

SCARLET WINTERS

THE BERONA CHRONICLES



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Scarlet Winters
The Berona Chronicles

By J. Kwong

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Scarlet Winters – the Berona Chronicles

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Edited by Jolie Tin

Cover by Vila Design www.viladesign.net

Special thanks

To all my friends who read this book and gave me constructive feedback, thank you so much! In particular, I would like to thank J.Tin and K. Ha for taking the time out of their busy days to review this book. I would also like to thank my wonderfully supporting husband, who didn't laugh at me when I told him I wanted to become an author.

And thanks to everyone who downloaded this book!

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The Annual Inventor's Competition

"Repeat after me..."

The Director of the Berona Guild of Inventors looms before me, spreading his arms like an eagle about to take flight. It's all very dramatic, but the audience behind him loves it and soaks it in like a sponge.

"I, Terry Landers..."

"I, Terry Landers," I repeat with a sigh.

"Hereby agree to abide by the rules of the Annual Inventor's Competition, as set by the Berona's Guild of Inventors..."

"Hereby agree to blah blah blah."

Dr. Merrell gives me a sharp look, and the three other contestants stare at me in horror.

"Ms. Landers, do you not agree with the terms and conditions as specified on your entrance application?" Dr. Merrell's white, bushy eyebrows furrow together, and I suppress the urge to pet the white caterpillar that has resulted from his frown.

"I do," I answer with another sigh. "It's just a rather long and tedious statement. Can't I say that I agree?"

Dr. Merrell looks like he wants to force me to repeat that ridiculously long statement, but the time-keeper at the sidelines taps his watch impatiently.

"Fine," Dr. Merrell growls. Pasting his glowing smile back on his face, Dr. Merrell turns toward the other contestants and they respond by straightening up.

"Then, I hereby announce, the start of the Annual Inventor's Competition!"

The crowd goes nuts and I roll my eyes. I know I'm being a complete brat, but I can't help it. Entering this competition was never my idea in the first place. Thanks to Erik Reynolds – my sponsor – I somehow found my name entered and accepted into the Annual Inventor's Competition.

At first, I was going to refuse to participate, but my mom reminded me of a few things.

"Erik might cut off your funding if you don't compete!" she had exclaimed. "You know he wants you to impress the Berona Guild of Inventors, and he hopes this will be your chance!"

"It's also an honor to be chosen as a competitor!" my mom had added. "Many inventors spend years trying to get a spot in the competition, and look at you! You get it on the first try!"

Well duh I would have gotten it on the first try. There's no doubt about that at all. I'm an awesome inventor. Anyone who has seen my work knew I am, undoubtedly, one of the best inventors in Berona. Unfortunately, I'm not the type of inventor Berona would reward, which made me question why I'm here in the first place.

"Competitors, face your challenge!" Dr Merrell booms.

Obediently, I, along with the other competitors, turn around to face a giant white curtain. With a dramatic flourish of his hands, the curtain lifts to reveal a field of really tall grass that is partitioned into four sections. Up in the bleachers behind us, the audience members oohhhs and aaahhhs. I roll my eyes again because there is nothing remotely impressive about a giant field of grass.

"Your challenge today..." Dr. Merrell continues, "is to create an invention that will clean up the grass in your allocated section."

"You've gotta be kidding me. We're mowing the lawn!?" I snort. Beside me, Gary Worthing – one of Berona's infamous inventors – shoots me a dirty look.

"You will only use materials from here," Dr. Merrell adds while brandishing his arm over a junk pile, "and you will have 30 minutes to complete your task. The panel will judge you on how well your invention efficiently and effectively mows the lawn."

The three competitors nod their head in understanding, and race off towards the junk pile. Unlike them, I casually saunter over, and yawn while waiting for the other competitors to finish rummaging through the junk. The audience stares at me like I'm being a complete slacker, but I'm really not.

While the competitors are frantically fighting over for the pieces, I'm actually assessing the ones I'll be able to use. In under five seconds, I've already pinpointed two pieces of junk that will be unlikely taken by the other competitors. It's these two pieces that I'm thinking about as I mentally create my invention in my mind. To anyone else, these are the most useless pieces from the junk pile. But to me? I can use them to make something amazing.

The heated stares from the audience bores into my back, but one particular stare scalds more so than the others. I turn around and give the scowling Erik a wave. He jerks his head at me to indicate the other competitors have dispersed. Turning around, I see that I'm left with nearly nothing, but of course, my two precious pieces of metal lie there, untainted by the other competitors' grubby hands. Gingerly, I pick up the two items and ignore Erik's continued scowl.

Back at my workstation, it takes me 10 minutes to finish my invention. I'm done before anyone else, which gives me time to observe the ruckus the others are making. Again, I can feel the heated stares of the audience members as they watch me, and I even give Dr. Merrell a bright, shiny grin when he looks at me in confusion.

"Time! Dr. Merrell eventually calls out. Immediately, the ruckus stops and the competitors stand stiffly by their inventions.

Together, Dr. Merrell, and a panel of three other members, walk around the room to inspect everyone's inventions. When they come to my workstation, they simultaneously frown at the thin tube that I hold out in my hand.

"This is your invention?" Dr. Merrell asks with a sneer. I nod and give him another bright and shiny smile.

"Ms. Landers," Dr. Merrell says to me in a low growl, "this is a highly prestigious competition. For your career's sake, I would suggest you make a better effort. After all, you *are* the underdog here."

"Don't be a douche-bag," I retort, which sends Dr. Merrell's bushy, white eyebrows skyrocketing to the top of his head. "You don't even know what this baby can do. How do you know I need to make a better effort?"

Dr. Merrell's puppy panel members let out an audible gasp, but the man doesn't deign to give me a response. Instead, he lets out an aggravated huff and stomps off with the panel members in tow. I smirk despite knowing that I've probably signed the death certificate of my career. It's definitely not smart to insult the head of the Berona Guild of Inventors, but honestly, my career was never alive in the first place.

"Let's start with our last year's winner, shall we!?" Dr. Merrell announces to the crowd after time is up.

Oh yes, let's start with Chris Holden, the man who wins this stupid competition every year. But of course, the rest of the competitors pretend they have a chance of winning, and clap enthusiastically as Dr. Merrell and the panel members approach Chris's workstation.

"I call this the Gravitational Mower!"

Chris waves his hands over...well, I frankly don't know what the hell it is. It looks like a piece of crap

made out of metal, and I want to applaud Chris for making metal dung art in 30 minutes.

“Using gravitational force,” Chris continues to explain, “I created a powerful vacuum that will efficiently and effectively mow the lawn.”

“Oh boy,” I moan as Chris bends down to turn on his machine. “Gary, you’d better hold onto your clothing.”

Gary Worthing shoots me another dirty look, but he heeds my advice. The both of us back away as far as possible from Chris’s workstation, and clutch onto our clothing as the Gravitational Mower whirs to life.

At first, nothing happens, but soon, the audience and the panel members are feeling the “gravitational force”. A woman in the audience shrieks as her hat is sucked into the metal piece of dung, and a man cries out when his shirt is torn off his chest.

I almost feel sorry for the panel members, since they’re the closest to the machine and have to grasp onto tables and chairs to keep from being sucked towards the device. It’s only when Dr. Merrell calls out “enough!” does Chris finally turn the damn thing off.

“Well, that was crappy...both literally and theoretically,” I comment. This time, I manage to get a smirk from Gary, but we both regain our composure as the panel members move onto the next competitor – Dana Gowry.

“Ms. Gowry,” Dr. Merrell addresses her, giving her a wary smile, “do show us your invention.”

“Oh!” Dana jitters. She blinks at Dr. Merrell like he’s grown two heads, but Dana’s awkwardness was something expected. Known for her inventions, but also known to be a slight social outcast, Dana was the Guild’s least popular inventor.

“I’ve created an automated lawn mower that can fit in your palm!” she announces as she produces an odd looking thing with wheels.

Dana sets the thing on the grass, and it pathetically putts to life. For a few seconds, everyone is silent as we watch the little thing roll around the lawn, but almost before it began, the machine sputters and dies.

“Fail,” I say, which Gary answers with a twinkle in his eyes.

“Er... thank you Ms. Gowry,” Dr. Merrell says politely enough. He gives her a nod, which Dana ignores as she cradles her dead invention.

“Gary Worthing,” Dr. Merrell proudly announces, puffing out his chest.

Again, I want to roll my eyes since everyone knows that Gary is Dr. Merrell’s apprentice. However, I have to say I have more respect for Gary than for Chris. Gary, after all, has created some notable inventions that actually work.

“Are you ready?”

“Yes sir!” Gary barks. He proceeds to produce a giant blade from his back, and instinctively, the entirety of the auditorium backs away.

“Ddduuuddeeee,” I say, pointing my finger at the giant blade, “are you trying to cut someone’s head off!?”

“It’s perfectly safe,” Gary answers with a frown.

“Yeah, no dude. It’s a giant blade!”

“Ms. Landers!” Dr. Merrell hisses at me. “Keep your comments to yourself!”

He then turns back to Gary, and pastes that giant smile on his face again.

“Mr. Worthing, please tell us about your invention.”

“Yes sir!” Gary answers, while straightening his back. “My invention is an automated blade, which will swiftly cut the lawn.”

Gary sets his invention in the middle of his partitioned lawn, but before he turns it on, he flashes me an uncertain look.

“Don’t do it man,” I say. Gary responds with a frown, but turns on his machine anyway.

The machine doesn’t even stay in the field for a split second before it comes hurtling into my workstation. Luckily, I anticipated this, and had jumped into the corner with my invention safely tucked in my hand. Sparks fly all around me, and I cover my head until the flying electricity subsides.

“I don’t think I signed up to die in this competition!” I snap as the panel members help me to my feet.

“Ms. Landers, don’t be so dramatic!” Dr. Merrell snaps back at me. But he shuts his mouth when he notices the jaw-dropped audience staring at us.

“Um...,” Dr. Merrell says, straightening his tie, “thank you Mr. Worthing. That was most interesting indeed.”

Gary nods at Dr. Merrell and looks sheepishly at me. I return the nod to let him know it’s all good. After all, I’ve had more than my own fair share of near-death encounters with inventions gone wrong.

“And Ms. Landers,” Dr. Merrell says with a sigh. “If you’re well enough to demonstrate your invention?”

“Sure,” I say with a shrug and place my tiny tube on the lawn. I’m about to activate it, but stop myself when I hear Dr. Merrell clear his throat.

“Are you not going to describe it?”

“No description needed,” I respond with a cheeky grin.

I turn to activate my invention and jump back from the lawn. The panel members also jump back just before a flash of green light erupts from my tiny tube and blinds everyone. Unlike everyone else, I’ve placed my sunglasses on right before I activated my invention, so I’m able to observe the gloriousness of my work as it tears up the entire field.

Oh right, did I forget to mention this? My invention, literally, rips apart the entire field. After the light subsides, all we see is a barren plot of land, which includes the partitioned portions allocated for the other three competitors.

“What the hell!?” Dr. Merrell yells. The panel members also erupt into enraged comments, while the audience looks on in confusion.

“Ms. Landers, did you create a bomb!?” Dr. Merrell screams at me, his spit flying onto my face.

“That’s right, Dr. Merrell. What better way to clear up grass than to get rid of it, 100% completely and cleanly?”

“Are you nuts!?” Dr. Merrell growls at me. “You’ve created a weapon!”

“As did your little apprentice,” I say with a nonchalant shrug. “At least mine did as tasked, while Gary’s giant blade almost took my head off.”

“You voluntarily created a weapon while the other inventors did no such thing!”

“I would disagree. The other inventors, minus Dana of course, did create weapons, which they didn’t intend to be used as weapons, but clearly could be used as such.”

"You're disqualified, Ms. Landers," Dr. Merrell snarls at me. "No wonder you've never been accepted into the Berona Guild of Inventors."

Ouch. That statement was supposed to hurt, but I've heard it so many times that I'm immune to it now. I give him another shrug as two security personnel lead me off the competition grounds. The audience members stare at me as I pass, and one man reaches out to touch me on the arm.

"I think you should win," he says, smiling at me. "After all, your invention was the best."

I smile back at the man, but shake my head.

"Didn't you hear? They think I'm a complete psychopath. There's no way I will win."

The security guards nudge me to keep moving, and I shoot Erik a look as I pass him. He looks back at me, shaking his head in disappointment. But honestly, what did he expect? It's not like they would miraculously allow me into the Guild of Inventors after the competition was over.