

He heard the scrape of stool legs across floorboards, then a shuffle of fabric as she settled. Silence.

And in the silence, a sound from outside the tower.

“Oh no,” Dust said quietly, wincing.

The scrabbling sound of claws on stone grew louder, and then Astra gave a little gasp—no doubt as Bumble heaved herself into view on the window ledge. A moment later, the *thump* announced her entrance.

With the quickness of a Planter, Astra’s shadow left the floor, leaping higher. She’d either climbed on his stool or his workbench.

“Shoo!” she said fiercely. “Shoo, beast!”

“It’s just Bumble.” Dust gave a sheepish grin she couldn’t see. “She’s harmless. To you, at least. But she’ll eat all my carvings if you let her, ’n she’ll make herself sick. Oi! Bumble. Out of my workshop. Come back later.”

He gave the wall a sharp smack to emphasize his words, but he heard the shuffling sounds of an undeterred woodmunch.

Astra’s voice held a distinct note of panic when she spoke. “I saw one of these fiends snap a full board in half!”

“Aye, they’ll do that. Bumble, I mean it. *Out.*”

In answer, the woodmunch emitted a high-pitched whine, which gave Dust pause. He frowned, listening. After another shuffle, Bumble gave it again. Squinting, Dust thought he could make out the creature’s shadow beside his workbench, beneath Astra. Instead of the crisp snap of sacrificed carvings, he heard another keening whine.

“Please don’t eat me,” Astra whimpered.

“Astra . . .” Dust felt a cold dread, and he had to swallow before continuing. “Did you get bitten by something in the forest?”

“Yes, I—how did you know?”

“Bumble can smell it.”

Blaze spider. They carried a venom that poisoned trees as readily as creatures, a venom that could kill a woodmunch if they ate the infected wood.

“Don’t panic,” Dust said calmly, “but you’re set to die in about eight seconds.”