately felt his stomach beginning to churn. He watched as Reya relinquished her grip of the wooden handle and strode towards him. Reya did not speak as she approached Devi, however. She did not even offer him a glance. Instead, she took up a loose hanging rope from the base of the mast and began to pull at it, heaving backwards with the entire weight of her body.

Above Devi, the sail that had softened his fall from the edge of the cliff began to stretch and tighten. The top of the sail was already flush with the top of the mast, but its low corner now inched towards the end of a wooden bar that ran perpendicular to the mast. Unfurling before Devi was a sheet of sheer black, dotted with hundreds of tiny, white specks. As he gazed up at

the sail, it was as if he was looking through the clouds into the starry sky beyond.

Reya pulled the rope tight, stretching it beneath a metal hook at the base of the mast and wrapping it quickly around the hook's curves in a figure of eight until the sail was secure. Devi could feel the ship softly lurching beneath his feet, the waves of the Tharakun intermittently advancing and receding with the tide, and he struggled through deep breaths and a clenched jaw to stop his stomach from lurching along with it.

Without a word, Reya continued on past Devi towards the stern of the boat, which already felt as if it was beginning to drift away from the base of the cliff. There, she took her place behind a large, wooden wheel lined with thick, wooden spokes, which extended out beyond the wheel itself to form several short handles. Reya gripped two of the handles at the base of the wheel and heaved them towards the top. The ship lurched violently to Devi's right, and he almost failed to keep his feet. Reya gave the wheel a second one hundred and eighty degree turn and held it in place there.

Moments ago, the ship had run parallel to the shore, but now its bow dragged itself towards the horizon, and it slowly began to move away from the cliff. A gust of wind picked up, and the rope that was tied tight to the base of the mast creaked a little, the sail it held in place pulling even tighter. The ship lurched again, and

suddenly Devi's back was to the cliffs and the Keep, and the open sea stretched out before him.

Devi considered jumping from the ship for a moment. It had turned towards the horizon, but it was still close enough to the cliffs that he could reach the shore. The cliff face directly behind him was sheer, but it shallowed as it began to meet Black Soul's Bay further down. Devi had barely stepped foot on a ship before, however, and he didn't even know how to swim. The water might be shallow enough for him to wade – he had seen the bottom of the Tharakun from his ship the previous day – but he didn't like his chances if it was deeper than it seemed.

"You won't make it," Devi heard Reya call over his shoulder.

She hadn't even needed to see his face to know his intentions. Devi turned to face her. He tried to bring himself to speak, but he quickly found that he was unable to do so.

"The crocs will get you," Reya said simply.

She turned the wheel in her hands back to her left slightly and held it there, straightening the ship's course. Wind filled the sails, and the ship split the water in two, sending soft, rippling waves away from its bow on either side. They echoed out across the water, gradually growing more and more faint until they settled into the stillness of the sea once more.

Devi looked up at the Keep that loomed over them from atop the Salt Cliffs. Reya was right. The small ship moved quickly, and in Devi's brief moment of hesitation, Reya had already put some distance between themselves and the cliffs. Even if they had been closer, Devi's body flailing in the water, trying its best to stay afloat, would have been an invitation too enticing for the crocodiles on the shore to resist.

Devi turned away from Reya and walked the length of the boat. It was small and manoeuvrable, and it seemed to cut through the water with ease, but unlike the tiny ship he had sailed, it appeared to be large enough to have its own hold below deck. When he had seen it sailing off the coast of Narkasee the previous day, Devi had been unsure whether it was Reya he had seen staring back at him from its deck. Now, there was no question that it had been.

"What's going on?" Devi asked, turning back towards Reya.

"We're sailing. Have you never seen a ship before?"

"Yes, I've seen a ship before," Devi sighed.

"Of course you have. I watched you fall out of one."

Reya giggled as she spoke, and the sound ignited sparks of anger inside Devi.

"I mean why are you sailing, and why have you brought me with you?"

Hanging from the middle of the ship's wheel was a short length of rope. Reya bent to one knee, pulling the rope tight as she had at the mast. She fed the rope through a metal loop on the deck beneath the steering wheel, her fingers dancing as she tied the rope into a strong knot. She tugged at the wheel as she rose to standing, but it barely moved an inch.

"You want to find the Fire Stone, don't you?" Reya asked.

She made her way back towards the front of the ship, where a second mast, much smaller than the one at its centre, rose from the decking. A small, black sail hung loosely there, and it too was covered with tiny, white dots like stars.

"Of course," Devi replied.

Reya took hold of the rope that hung from the mast and pulled it tight. The small, black sail instantly stood to attention, stretched tight at the bow of the ship. Reya curled the rope around another curved, metal hook, tying it and pulling at it lightly to test its security.

"So, let's go and find it," she said.

"Let's go and find it?" Devi repeated, his voice flat and cynical. "Us? Now?"

"Why not?" Reya asked.

"Because we don't know the first thing about surviving in The Sands," Devi said, incredulous. "I've

barely begun my training, and you're a princess, not a Seeker."

"Who says a princess can't be a Seeker? Isn't it the right of everyone in Katai to seek the Stones?"

Reya smirked at Devi, just as she had when she had pinned him to the bed moments earlier. Already, he hated that look. It made him feel stupid and weak. It made him want to wither away and hide. It made him doubt whether he even knew his own name.

"Every boy," Devi said finally.

"I'm sorry?"

"It's the right of every boy and every man in Katai to seek the Stones."

"Well did you ever think that the women and girls might enjoy a chance to win glory for their nation too?"

Devi fell silent. He felt like he was a boy again, being chastised by the village mothers for taking apples from the orchards.

"But why now?" he asked.

"I could ask you the same question."

Devi thought back to the night his father's head had been sliced from his body. As they had countless times since, visions of Rakhas's fields burning to a cinder flashed across his mind as if he was back there under the moonlit, ash-filled sky.

“Besides, my father keeps me locked up in the Keep all day,” Reya said. “I have to do something to pass the time.”

Devi remembered seeing Reya in the window of the Keep the first morning he had trained, and he remembered Vikas’s words.

“So that’s what this is for you?” Devi asked. “A way to pass the time? You’re going to get us both killed because you’re bored of having someone to keep you safe and protected?”

Reya bore down on Devi, her smirk falling from her lips as she strode across the deck. She didn’t stop until her face was just inches from Devi’s own, his lip still throbbing a little from where she had bitten it earlier.

“You’re not the only one that wants to find the Fire Stone, you know? And besides, I’m not safe in the Keep, and neither is my father. He thinks its walls can protect us, but the longer we stay hidden behind them, the closer Katai comes to extinction.”

Reya stepped back from Devi but continued to hold his gaze.

“You’ve heard the rumours, Devi. The Darmeenians are closing in. If we don’t find the Fire Stone soon, they will, and that will be the end of Katai. I love my father, and I love Katai. I want to save them both.”

Devi wanted to speak, but for a moment, he couldn’t find the words. Until now, Devi had only seen Reya

from a distance. Each time he had seen her in Vagan's Keep, he had barely been able to tear his eyes away from her. Since then, he had seen her leap from the edge of the Salt Cliffs, watched her sail a ship single-handedly, and had awoken with her teeth sinking into his bottom lip. Reya was captivating. She was wild. She was reckless. But now, all of a sudden, she seemed immeasurably vulnerable.

"Why me?" Devi asked, his fledgling anger beginning to dissipate but his confusion remaining.

The smirk that had fallen from Reya's face returned with a vengeance. She made her way back over to the steering wheel at the stern of the ship and gripped the end of the rope that she had tied around the metal loop. She gave it one short, sharp tug, and the knot instantly fell apart. Then, she unhooked the rope, and took hold of the steering wheel once more, heaving it anti-clockwise for a full rotation. The ship lurched to one side, the sails tightening against the wind as it banked around to its left.

"This is my ship," Reya said, a mischievous glint in her eye. "I'm the captain, and I give the orders. Most of those other boneheads wouldn't be able to handle that."

"Boneheads?"

"The other trainees," Reya clarified. "They might be dense, but they certainly aren't spineless."

Devi felt his anger beginning to rise once more. He had never met anyone able to shift his emotions so dramatically.

“How do you even know how to sail when you just said yourself you spend all day in the Keep?”

“I spend all *day* in the Keep,” Reya repeated. “But my father doesn’t need to know where I am at night.”

Devi looked to his left towards the Salt Cliffs. He and Reya were far out to sea now, and the Keep looked tiny, barely visible but for the dim orange light that glowed in the windows at its back. To Devi’s right, the Tharakun stretched for as far as the eye could see, and the moon shone bright above the horizon.

“Well, Captain,” Devi said. “I hate to tell you this, but The Sands are that way.”

Devi pointed over Reya’s shoulder, in the opposite direction to the ship’s current course. Reya paused for a moment, content to allow Devi to continue to speak.

“And what kind of supplies can this thing hold?” Devi asked, raising his arms and looking from one end of the boat to the other. “I might not know much about sailing, but I know we need to eat. It will take weeks to sail to The Sands.”

“We’re not heading for The Sands,” Reya said, once it was clear that Devi had fallen silent. “We’re heading for Darmeen.”

Devi was dumbstruck.

“Darmeen?” he asked.

“That’s right,” Reya said simply, as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

“Why in Vagan’s name would we want to go to Darmeen?”

Reya crinkled her nose.

“Please don’t say that,” she said.

“Don’t say what?”

“In Vagan’s name,” Reya sneered. “He’s my father. It just sounds strange.”

“Fine,” Devi sighed, his patience long since having worn thin. “But why Darmeen? It’s a death-wish.”

“But The Sands aren’t?”

Devi chewed his bottom lip.

“The Fire Stone is in The Sands,” he said. “The Darmeenians killed my father and grandfather, and they enslaved my great-grandfather. Why would I want to go anywhere near that place?”

“So you can reach the Fire Stone,” Reya replied. “And so we can save Katai from the same fate.”

“But the Stone is in The Sands!” Devi said, exasperated.

“I know where the Stone is,” Reya replied. “Everyone in Katai and beyond knows where the Fire Stone is. But we’ll never reach The Sands in this thing.”

Devi looked up and down the ship that continued to drift away from the Salt Cliffs. It was a meagre vessel,

barely large enough to support a small crew of five or six and small enough to be sailed by as few as one.

“We’ve only got space for a few days’ worth of supplies. You said so yourself.”

“So what?” Devi asked. “We’re using supplies to get to Darmeen, and then we’ll just be picking up more supplies to sail back. It’s not worth the trip.”

Once more, Reya said nothing. Instead, she allowed Devi’s mind to continue to work.

“Unless,” Devi said, a light of understanding falling across his face. “We’re going to switch to a bigger ship in Darmeen.”

“Not just a bigger ship,” Reya replied, her eyes catching fire. “The *biggest* ship.”

It was Devi’s turn to fall silent.

“The Darmeenians have been building the largest ship the seas have ever seen,” Reya continued. “They’ve been working on it for years, and it’s finally ready to set sail.”

“How do you know this?” Devi asked.

“You hear whispers on the waves,” Reya said. “But it’s true, Devi, and that’s our way out to The Sands. A ship that large will be able to sail for weeks on end without ever having to stop to resupply. It’s set to sail further than any ship has ever sailed before, and we’re going to be aboard it when it leaves.”

Devi stared back at Reya. Though his training had been limited, he had at least begun to prepare his mind and his body for The Sands. After losing to Orlain, however, there was no way that he would be allowed to continue his training. Reya's plan was bold, it was brave, and there was a chance that it would now be his best hope of finding the Fire Stone. But Devi knew there was a much greater chance it would lead to his death.

Devi opened his mouth to speak, but the ship lurched suddenly, and he quickly clamped it shut once more. Then, he ran to the side of the ship, bent over its taffrail, and hurled the contents of his stomach into the Tharakun.

FROM DUST AND ASH IN DARKENED SKIES

Devi has always dreamed of becoming a Stone Seeker, but tradition has him rooted in the fields of Rakhas, tending to his father's farm. When Darmeenian raiders invade his village, Devi finally has a chance to prove himself, but instead he cowers away, hiding in the shadows as his home is burnt to the ground.

Determined to redeem himself and protect the future of Katai, not only from Darmeen but also from the creeping desert that threatens to overwhelm them, Devi flees to Narkasee to finally begin his search for the Fire Stone, one of four ancient, elemental gems that combine to unlock the all-powerful Aether.

With a horde of faceless men and a pirate princess at his side, Devi finds himself with a second chance at glory, but first he must discover that glory can only come with sacrifice, and only the ultimate sacrifice will be enough to save Katai.

THE VISION OF THE SON SHALL RISE

