**From the Mountain**

**L.L. Crane**

**Mark of Power Series**

**Book 1**

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For Natalie and Nicole…who still believe in dragons

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**The Mountain**

The man-made mountain was situated next to the ocean, waves crashing violently against it as if they knew it didn’t belong there. At the very top of the mountain perched a mansion, formed of smooth purple rock, so rare that it glistened against the occasional sunlight. It was built like a castle, with turrets and windows, even a moat of salty brine water bleeding in from the ocean.

A prison was nestled at the base of the mountain, sections of it actually winding into the packed earth of its lowest parts. Soldiers, dressed in red uniforms stood at attention before its doors, long swords swinging from their belts. Further out from the mountain, was an area they once called Presidio, housing the privileged…in mansions as glorious as the one on top of the mountain…made of stone or rock, precious metal, the highest quality of wood. The government officials lived there, although they were few now. The healer. The Elite Army. Those with Power. And of course, the Destroyers.

Two men sat opposite each other in the amethyst mansion at the top of the mountain, facing each other across a large dining table made of mahogany, so shiny that their reflections could be seen in the wood. The floor was made of the deepest black marble, so dark it almost appeared purple. The walls were painted lavender and the windows overlooking the ocean boasted of brocade curtains, a direct contrast to the lighter color on the walls. Waves could be heard as they lapped against the mountain, reverberating throughout the entire house.

The tallest man, with deep black hair sleeked back over his forehead sat upright in one of the chairs, opposite the other man. He had a long, elegant nose and dark, swarthy skin. The other man was not nearly as handsome, but he carried himself with authority, which the taller man liked. He, too, had dark skin and dark hair, but his face was rounder, his nose almost bulbous. His forehead was broad, as was his body. Both were dressed in black, but the taller man’s clothes gleamed with the slightest hint of purple. Black leather gloves were tightly wrapped around his hands, even as he ate.

“So, Strom has been taken care of?” The tall man calmly questioned as he sipped a deep red wine from an ornate crystal goblet.

“Yes, he is dead.”

“How?”

“We ambushed him. He was headed back home… to Harcourt.”

The next question flew off his thin lips, a tone as elegant as his face and clothing. “Proof?” he queried, obviously in charge, leather gloves still wrapped around the goblet.

Even though they were eating, right as the lord of the mansion set his goblet down, picked up a silver fork, and placed a delicate piece of lobster into his mouth, the shorter man reached into a leather bag on the floor beside him and pulled out a head. A human head that once had thick blonde hair and a rugged face, but was now shriveled and decaying, mangled skin falling off of it with traces of dried up blood. An honest face, one could tell, even though it no longer lived.

Lord Gareth continued to chew slowly, his mouth moving in tiny circuits, peering over at the head as if it were a dead rat. He swallowed before speaking, his voice emotionless. “It’s him alright…nice work.” He took another bite of lobster and reached for the crystal goblet, sipping the dark red wine with pleasure. “And the Timbrels?

“Taken care of, my Lord.”

With that, Lord Gareth placed his fork on the table, never questioning why the other man had not yet touched his food. He tilted his head to one side. “Lanton, my good man, have you proof of that as well?”

Lanton leaned down slowly, almost hesitantly, from his chair in the opposite direction as before and reached into a different bag, revealing another head – this one a woman’s. She, too had blonde hair, at one time long and flowing, but now matted with thick red blood, almost the same color as the wine. Thick globs of dirt plastered against it, mixing with the blood like art work gone awry. Obviously, her face had once been beautiful, small features with large eyes, although the color could not be distinguished at this point.

Lord Gareth stopped chewing and stared at the bleeding head before him, much fresher than the man’s. “Did Jackal get away?”

It took Lanton a few seconds to answer, the slightest hint of remorse resonating in his husky voice. “No. He put up a fight….over the woman.” He gulped and cast his eyes toward the woman’s head. “We had to kill him.”

Lord Gareth shook his head slowly. “Such a shame. I had plans for him.” He sipped more wine and breathed out deeply, then dabbed at his lips with a pure white linen napkin. “Jackal was brilliant, you know.” He leaned forward, then, pushing his lean body against the table toward Lanton’s, and his voice became a lyrical whisper. “He could have helped The Alliance had he not married the Light Skinned woman.” He nodded ever so slightly to the head that Lanton was placing back in the bag, traces of blood staining his rough, rugged hands.

“She was a problem, sir. And Strom, too.”

Lord Gareth’s voice became rough, husky, and just a little bit mean. “They all are.” He made a face then, one like a child being forced to eat a vegetable he doesn’t like. “That is why we had to pass the Purification Law…they are weak as well as problematic. For the future of the Alliance…the blood must stay pure.”

Lanton narrowed his eyes, the slightest hint of uneasiness pervading. “Yes, but the law allows for…” He hesitated for the briefest of moments. “…Light Skins with the Mark of Power to live.”

The room remained silent for several minutes as Lord Gareth stared with burning black eyes across the table at Lanton. He waved his hand in the air, obviously dismissing the subject. “They may prove useful in the future…they have Powers, you know.”

Instantly he changed the subject, “And that brat of theirs…the half breed?”

“Uh humm,” Lanton started, clearing his throat uncomfortably. “He escaped somehow…we went back to the house, but he was gone.”

“Gone?” Leather fists pounded the table and black eyes blazed, the crystal goblet wobbling on the table. “How could you lose a seven year old?”

“We searched everywhere for him…for the rest of the night. He…he…seems to have disappeared.”

Silence lingered, dark power somehow emanating from it, and Lanton dared to take a sip of wine and a bite of food, although the rich lobster and butter sauce clumped in his mouth like mud.

“Very well. He can’t survive on his own for too long.”

Lanton swallowed with exaggeration, as if he were eating a live animal. “Our thinking exactly.” He placed his fork back down on the table, his appetite gone.

“And how is our prisoner faring?” At this, Lord Gareth stopped eating and drinking. For the briefest of moments his ebony eyes actually softened.

“Not well, sir.”

With an explosion, Lord Gareth slammed his fork on the table, bits of food flying through the air. “Explain.”

Lanton paused for a few minutes, fidgeting his fingers under the table. “She continues to scream…night and day…for her husband and her child. And she refuses to eat.”

“It has been three days. I thought she would calm down by now. Have you punished her?

“Yes, of course.” Lanton’s lips curved down and his brow wrinkled. “But she is strong…she…she won’t submit.”

“Very well. I will deal with her myself.”

“I am sorry my Lord. We have tried everything.”

The tall man stood up then, even though the meal wasn’t finished. “You are excused, Lanton. I will be in touch.”

Lanton rose, his long, ruby handled sword bumping the table with a thud. “What do you want me to do with these?” He pointed to the two leather bags.

“Leave them.”

“Yes, sir.” Lanton replied, rapidly scurrying away from the table, as if he were escaping a rabid animal. The thick wooden doors of the mansion closed behind him with a whining bang, and as he bustled down the stairs, he could be heard mumbling under his breath, “Angels help her. Angels help that poor woman.”

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Deep under the loins of the mountain were secret tunnels, dug by men as well… different men than those who built the mountain. They were just recently completed, so fresh that the packed earth still fell off the sides of the walls in small, wet clumps. The tunnels were damp and cold, reeking of rancid ocean water.

A trap door opened and spilled the smallest amount of light through the darkness of the tunnels and a slight man dressed in a white robe stepped back from it.

“One by one…you must get into the tunnels,” he urged, scanning the ornate room of his home, packed with silent, ghostly faced people. His daughter was at school and he had closed his clinic for lunch. His time was limited.

People began to scurry down the ladder…into the tunnels under the mountain. As their feet hit the bottom of the tunnels, their shoes filled with cold ocean water, and they began to run.

“Hurry,” the man implored to person after person, actually shoving some of them down onto the ladder. He looked over his shoulder every now and then, as if he were expecting someone.

“The Purification Law passed today. You must get out of the city.”

He would offer directions to some of the people as they scrambled down the ladder. “There will be dragons on the other side…to take you to Harcourt.”

As he pushed another person onto the rickety ladder, he became desperate, wondering if he would finish in time. It was easier with the children. He could just pick them up and almost give them a toss. As he lifted a girl, perhaps six years old, the same age as his daughter, his breath came to him in sharp gasps. The middle of his chest curled into a tight ball. It could be her, he thought, a shiver running up the spine of his back. It could be her.

Finally, the last person vanished safely into the tunnel, and with shaking hands, he closed the door behind them, covering it with a rare Persian rug, an antique left over from before the Great Wars. He took a huge breath, composed himself by wiping his hands over his long hair, sweeping it back into a tight knot. Slowly, as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened, he opened the door to the clinic without ever eating lunch, pasted a smile on his face and called for his next patient.

Deep beneath him the people ran, as they were told. It was difficult, and the water slowed them at times, their shoes now filled with mud, leaking out the sides as their toes squished between it. At one point a small boy tripped and fell. His mother screamed, over and over again, but she was unable to stop for him as the crowd violently pushed her forward, a massive movement that seemed to have a mind of its own.

“Morti…Morti…” she hollered with panic, again and again, desperation and fear echoing off of the mud walls. But there was no response. The tunnels thundered with their movement, but the mountain stood firm and nobody from above heard them as they tumbled along like underground vermin.

They were ordinary people. With once ordinary lives.

Although most of them had never seen each other before, they had three things in common. They were all Light Skinned. They were all unmarked. And they were all literally running for their lives.

**At Six…**

The bell rings loudly, and I jump out of my seat, racing toward the door. It is recess time, and I can’t wait to get outside. I am jostled by the other kids until my feet hit the grass, and I spread my arms out like wings and run, dipping and diving. I look behind me, and Reese follows, his arms stretched wide, too. We are dragons at the moment, but even better, we are best friends.

Canto joins us today. Sometimes she plays with the other girls, jumping rope or swinging, but she likes to play dragons, too. I am in the lead right now, but I slow down for Reese. He is a little bit chubby and sometimes he can’t keep up. Canto swerves around us both, running as fast as she can, her bright red hair flying behind her. I hear her laugh as she takes the lead, and I want to run faster, be in front again, but I don’t want to leave Reese behind.

Glendon, Tanlo, and the other boys are playing soldier. They find sticks or other things to use as weapons, but they have to be careful that a teacher doesn’t see them. If they get caught, they get a detention. Glendon is the best at playing soldier. He is taller than me, even, and he is fast. I am glad he doesn’t like to play dragons, or he would always be in the lead, and that would make me mad.

I decide to race around Canto. I know that Reese won’t mind. I am running faster, swerving around her when suddenly the sky turns black. I freeze, staring up into the darkness. Reese and Canto do the same.

That is when we see them. Real dragons. Huge purple dragons that block the sun from our eyes. And they are landing in our school yard. Some of the girls start screaming. Reese takes my hand and I reach for Canto. Reese, like always, takes charge, shoving us behind one of the huge climbing balls.

“Crouch down low,” he whispers to us. Reese is the smartest boy in our class. His brown eyes look frightened, though. Canto and I both do as he says, and we huddle together, our arms wrapped around each other. My heart is beating fast, and I don’t know what is going on. Dragons seem to fall out of the sky, and men who must be soldiers step off of them. They pull out giant swords with red handles and hold them out. The blades are shiny and scary and I can’t seem to take my eyes off of them.

One man speaks. He is tall with very dark skin and the blackest hair I have ever seen. I reach my neck around the giant ball, peeking at him, my eyes wide open. I think I have seen him before. I just don’t know where. He doesn’t yell, but we all hear what he has to say.

“The Purification Law has passed. All Light Skins are to come with us. Now.” He scans the school yard with his black eyes. “It is best not to fight. You won’t get hurt if you come along easily.”

Canto starts to scream, but Reese puts his hand over her mouth. “Shhh,” he whispers in a strong way. I am too frightened to even cry. What are they going to do with us? There are so many of us with light skin. Canto, and me. Shyla, Grace, Kendon. I make a list of all of the kids in my class…and I come up with seven. And that is just in level 2. There are eight levels in our school.

The other kids are screaming loudly now as they are loaded onto the huge purple dragons. Some put up a fight, but others just go along willingly. We wait quietly behind the giant rock ball, hoping we won’t be found. Reese and I hold hands, like we always do.

“Reese!” A loud, deep voice thunders over us, and we all look up. It is Reese’s dad. He is a very important man. You can tell because he is dressed in dark purple. He glares down at us.

“Let go of those girls, now,” he yells at Reese. Reese clamps my hand tighter, but he looks up into his dad’s angry eyes. For a minute they just stare at each other. Then his dad grabs him by the collar of his shirt, yanking him up and away from us. “The law has passed,” he tells Reese, shaking him roughly. “Stay away from them…from all of the Light Skins.” He walks away with Reese over his shoulder, kicking and screaming. I grab hold of Canto, almost squishing her with my arms.

Reese’s dad and Entho are friends. I don’t understand how he can talk that way. About Light Skins. Entho is a Light Skin. And so am I. “Over here, he yells loudly to the soldiers, pointing his long, dark finger toward us. “Two Light Skins are hiding behind this ball.

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I have always wanted to ride on a dragon, but not like this. Canto and I are lifted up and shoved onto one of the big purple dragons. She clamps her arms around me, and tears run down her face. She has a pink shirt on and green shorts. Her blue eyes are huge.

“They’re going to kill us,” she tells me, sniffling.

“No…no they won’t.”

“Shut, up, Ghost.” I look up suddenly, and one of the soldiers slaps me across the head, and I almost fall off of the dragon. My head stings where he struck me, and I start to cry. I have never been hit before. Two more Light Skinned children are loaded behind us. As I choke, trying to dry my tears, the soldier gets on the dragon, and we take off, flying into the sky. I look back and see the school yard getting smaller and smaller, and only dark faces looking up at us. Even the Light Skinned teachers have been taken.

Canto and I cling to each other as the wind rushes around us. We fly for a while longer. If I look down I can see Bay City and the ocean off to the side. And Mount Gareth…huge ugly old Mount Gareth. I wish Entho was here. He would know what to do.

After a while we land in a large grassy area by three huge buildings. Lots of dragons land beside us and we are pulled down from them and forced to line up in a long row in front of one of the buildings. So many children are crying and the Light Skinned teachers are trying to comfort them. I am quiet now, afraid to talk – I don’t want to get hit again. But I hold Canto’s hand, squeezing it every now and then.

Slowly, one by one, the Light Skinned people are taken into the building, the door slamming behind them with a bang. Sometimes I hear a scream. Or a thump like something is hitting the floor. As the line gets shorter, and I get closer, I start to see bits of blood leak out of the closed door. That is when I know that they are going to kill us. Because we have Light Skin.

There are three kids ahead of us, but I don’t know who they are. I get in front of Canto because she is so scared. I wait my turn… there is nothing else I can do. If I try to run, one of the soldiers will capture me. I take another step forward, thinking of Entho. Is he in the line, too? I can feel my heart beating fast. Really fast. And it hurts to breathe. How many steps do I have left before I go through that door?

Then I hear a loud voice. A voice I know well. “Stop!” It is Entho. Entho is here! I turn toward his voice, a big breath squeezing out of my mouth. But I don’t want them to kill him, too.

“Entho!” I scream, wanting to leave the line and go to him. But I know better…the blow to my head still stings. “Go away, Entho…run,” I warn him.

But Entho sprints up to me and picks me up. Two soldiers immediately rush over, pointing their huge swords at us. “She has the Mark of Power,” Entho shouts as he holds me up. His hands are shaking, and he pulls back the hair from my face. He shows the soldiers the mark on my cheek…the Mark of Power.

“The Purification Law is clear,” he says. “All Light Skinned people with the Mark of Power are to live.”

The soldiers glare at him. And at me. My heart is beating in my chest and I start crying because now I know for sure that they are going to kill Canto. And the others.

“You’re a Light Skin,” the soldier says to Entho in a mean voice. “Where’s *your* Mark of Power?” Another soldier laughs. “Looks like we got us another one.”

“I am a healer, so I am immune to the law,” Entho quietly tells them. His eyes are a creamy brown color, but I have never seen them so angry. He lifts his white healing robe and shows them the Mark of Power on his leg. They inspect it closely.

“Take her and be gone with you, then,” the other soldier says.

Entho wraps his long arms around me and starts walking away. I am safe. I have the Mark of Power and I am safe. But I look back over Entho’s shoulder and see Canto. And she is next in line.

**At Sixteen…**

The horn blares, a jolt that echoes through the thin walls of our dormitory. We automatically throw open the doors and race into the halls. Our feet match each other’s in perfect precision, just as we have been trained. We don’t need to think about our positions – we have fought hard for them.

Glendon is first, me second, and Pride third. Twenty-two others are behind us as we march in unison, Glendon setting the pace. The rhythm of our footsteps sings to us like a lullaby, even though that is the last thing any of us have heard in years. I fall into place behind him silently, two ivory handled knives at my waist and my bow slung over my shoulder. My quiver of arrows is perched comfortably on my back. An empty sheath is anchored to my belt…to all of ours. We haven’t earned our swords yet. All of us are more than aware that only three of the sheaths will ever hold a ruby handled sword – those of Lord Gareth’s elite guard.

We blast through the front doors and Glendon steps up the pace. We keep time with him, as we always do. He is tall and lean, just as I am. But he has dark black hair, a slightly hooked nose and black eyes that appear to be hard, unfeeling. And his skin, like all the others is dark.

Pride is in perfect step behind me. She is small and petite, and it has always been difficult for her short legs to keep time with Glendon’s and mine. But she manages it somehow. I respect her for that. But it doesn’t go any further. She hates me. And I hate them all.

Reese is fifth in the pack. He has made it to the finals. But just barely. I smirk to myself thinking of his empty armband. Glendon has three purple stripes sewn to the armband of his red jumpsuit. I have two, and Pride has one.

Glendon leads us out onto the field. Thump. Thump. Left. Right. Our boots hit the soft grass as the aroma of salty ocean air teases my nostrils. We line up in front of a wall of targets, stopping at once. We spread our feet apart and stand at alert, waiting for a signal, motionless statues. We are one and yet we are none.

It is a Friday, and the massive field is empty. After today two things will happen. Five of us will be chosen to compete for Soldier Academy, and ten others will become simple guards. Anyone behind Reese knows this, but desperately hopes for a chance today…for one of us to mess up so a slot will open, a rare opportunity to take our place at the final competition tomorrow. And a chance to have a gleaming sword placed in an empty sheath.

It is our last day of Weapons Training School. We are all sixteen years old and have trained together since the Purification Law passed and the Final War began…when I was six years old. Those of us who had parents with money, power, or influence were immediately funneled away to Weapons Training School. I suppose their thinking was that we would be safe here. But they were wrong. I have been anything but safe. I am one of the only Light Skins left in the city, perhaps even in the world, and it haunts me every second of my life.

After the competition three of us will walk away with swords. One gold, one silver, and one bronze, and of course the handle of each sword will be pure ruby…the color of blood. They will fit perfectly into the empty sheaths on our belts.

At this point, I know two things to be true; I am sure I will make the top three and someone will place a sword in my sheath. I also know with every fiber of my being that it is the last thing I want.

**Chapter 1**

I am positioned at the far end of the field, not because I am in first place, but because I am left handed. With precision, I pull the string of my bow back, focusing on the red and black target ahead of me…the target that holds my fate in its invisible hands. I focus on the target, becoming one with it as I fill my lungs with the sweet and salty mist of ocean air. But suddenly my concentration is shattered, as if pieces of glass were falling from the sky. The noise I hear is so memorable and frightening that my hands begin to tremble. My heart pounds in my chest and every beat feels like someone is inside of me hitting my ribcage with a hammer.

I fight not to look up, to see what is making the noise. We are trained to remain motionless, especially during a competition, but I know all too well what is shredding my eardrums into intolerable fragments of mush. My first reaction is a strong desire to run…to find a safe place to hide and curl up into a tight ball…possibly forever. As I struggle to keep still, to focus on the target, the skies above me turn deep black…shadows of something huge blocking out what little sun we have left in the city.

“Drop your weapons, the Master Sergeant orders, his voice a husky bark. This has never happened before.

I slowly lower my bow and arrow and tilt my head back as three gigantic purple dragons land on the field behind us, their wings flapping slowly, heads lowered with deep red eyes that dart around like those of a lizard’s. I turn my head to match their movement, dust and patches of grass tearing up around their giant talons. My face is blank, the same expression as all of the competitors, something that has been drilled into us since we were barely out of our mothers’ arms. Three men and a woman…all dressed in black cloaks, gleaming with a violet hue dismount from the enormous dragons. Lavs, of course. I am not sure if I am supposed to know about them, but I do. I can thank Entho for that at least. They casually stroll toward the sidelines.

“It is Lord Gareth,” someone stammers, a voice so quiet I can barely hear it. I narrow my eyes, straining to see. *Could it really be him?*

The crowd parts for the small group, and they approach the sidelines and settle on the far side of the field…so close to me that I can almost make out the details of their faces. The lone woman’s face is hidden, though, by the hood of her cloak. She stands slightly behind the tall man, obviously her superior, a shimmer of coffee colored skin peeking out of her hood – just like darkness falling. She looks vaguely familiar, but I can’t seem to place her.

The other two men stand on either side of the couple, faces I have never seen before. One man is tall as well, glaring at us with a nasty sneer, his nose so long it looks out of place on his face. The other man is short and broad with a wide nose and forehead. Both wear the red handled sword of a Destroyer. I shudder at the sight of them, memories flashing through my brain like a flood out of control.

But it is Siv Gareth I can’t take my eyes off of. He hasn’t changed much in ten years. His hair is still black and glistening, sleeked back from his forehead. His eyes, unmoving steel, dark orbs cut through every human in his path, and his hands fall to the sides of his legs, occasionally stretching out in black leather gloves as if they were sore or cold.

I know who he is – know more than his name and that he is the leader of the Alliance. I vividly remember him from the play yard at school that day, how he spoke so calmly...as if it were an ordinary field trip we were taking as we were loaded onto dragons and taken away to be killed, slaughtered like animals for food.

A ball of hate churns my stomach into a gigantic knot as bile rises into my throat. I can taste the poison of it as I think of Canto…of all of the other Light Skins that were killed that day. And all of the days after. My amber eyes turn to him, just to be sure.

Yes, it really is Siv Gareth. There is no mistaking the memory of his face. The ball of hate intensifies to such a level I no longer know who I am…or what I am about to do. As if someone else has control of me, I deliberately lift my bow and arrow. I turn ever so slightly, smelling the salty wind and grassy field as I perform rote calculations in my mind.

I bite on my lower lip and furrow my brow, a piece of me registering what I am doing…another piece ignoring it. I aim the arrow directly at Siv Gareth’s heart. It wouldn’t take much to let the arrow go…to watch him fall, slump down into a pile of human waste. I think of the consequences, though…imprisonment for sure. Possibly death. The Final War has ended, and Siv Gareth leads the Alliance…killing him is an unforgiveable crime. Yet, for the past ten years, I have been trained to do nothing more than kill. By his command.

My mind freezes and my heart turns to ice at the thought of killing him, so cold I begin to shiver. Memories flash through my head and I further narrow my eyes against the glimmering shards of sunlight casting down on his deep black cloak, aiming…aiming…aiming. Aiming at Siv Gareth’s heart.

And then…

I pull back my string, releasing the arrow in one swift movement, listening as it hisses through the air. I lower my hands and my bow, and as I do, another thought overrides everything else.

I never miss my mark.

**Chapter 2**

The crowd gasps as my arrow slashes through the dim sky, a direct path to their leader’s heart. I feel the slightest moment of remorse, and then a sinking feeling settles in my stomach. There is no hiding what I have done.

But it all happens so quickly, I don’t have time to think beyond that. Another gasp releases from the crowd, only this time louder as Siv Gareth’s hand reaches up in one fleeting movement toward the speeding arrow, faster than anything I have ever seen. In an instant his fingers wrap around it, stopping the arrow mid flight. For a long moment he holds it in the air, a trophy for all to see. Then, he slowly lowers the arrow to his side, scanning the crowd wickedly.

Impossible. *How can a human catch a flying arrow?*

My eyes widen, and I am filled with a horror so paralyzing that I can’t move. Or breathe. *What have I done?* Silence now surrounds me as Siv Gareth slowly strolls my way, the arrow in his hand like a child’s small toy. He stops directly in front of me.

“I believe this is yours,” he calmly states, as if he pulls arrows out of the sky every day. Arrows aimed at his heart. He theatrically hands the arrow to me.

There is no denying what I have done. I merely nod my head, waiting for the soldiers to take me away. I reach for the arrow, my hand actually touching his black leather glove as my heart pounds in my chest and I struggle to pull air into my lungs. Still, I meet his ebony eyes with mine, lifting my chin defiantly.

He speaks again, more loudly so the crowd can hear. “I am sure the arrow slipped, that you were surprised by our sudden visit.” He turns around slowly, gesturing to the crowd with his empty hands. The back of his cloak fills my vision. I crane my neck, though, peering into the crowd, and I notice that both of the Destroyers with him have drawn their swords.

“Yes,” I agree, mumbling to his back and feeling like a traitor, a liar…a lesser being. “It slipped.” I continue to stretch my neck around his looming body, scanning the silent crowd of dark faces. Searching with my eyes for only one person… Entho. I locate him standing directly next to Bello…the only two Light Skins in the crowd. Their blue and brown eyes flare, blazing in the dim sunlight. At me. Accusation and shock on both of their faces. *Oh, Angels* w*hat was I thinking?*

“Carry on,” Siv Gareth tells the Master Sergeant. He turns back toward me and his black eyes lock onto mine for the slightest second, then he struts with a purpose of movement back to the sidelines, all eyes watching. Judging.

With each of his footsteps blood rushes through my veins, and my head feels like it is about to explode. I swallow repeatedly, but it does no good. My hands begin to shake as they grip my arrow. Over and over in my mind I try to figure out what just happened. *How did he catch the arrow? And why am I not being taken away to prison? Or worse?*

“Bows up!” The Master Sergeant’s voice is loud…husky, and clear all at once as it reverberates in my ears. I am suddenly shaking so violently I can barely hold my bow. The arrow – Siv Gareth’s arrow – burns in my hand as if it were really on fire. I drop it to the ground and reach back into my quiver for another.

I nock the arrow, pull back on my string, waiting for the order to fire…trying to catch my breath, my chest heaving up and down. I am unnerved, unable to concentrate. Just then, a new thought enters my mind.

This was all done by design…I am nothing more than a game piece being moved about on a board where I will never win. No matter what I do.

**Chapter 3**

Somehow I manage to focus on the competition again…blinking my eyes to clear my head, the target ahead of me sharpening from the blurry image it has been. I breathe deeply. *I am still alive. My heart is beating. I am not in prison. I am still alive. I am still alive.*

There are five of us lined up in a row like dominoes – and two of us are going to fall. Our red jumpsuits reflect the faded sun that almost shines down, a slight breeze blowing them against our legs like curtains in a window. Faint grayish-black cinders swirl around us, trickling down like smoke from a chimney.

Reese, as luck would have it, is positioned directly to my right – short and stocky with curly hair, a broad forehead and small brownish-black eyes. “Hey, Teak the Freak, nice stunt.” His voice is low as he keeps his eyes focused on his own target. I dart my eyes at him, and he continues. “Destroyers should have killed you a long time ago,” he hisses at me, a trickle of spit flying through the air. By all appearance he is strong, confident – even handsome, but that is all. The years in Weapons have changed him – changed us all. His right hand pulls back on his string, but I notice both of his hands trembling, just the slightest. I struggle to hold back a smirk. I am better than Reese, and he knows it.

Still, my cheeks grow hot, and I know they are turning red, am aware that the terrible mark on my cheek will turn a deep purple color, throbbing for attention. *Don’t let him get to you. It is what he wants more than anything.*

“Bagger,” I hurl back at him, not taking my eyes away from my own target. If we are caught talking, we will be disqualified – or worse. In Weapons we are taught to follow the rules, and they are fairly simple. Four basic rules. Obedience, of course. Don’t ask questions. Follow instructions. And go it alone. Punishments are swift and painful and merciless.

Once again I wonder how I have escaped punishment…I shot an arrow directly at the Alliance leader, at Lord Gareth himself, yet here I am…still in competition. I glance at my team mates. Two boys and two girls, pure and unmarked. Once again I am cruelly aware that I am the only Light Skin, and I am definitely Marked.

I am in second place – we have already competed in blades, spears, and hand-to-hand combat. This is our final competition – bow and arrows. It is also my best weapon.

“Fire,” the master sergeant booms.

Arrows instantly zing through the air, but for some reason I hesitate. Thoughts swirl through my head, like thunder clouds during a storm. I breathe in and then out, feeling the air rustle in front of my mouth, but that is the only movement I can muster. I have already pushed my limits…have been given a reprieve I don’t understand. But another thought, a new one, enters my mind, like poison seeping in from the ocean mist. *What if I don’t shoot? What would happen if I just refuse?*

Immobilized, I gawk at the flying arrows of my team mates. Glendon’s arrow swoops in large circles, probably three or four, then dives dangerously close to the ground before it lands in the middle of the target, barely missing the bull’s eye. Bello is probably bursting with pride. Reese floats about three feet off the ground and releases his arrow with flourish, but then a deep scowl emerges on his face as his arrow shoots off toward the edge of the field…not too far from Siv Gareth himself. It lands like a dead fish on the cool green grass. Pride’s arrow circles her body five times and then sails straight to the target. Still, she misses the bull’s eye. The rules are clear…no matter the presentation, the display of Power, only a bull’s eye counts for points.

Bentle, a stout girl with short auburn hair and deep brown skin is the last to shoot. I might have liked her in a different world, maybe even been friends with her. But not here. Not now. I know she has Power, like the others, but she chooses not to use it…to simply shoot. With no emotion on her face, she misses the entire target, her arrow landing flat on the ground.

My eyes travel to Bentle’s arrow…and then to Reese’s. I could do that…purposely miss the target and never have to go to Soldier Academy. It would be easy to do. Just miss, time and again. With my peripheral vision, I take in the silent crowd. The sea of dark faces is becoming restless, waiting for me to shoot. *Do I miss on purpose? Or do I hit the target, something I can do so easily I don’t even have to try anymore?*

Entho’s pale white face and pure white healing robe stick out of the crowd like a polar bear in a forest. His face is grim, more so than usual. Standing beside him is Bello…my Weapons Instructor. Her arms are crossed over her chest, and her blues eyes are slivers of indigo light – slashing through me like a sharp steel knife. They are the only two Light Skins…and the only ones who really care about my performance. Soon I will be disqualified. I bite my lower lip, thinking.

“Five seconds,” the Master Sergeant booms, irritation seeping through his voice.

Suddenly, without further thought, I just let go of the string. I hear the boing and hiss of the arrow as it moves toward the target. My hands are shaking, worse than Reese’s, but for different reasons. I know where the arrow will land, and I am correct. Right in the middle of the circle. A bull’s eye. As always. The only bull’s eye out of the five of us.

The crowd murmurs, and just for a moment I am smug. But I narrow my eyes, focusing on the arrow sticking out of the target as if it were piercing my own chest. Tears threaten to spill out, and I know if I let them, I could probably flood the entire field. Clearly, I have made my choice.

Fifteen more times, while clenching my jaw until the pain is almost unbearable, I hit a bull’s eye. Dead center. Dead…like I should have been for shooting at Siv Gareth. Dead…like my heart.

We stand as one again, the five of us on the line…waiting like mute soldiers for the scores to be tallied. For the last time. A judge, a Red Cloaker, finally raises his hand, the signal that the scores are in. The crowd parts as Siv Gareth strides over to the judges’ table, snatches papers from their hands, and scans them briefly. After a brief moment his unemotional voice carries across the field.

“First place…Teak Frain.” My heart falls into the bottom of my stomach as he says my name. It sounds like thunder rolling off his lips. Teak. Frain. Teak. Frain. Teak. Frain. Soon to be…Killer. Killer. Killer. In a fog, I trudge over to the winner’s circle. At the same time Siv Gareth’s long legs move theatrically over to an ornate purple covered table, and he picks up a golden sword with a ruby colored handle. We meet face to face. Again.

Inches apart, he speaks to me, his voice a monotone that only I can hear. “Your mother would be proud of you.” *My* *mother? What does this have to do with my mother?*

He smiles at me, thin pink lips that remind me of a lion about to kill its prey. Deliberately, he places the sword in the sheath of my belt. I am unprepared for it in more ways than one, and the weight of it drags me over. I almost stumble, but I catch myself, a ball of steel forming in the center of my body. I meet his cold black stare, matching it defiantly with my own golden one. Gold. To match the sword.

I say nothing. Siv Gareth’s voice, although barely more than a whisper, roars in my ears as I obediently place a leg up on the winner’s podium. My other leg follows, as if it had a choice in the matter.

“Second Place…Glendon Tuttle.” Glendon is grinning, his white teeth flashing brilliantly as he shakes Siv Gareth’s hand. The Alliance leader places a silver sword in Glendon’s sheath. Glendon stays firm, solid, as he steps confidently onto the silver podium to my left. He smiles into the crowd as they cheer for him.

Siv Gareth continues, “Third Place…Pride Hanch.” She almost jogs up to him, and he places the bronze sword in her sheath. She flushes, a flat smile curving her lips upward ever so slightly. The sword seems to engulf her entire body, but she handles it with grace as she easily stands on a podium to my right, the sword almost dragging the ground with each of her movements. Glendon and Pride…both below me. A Light Skin on the highest podium. It is unheard of.

I am in first place, a coveted position by any measure…but as I look over at Siv Gareth, still alive and standing between the two Destroyers, an intense feeling overtakes me. Fresh, angry blood rushes through my veins, and I can’t fight off the foreboding feeling that even though I just won, I have really lost.

**Chapter 4**

The crowd disperses, and I kneel down to pack my bow and arrows into my bag, something I have done thousands of times. I tie each cord carefully, as I have been trained. The golden sword beats against my leg with each of my movements, and the weight of it is more than just physical.

I stop then, reach for the sword, pull it hesitantly out of its sheath and hold it in my left hand. This time I am prepared for it. I run my fingers over its edge, by all appearances lovingly. But it is only something I have learned…emulated. I despise blades, especially swords. I check the edge of it, as we have been taught, and a small grin creeps over my lips. It is dull, useless…just an ornament. A stupid, useless trophy.

I place it on the ground next to my bag and begin to untie the cords I just tied. My bag opens, and I peer into it. My bow and arrows, three short daggers with ivory handles, and a small sword with gleaming steel are all tucked in neatly with my red cloaks and jumpsuits. I reach for the golden sword and place it on top, aghast at how it looks out of place among the real weapons.

I study the combination of weapons in my bag as I begin to tie it up again. I will give the sword to Entho…he can hang it above the fireplace. Angels know he has spent enough money on my training. But the thought of Entho turns my stomach sour. The last thing I want is to face him when I get home.

As I tie the last cord, I catch sight of a small Light Skinned woman with radiant auburn hair charging toward me. It is Bello, my Weapons Instructor, and she is a ball of fury, as usual. She barks at me, “Teak…in my office. As soon as you are done packing up.”

I shoot my head up, bracing myself. “What now?” I ask, my voice a weapon of its own. I glare at her with amber eyes that have learned to hate. She has taught me well.

“Just meet me there,” she answers, her piercing blue eyes slicing through me like a freshly sharpened blade.

“Okay.” I answer curtly as I sling my bag over my shoulder, watching her disappear, a tornado of red movement whirring off into the distance. For the first time ever, I don’t need to wonder why she is angry at me.

I begin the long walk toward her office, my bag pulling against my shoulder with a new weight that I don’t like at all. The competition was at the City Arena and Weapons Training School is a long distance at best. Darkness is just falling, and the broken buildings, remnants of the Final War, shadow gloomily behind me.

I choke on the smell of the city – greasy food, smoke, rancid garbage. Abandoned and burned vehicles, their colors long gone, block my way, and I must travel around them. There is an occasional shout, a dragon pulling someone in a cart, plodding through the streets with carriage wheels creaking over the dirty, cluttered streets. There are few people out after the sun goes down.

Images of the Bay City of my early childhood flash into my mind – of when the streets were clean and the sun was bright – of playing in parks while Entho watched. Of looking up in the sky and seeing an occasional dragon – green or red or black scales glistening against the blue sky like multi-colored candies in a jar. Of houses of different colors nestled together – almost touching each other as if they were best friends. Of going to school and sitting in a desk learning to read and write and perform math equations. Of Reese. And Canto.

I shake my head. That city is gone. And so are my friends. I pause at the end of the block, crumbled sidewalk beneath my feet, preparing to turn left. Two men, dressed in ragged brown cloaks lean against the wall of a building – passing a bottle between them and clumsily spilling amber liquid down their chins. They are dirty and unshaven, cheeks smudged with black and greasy hair matted down their backs. I am repulsed, not only by their appearance but by the fact that they are Brown Cloakers – the lowest level of the Alliance.

One calls out to me, whistles. I ignore him and continue walking with my back stiff and erect, a stance that has been drilled into me through hours of grueling practice sessions.

The man croaks, his voice rough and hoarse, like he has spoken or yelled too much. “Ghost thinks she’s too good for us, Dancy.”

The other Brown Cloaker’s voice is an echo, softer than the other man’s. “Maybe we should teach her a lesson.” Both men laugh, throaty cackles, roaring like cornered animals. “I aint never had me no Ghost.”

Behind me, the slightest crinkle of movement minces the air along with the unsteady tapping of their footsteps against the rugged ground. They are following me. Closely. The dusty wind blows against my skin, forming goose bumps up and down my arms.

I speed up, taking faster and longer strides, but their footsteps are bearing down on mine. My mind spins, thinking of what to do. *Should I stop, confront them, or keep going, hope that they will tire of their game and leave me alone?*

Just at that moment, my long hair is seized and yanked backward, my head violently slamming into the solid ground. Filthy hands grip my neck, squeezing the air out of me like a coiled snake. Pain, sharper than any I have ever felt, seizes my neck and throat. I gulp for air, clawing helplessly, desperately at anything. But all I can manage to grab hold of is air. The smell of rancid breath, stale urine, and remnants of alcohol wash over me, and my stomach churns in protest.

Panic grips me, squeezing my chest like an iron press. My eyes are open wide, my only view the Brown Cloaker, with dark glazed eyes and rotten teeth gaping in his mouth like dirty beige pebbles. Spittle leaks onto his chin as he kneels on me, pinning me down while his grubby hands continue to choke me, tightening more with each second. I hear chortling laughter in the background as dizziness overtakes me, forcing me to almost hope for the blackness that I know will soon follow.

Then, just when I am about to give up to that feeling, still flailing helplessly, the Brown Cloaker takes one hand off of my neck, still pressing down with his other, and rips at the buttons of my jumpsuit. He roughly mauls me, grabbing at my underclothes with his filthy hand. It is the break I need. I turn ever so slightly, pushing my hand into a fist, and land a blow to something – his head, shoulder, stomach – I can’t be sure. But it gives me the opportunity I need as his grip loosens ever so slightly.

I strike quickly, without thought. A knee to the groin sends him reeling as the other man careens toward me. I pop up, whirl around and kick him in the knee, bones crunching as he screams. He falls to the ground, holding his leg, moaning like a wounded animal. It is enough to set them off guard – but just for a split second.

My nerves are on overdrive as the sound of breaking glass shatters in front of me. I stare in absolute horror when the first man, the choker, throttles toward me with a broken bottle – waving and jabbing it at me, a sharp, cruel weapon. With each of his movements, I dart out of the way, barely missing contact. My mind buzzes, as if a million bees were flying around inside of it.

I have been trained for just these types of situations, and I know what to do. I pull my fist in tight, wheel around quickly and land a solid punch to the Brown Cloaker’s nose. Blood flushes out, pouring down his face like a red leaking faucet. I advance, kicking him in the stomach with enough force to send him flying into the wall of the building…the wall I wish he would have just stayed against. The bottle drops to the ground with a resounding clank.

I freeze, glaring at the Brown Cloaker. and my heart beats so loudly in my chest I am sure they can hear it across Bay City. I am panting, like a dog in summer, pondering my next move. *Should I kill him? For what he has done to me? I know I can.*

It doesn’t take long to reach a decision. I charge forward, like an animal fighting for its life. I am ready to kill. For the second time in one day I know in my heart I can snuff out a human life…just as they taught me.

The Brown Cloakers must sense it…know what is about to take place…understand on some level that more blood will be spilled, and it won’t be mine. Both men retreat quickly, backing away from me. They turn, slinking off, one of them dragging his leg behind him, the other leaving a trail of blood on the broken concrete like a red snake’s path in hot sand. *Should I chase after them and finish this? Or just let them be?*

I stop, paralyzed. I am rooted in place on the sidewalk, unable to move as I breathe in and out, filling my chest with sweet, cool air. I reach up to my throbbing neck, rub it, as if a mere touch could ease the pain. I try to swallow, but there is no saliva in my mouth, and my throat constricts with the effort. I purse my dry lips together, thinking. *I could still catch them*.

My mind is locked shut, though. Just like my body…this wasn’t practice…hand-to-hand combat with my team mates. This was real. Too real. The scene plays before my eyes time and again as my open jumpsuit flaps against the breeze.

Finally, my thoughts clear, and I grip the sides of my jumpsuit, pulling them together. I find a solid button and attach it, my fingers raw with specks of blood spattered on them, already turning brown. Brown blood from the Brown Cloakers who attacked me. I shiver, recalling the entire incident. Then, with a sigh, I pick up my bag like it is an old friend, and I continue walking, my head folded down against the dirty wind that blows angrily against my face.

I push forward, toward Bello’s office, knowing I will be late. Knowing I will be punished, and also knowing that there will be another attack…only this one I know will be quite different.

**Chapter 5**

As I approach Bello’s office, my breathing slows and my heartbeat returns to normal. I take a deep sniff of salty sea air. The ocean is the only part of Bay City that I love. It is fishy and musky and warm. The steady sound of water lapping on the sand soothes my frazzled nerves, rinsing away the grime of the city…shooting an arrow at Siv Gareth…winning the competition…the horrific Brown Cloakers. I exhale it all in one deep breath, but dread soon fills the space it leaves behind. I know what is coming next. All too well, I know what is about to happen.

I reach the rounded wooden door of Bello’s office and pause before knocking, staring like a lost child at the black lines etched into rich mahogany and the ornate brass door handle. I lift my hand to knock on the door, but before I do, it swings wide open – all by itself, a slight squeak greeting me. Gingerly, I step into her office, setting my bag on the floor. All by itself, the door shuts behind me with a small clank, as if it needs to have the last word.

Bello is floating in the air before me, her legs crossed in a sitting position, and a smug smile on her face. If I hadn’t seen her do this before, I might be alarmed.

“What’s with the flair for dramatics?” I ask, disgusted as usual by her display of Power. I chastise myself silently, knowing that my snarky comments won’t help the situation.

Bello lands with a thud in a huge green overstuffed chair that is perched behind her desk, deep blue eyes hammering at me. I meet her gaze head on. I will not back down to her. Still, my palms are sweaty and damp and cold.

“What took you so long?” she barks at me.

I sigh, not wanting to relive my encounter with the Brown Cloakers. My hand instinctively bolts to my neck, rubbing at the soreness. *What will my punishment be this time? The burning? The wedging? The squeezing? I especially hate the squeezing. Maybe she has something new…for a more serious transgression*. I bite on my lower lip, contemplating my words, before speaking.

“Just a run in with a couple of Brown Cloakers,” I tell her, my voice dull, emotionless. “I won.”

Bello nods her head, slowly as if she is waiting to make a move at chess. Her silver earrings dangle with each movement, tiny dancing swords. I stare at them, refusing to make eye contact. Is she going to play with me like I am a mouse and she is a cat? Bat me around until she goes in for the kill?

“Sit,” she orders.

Obediently, I plop onto the hard backed wooden chair at the opposite side of her desk. I hold my back straight and peer down at Bello’s small frame in the huge green chair. She appears almost childlike, but I know better.

I scan Bello’s office…it is a mess. There are weapons everywhere. Old weapons that we never use but have to study anyway – battle axes, short swords, aiming swords, dirks, katars, longbows, and crossbows. There are even guns…rifles, shotguns, automatic weapons and more…all outlawed now. And, of course, the weapons we have trained in – that feel more familiar to me than the red jumpsuits I must wear every day. Bow and arrows. Blades. Spears.

Long mirrors line one wall, and I catch sight of my reflection. My pale face stares back at me with amber, almost golden eyes, and my long blonde hair spreads down off my shoulders in an unruly mess. The Mark of Power on my upper left cheek glares back at me, as useless as the golden sword in my bag. It takes me just a few minutes to come to the usual conclusion that I am nothing more than a freak….Teak the Freak. It is what they all call me. That or Ghost. Immediately I turn my eyes away.

On the opposite wall is a bookshelf full of troll figurines – Bello’s collection. I don’t understand her fascination with the ugly dolls, but there must be at least fifty of them, short, fat with wild hair of various colors. They are the only things in her office that are displayed neatly and not covered in dust.

Bello has some weapons training books scattered on her desk. Schools, healers, and a few others are allowed to use books for training purposes only. All other books have been banned since Siv Gareth’s army won the Final War, and he became the leader of the Alliance seven years ago. Some of Bello’s books are opened to pages displaying pictures of weapons and short descriptions of their uses. We have been allowed to look at them throughout the years, and I can visualize almost every weapon within. I stare blankly at them as I wait for her next move. It doesn’t take long.

“What was that pathetic display I saw today?” she spits at me, her piercing eyes full of accusation. I look up slowly as a small trickle of saliva lands on her desk.

“What are you talking about?” I retort sarcastically. “In case you didn’t notice I placed first.”

She pauses, strums her fingers on her desk and sneers at me. “Yes, you placed first…but that is it.”

I muster up my meanest look, hating her for what I know she is getting ready to bring up, hoping my amber eyes will unnerve her. I am wrong. Yet, I am guilt ridden. It hasn’t always been this way between us.

She wastes no time. “You refuse to harness your Power.”

Here we go again. The Power thing. I don’t know what I can say or do to make her understand. I try one more time.

“I. Have. No. Power.” I tell her, slowly, as if she is a small child. Or dumb.

Her blue eyes, a strange dark color that is almost purple, continue to slice through me, as if I were a piece of meat. “Are you really aware of who was there watching today…who you foolishly shot an arrow at?” Her voice rises.

“Yes, I am.” I mutter, sighing. I roll my eyes, something I know infuriates Bello. “Siv Gar…. Lord Gareth.”

Bello’s anger heightens. “Yes, Lord Gareth.” She bends forward, leaning toward me, and whispers so softly I can barely hear her. “The one man who can still order you to be destroyed.”

I fall back into my chair, as if I have been hit in the chest by a dragon flying at full speed. *Destroyed? I can still be destroyed?* I turn my attention back to the mirror…to the crescent shaped Mark of Power high up on my left cheek bone. The Mark of Power that has kept me alive.

She continues her tirade. “And what in the Angel’s fury were you thinking…shooting an arrow at the Alliance leader? Lord Gareth himself… in front of everyone? It is a wonder you are still alive!”

I turn my eyes toward Bello’s, contrite for a change. “I…I…don’t know. It just happened.”

“It just happened? What kind of an excuse is that? You had better start thinking before you act.” My mind wanders as she continues her outburst. *What if my arrow would have killed Siv Gareth? What would have happened to me?* A shudder runs through my entire body as her voice drones on.

“Unless you can display Power soon…”

My mind drifts again, not knowing what to say, what hasn’t already been said. I don’t know how to get through to her. I sigh, breathing out the entire, miserable day.

“...they’ll eat you alive at Soldier Academy.” Her lips curl up a bit, almost into a perfect smile. Is she taunting me?

I try to respond, to explain rationally what I have told her uncountable times about my Power – or lack of it. Her deep auburn hair, a mess of its own sort captures my attention and I focus on it as if it were a gem or jewel. Soldier Academy….Soldier Academy. No, I, think…I can’t go to Soldier Academy. It will kill me. Maybe not physically, but I know it will kill me on some level. Bello might as well pick up one of those weapons and kill me right now.

Staring at her, remembering all the drills, all the punishments, all the taunting…I suddenly snap. All the years of frustration and anger I have tamped down rise up in me like a flame that can’t be squelched. I bolt to my feet, rage coursing through me, an anger like I have never known.

“You don’t understand.” I yell, fire breathing out of me like a dragon’s flame. “I am tired of you always telling me I am not good enough. I am sick of hearing about my Power. The Power I tell you over and over again I don’t have. And I am done…so done getting punished for not having it.”

I pause, shooting her a death glare. Then, the words that should never be spoken spew out of my mouth. Once again I don’t stop to think about the punishment that surely will follow. “I HATE WEAPONS! I HATE IT HERE. AND I HATE YOU!”

Bello’s head shoots backward, as if I had just kicked her in the face.

My voice lowers a little. “I especially hate all of those baggers in my class who have called me Teak the Freak…and Ghost…treated me like a…like a real circus freak ever since I showed up here.” Panting, I can’t seem to get enough air in my lungs. I feel a lump forming in my throat and a tear squeezes out of one of my eyes. I quickly wipe it away, not wanting Bello to notice, but I know she will. “AND I DON’T WANT TO GO TO SOLDIER ACADEMY!”

Bello blasts up out of her chair, leans forward, bracing herself on her desk. Her eyes narrow into tiny slits, cutting into me like a sharp dagger. I expect to be pinned against the wall, to have a burning sensation creep slowly all over my body, to have her squeeze me into a little ball with her Power. Or worse. I have crossed the line, broken the rules, and that is not allowed. In Weapons. That is not allowed at all.

But she remains still, quiet. I have never seen Bello without words. Or swift action. Finally, she speaks, her voice low. “What is it that you want?”

“DRAGONS!” I don’t know why I am still shouting, but I can’t seem to stop. “I LOVE DRAGONS. I WANT TO GO TO DRAGON ACADEMY!”

Another tear spills down my cheek, but this time I don’t even bother wiping it away. It lands on my crimson jumpsuit, leaks out like blood from my heart. I brace myself, knowing what Bello will do…preparing for the punishment of her choice. But as my eyes cast up toward the blue eyes that always overtake mine, nothing happens. The room is eerily quiet.

When Bello speaks again, words spill out of her pursed lips like poison. “Dragons?” She pauses, her eyebrows turning down, nostrils flaring. She strums her fingers on her desk again, then sighs deeply as if she were letting out all the evils of the world. “Entho won’t be happy about this. He won’t be happy at all.”

**Chapter 6**

It is Sunday morning, and I am home from Weapons...waking early in my own luxurious bed… pillows and soft sheets and thick blankets surrounding me like fat fluffy clouds. It is still dark when I open my eyes. I blink, yawning and stretching. It seems like any other weekend, but then a sudden fear grips me like a handle that turns only one way. Tomorrow I leave for Soldier Academy and Entho is surely downstairs. I haven’t seen him since the competition…since my blow up with Bello…since shooting an arrow at Siv Gareth.

Gradually, I sit up in bed, rise like a ghost…and then laugh at the thought. A Ghost. Like me. I reach into my closet and pull out a crimson cloak, throw it over my head and run my bare feet down the slate steps, clean and cold and hard…toward the kitchen. Toward Entho.

He is perched in his hard backed kitchen chair, sipping herbal tea and preparing for his day. As always. I stop for a minute and drink in the smell of bacon, herbs and medicine. And the slightest hint of biscuits. For a moment I think everything will be the same, as it always has been. He will go to his clinic and I will wander around the mansion, finding something to occupy my time.

But then I realize that everything has changed …from the second I launched an arrow at our nation’s leader…the second I shot a bull’s eye instead of faking it….the second I told my Weapons Instructor I hated her...and Weapons. It all changed.

I slump into a chair across form Entho, crossing my arms in front of my chest. Then, I look down at the floor, waiting for the scolding that is sure to follow.

“Want some tea?” he mumbles instead, his nose poking into a large, thickly bound healing book.

“Sure.” I stand up to start the tea, but he takes his hand, puts it on mine, his long slender fingers covering it like a miniature blanket.

He speaks simply, but his voice is strained, odd. “Sit.” He stands up, trudges to the cupboard, and pulls out a ceramic mug I have never seen. It has a flying green dragon on it, wings spread wide and fire breathing out of its mouth. I can’t help but gasp at the beauty of it. Entho fills the mug with hot water and steeps some tea into it, pouring in honey and a little bit of cream – just the way I have always liked it. Then he places some herbs and medicine in it and mixes it with a spoon. He mildly sets the cup on the table.

“This will help the pain in your neck.”

I wonder how he knows about my neck. “Thanks,” I murmur, placing my hands around the mug. The heat penetrates into my hands, and I pretend that it is the dragon’s fire warming me. I take a tentative sip, pursing my lips at the bitterness.

Entho sighs, slowly and deeply, his chest rising and then falling. He looks old. And tired. *Why haven’t I noticed before?* When he speaks next, his words are clear, succinct. “But it will do nothing for the pain in your heart.”

I shoot my head up, shocked at his words. “What do you mean?”

“I was afraid this day would come,” he starts, his voice warbling in my ears. “I’ve thought a lot about it, and I want to apologize to you.”

I open my eyes widely. Entho is not one to say he is sorry. “About what?”

“For not giving you a choice.” His brown eyes glisten, wrinkles beginning to form like little rivers around the edges. “I…I…” A tiny tear leaks out of one of his eyes. He sniffs, almost a snort. “I was so scared that day…”

It is silent. I stare back at Entho, too shocked to respond at first. “Me, too,” I finally get out. I know what day he is talking about. The day the Destroyers came to the school yard and took me away. Our eyes meet, and I see tenderness in his milky brown eyes for the first time in years.

“I foolishly thought if I sent you to Weapons, that you would always be safe…” His voice trails off again then becomes choked with emotion. He points his finger toward me, long and slender and white. “It was hers….the mug.”

“Mom’s?” I question, a lump instantly forming in my throat at the thought of my mother. I am suddenly dizzy and it feels as if gnats are flying around in my head. I miss my mom terribly at this moment, my heart squeezing in pain at the thought of her. Memories of watching her die, falling to the ground from her Emerald dragon when I was four years old wash over me, and as always when I think of her, tears threaten to spill out of my eyes.

He nods slowly, heavily. “She loved dragons. Losing her like that….I…I just couldn’t lose you too.” He breathes in, then out, like a billows, like he can’t get enough air in his lungs. “I never wanted you near a dragon.” His caramel colored eyes are soulful, sad. I have never seen him like this. I shift uncomfortably in my chair, grasping the mug as if it were a direct link to my mother.

Thoughts travel back to that day, when I was four years old. Of course Entho wouldn’t want me around dragons…after watching my mother die like she did. But Weapons? I think of all of the bruises from hand-to hand combat, of the punishments, of the isolation. The taunting and tormenting from my team mates. Of Reese. How could he think that Weapons would keep me safe?

My eyes lift as Entho reaches into his white robe, pulls out a box and hands it to me. “This was hers, too. I gave it to her on our wedding day.” A thin, flat smile forms on his lips, a rare sight. “She said that it helped her charm the dragons.” Then, as if washed over with an emotion too strong to understand, he hangs his head, dull blonde hair slicked back and tied into a small knot in the back. The healer’s knot. “She forgot to put it on that day…”

His words trickle away like a small stream flowing downhill. I open the box slowly, as if it were a gift from a king. My heart is pounding in my chest and my hands are shaking, repressed memories of my mother crashing into my mind.

Tentatively, I pull out a shiny golden bracelet and a wheeze escapes my lips. It is a charm bracelet and each charm is a dragon with miniature jewels for eyes. Every dragon is different. One has outstretched wings with red eyes. Another is stout and short with blue eyes, its wings pulled in. There are seven total. I have never seen anything more beautiful and wonderful in my life. I touch each charm, thinking of my mother…remembering her.

“Go ahead, put it on.”

I slip the bracelet onto my right arm, fastening it with my left. It jangles when I move, the tiny dragons bumping against each other like miniature circus clowns. I smile as I watch them clinking together. In my mind I hear music – mandolins and flutes.

“I am proud of you,” Entho interrupts, surprising me. “You did very well in Weapons. I think it will serve you well in life.” He rises.

“Oh,” he grins, another rare surprise, like a seashell you find on a desolate beach. “Your mother would want you to wear that while you are at Dragon Academy.”

**Chapter 7**

I open my eyes slowly, small bits of broken sunlight filtering through my bedroom window. It is Monday, I am sure of that, and I should be gone…away at Soldier Academy. Then a thought slams into my head, causing me to bolt upright. *I have the Dragon Assessment today.* I don’t know what Bello and Entho have done, what strings they had to pull to get me to this point, and I really don’t care. But I still have to pass the Assessment before I can go to Dragon Academy.

Not many make it to Dragon Academy. Those who do have usually spent their entire lives with dragons… feeding them, caring for them, and training them. I know I am at a huge disadvantage. I also know what I am up against – that it is almost a birthright to be a dragon trainer. My years at Weapons will not help me pass this Assessment.

By the time I am dressed, Entho is already in his clinic. I open the door. *When was the last time I stepped foot in here?* I close my eyes and think about when I was a child, back when I still called him daddy – I loved to sit by him, watching him work with his patients. His soft voice asking them questions, his slender fingers touching, probing, healing.

He already has a patient, a short woman in a blue cloak who is telling him about her ankle, how she fell and twisted it. I don’t want to disturb them. I try to sneak up on Entho, but the dragon bracelet jangles with each movement I take. He lifts his head, turning in my direction. “I am going now,” I quietly tell him.

He halts, still keeping his hand on the woman’s ankle and continues to peer at me with his caramel eyes. His lips curl up, and I can’t help but move my own lips in the same way. “Good luck. And I truly mean that.”

“Thanks…it means a lot to me.” I turn from him, stride out the side door to the clinic, and trek to the street in front of our house. I will have to take a dragon and cart to the Assessment Center, which is across the city.

I plunk my body on what is left of the curb, sucking the salty ocean air into my lungs, waiting to hail the first dragon cart that comes by – it is a long wait. Finally, a blue dragon, an Azure with golden eyes stops in front of me. The driver hops down and opens the door for me. The cart at one point was white, but now stains cover it like battle wounds – dingy and grey and ugly.

I step in and settle on a hard wooden seat. There are two others sitting across from me – a man and a woman dressed in green cloaks. Middles – neither rich nor poor. They both gawk at me. I stare out the window, doing my best to ignore them. I have developed this skill well. Absently I fondle my mom’s charm bracelet.

It is quiet except for the cart’s steady rhythm – creaking back and forth, rocking us as if we were infants in a cradle. Then, my stomach tightens into knots – the excitement of getting to take the Assessment has worn off, replaced by fear and dread. *I know a lot about dragons, but will it be enough?*

I have read about dragons most of my life. After Entho enrolled me in Weapons, I would come home every weekend. Still, he had patients and I would get bored. One day I snuck into his bedroom. I don’t remember what I was looking for, but I found a metal box locked up under his bed. I searched through his dresser drawers and found a key that fit perfectly. I opened the box and discovered a stack of dragon books – they must have been my mother’s. I grabbed one, tucked it into my cloak and hid it in my room.

It was simple after that. I devoured the books at night when Entho dropped into bed, too exhausted to even tuck me in. I would light a forbidden candle and read about dragons – their different breeds, temperaments, colors, wingspans. Dragon anatomy was my favorite. I memorized every bone and muscle that a dragon has.

I didn’t think about the repercussions then, but now I shudder, wondering what would have happened – to Entho and me – if someone had found out I was reading the banned books. *Why did he even keep the dragon books?*

The cart jolts and then stops abruptly.

“Fourth and Geary,” the driver flatly announces. It is my stop. I step out of the cart, pay the driver and walk toward the Assessment Center. It is almost sunny out, and warm. Sweat trickles on my forehead, but I am not sure if it is from the heat or my nerves.

I scan this area of the city. There are empty, broken buildings, remnants of sidewalks, a dilapidated upturned bus, and more people in brown cloaks than I have ever seen in my life. I speed up, jostling through crowd of dark faces, doing my best to ignore their stares – not sure if it is my red cloak or the fact that I am a Light Skin that they are gawking at. Maybe it is both.

When I reach the Assessment Center, its grey stone surface shines, a jewel in comparison to the surrounding buildings. I enter the front door and search for a receptionist. A stiff looking woman is seated behind a solid oak counter.

“I am here for the Dragon Training Assessment,” I tell her in my most proper voice.

She is writing something and without looking up asks, “Name?”

I clear my throat. “Teak…Teak Frain.”

She looks to another pile of papers, pages through them and then says, “Room 5. Go down the hall and turn right. It’s the third door down.”

“Thank you,” I respond, spiraling toward the hallway.

I walk down the hall, feeling naked without my bag of weapons slung over my shoulder. I turn right, noticing a beautiful carved dragon statue perched in the corner, so real I am almost startled. It is bronze and a little taller than I am with huge outstretched wings. As I admire the dragon, a tall, thin man with a bald head passes by, wearing a silver cloak – an Administrator. I wonder if he will be the one to give me my Assessment. I continue on, find Room 5, and open the door, not knowing what to expect.

The room is empty and quiet. There is a plain oak table with a piece of paper and a pencil next to it. A bold sign on the table tells me to sign in. I write my name on the paper, printing the letters carefully. It is the only name there. *Is that good or bad?* A row of chairs is lined up against the wall. I take a seat and wait.

Almost an hour passes when a woman appears wearing a silver cloak...a different Administrator. She has dark hair pulled up high in a knot on her head, full cheekbones and a small, upturned nose. She is tall, taller than me even, and carries a pile of papers in her arms. I swallow nervously, the ticking of a clock in the background my only form of distraction.

Without smiling she asks, “Are you Teak Frain?”

“Yes,” I answer, forcing my voice to be stronger than what I feel inside.

“Follow me,” she announces, turning around.

I trail behind her and enter a sparse room, small and bare. There are no pictures on the walls, and the paint is an ugly beige color…like cooked sausage. There is a table with two chairs, identical to the table that was in the lobby. The chairs are hard, stiff, and look very uncomfortable.

“Have a seat.”

I sit in a chair, feeling a drop of sweat leak down my cheek, quickly wiping it away with my hand.

“My name is Dondee. I will be administering your test.” She settles the papers on the table and looks at me with dark eyes that are almost black. “You are to answer the questions as quickly and honestly as possible.” She reaches into her cloak and pulls out a small watch. I hear it clicking, each tick a judge that will decide my future. I press my lips together, a feeling of uneasiness settling into the pit of my stomach.

She daintily sits in the chair opposite of me, arranges her papers, and without fanfare starts firing questions at me.

“What are dragons fed?”

My mouth is dry. I clear my throat. “Domesticated dragons are fed a mixture of hay and grain. Dragons in the wild are carnivores, eat meat.”

“What side do you mount a domesticated dragon on?

“The left.”

“Why?

“Because the dragon is trained to expect that, so it won’t get surprised. Dragons’ eyes are set far back on their heads…it is difficult for them to see a human mount them. By training only one side, the likelihood of spooking the dragon lessens.”

“What is the incubation period for a dragon egg?”

“Ten to thirteen months…depending on the breed.”

“How are dragons kept from flying?

“Their wings are clipped. It isn’t painful for them. It is done when they are dragonlings.”

“What is the penalty for having a dragon with unclipped wings?”

“Imprisonment. If the amount is over five dragons….the owner is…destroyed.”

“Why don’t domesticated dragons breathe fire?

“They have been trained not to. They still can.”

“What training methods are used to keep a dragon from breathing fire?” Her voice is constant, hammering at me without emotion or intonation. After every one of my answers, she checks the timepiece and makes a mark on one of the papers.

“A form of behavior modification is used. Hatchlings are allowed to breathe fire until they become dragonlings. Dragonlings are rewarded with food when they don’t breathe fire. Their food is taken from them when they do breathe fire. After that, either negative or positive pressure is applied to the dragon. For instance, once a dragonling is halter trained, negative pressure on the dragon is applied with the halter when it breathes fire. It doesn’t hurt the dragon, but usually the dragonling is uncomfortable. The dragonling is rewarded by taking the pressure off when it stops breathing fire. This training continues until the dragonling doesn’t want to breathe fire anymore.” I wonder if I have said too much, but I add, “This training they receive as dragonlings is learned behavior and holds throughout adulthood. The dragon forgets it can breathe fire.”

“What is the wingspan of a dragon?”

“Forty to sixty feet.” I notice the slightest nod of her head.

“How did dragons originate?”

“They were first thought to be mythical creatures from long ago. But a dragon skeleton was unearthed in northern regions…before the Great Wars…when there was still technology…and a process called cloning was used to create a live dragon…it was a Crimson.” I take a long breath. I am not sure if I am supposed to know this or not, but I continue anyway. “Years later another dragon skeleton was discovered and breeding of dragons began. It wasn’t until after the Final War that large scale breeding of dragons took place. They were one of the few animals of transportation that were able to survive the Final War…their tolerance to radiation and chemicals is superior to that of other larger animals.”

“What are the seven basic dragon breeds?”

“Crimson, Emerald, Metallic, Ebony, Mottled, Azure, and Finny.” I breathe in deeply, not sure if I should add more. “But there are hybrids and other combinations of these breeds.” I stop, look up at her. She meets my gaze. “There is another breed, though, one that doesn’t fall into the typical category.”

“Elaborate.” This isn’t a question. Her ebony eyes glance down as she reaches for a paper and starts writing…quick furious scribbles.

“Lavs,” I blurt out, not sure if I should mention the purple dragons. Dondee’s head snaps up, as if someone has pushed her from behind. “These dragons are rare – purple in color. They are used solely by the Alliance and Lord Gareth will only ride a Lav. Lavs still fly, are physically the largest breed, and they can breathe fire. Lavs are believed to be the most intelligent of all dragons.” I pause for a moment, wishing I could stop, but I seem to be sailing madly down a stream in a canoe without oars. “And the most brutal.”

“I see,” Dondee replies. I feel as if I have done something wrong, said too much. “And which breed is the least brutal?”

“Crimsons and Ebonies have the gentlest dispositions overall. They are the easiest to train and domesticate. Although Finnies are smaller and appear to be less fearsome, they often have poor dispositions and are stubborn, high strung, and difficult to train. Mixed breeds will also offer combinations that are less vicious.”

We continue like this for about an hour, maybe more. Then I am given a break. I stand up, feeling stiff and sore. My mind is buzzing from the questions. I am used to movement, not sitting. I follow Dondee to a room where I am given a snack – some grapes and cheese along with a bag of water. The water soothes my throat and I nibble on the cheese even though I am not hungry.

Then I am led back to Room 5, where a gigantic drawing of a dragon now covers most of a wall. Dondee is holding a long stick, her back facing me.

She wastes no time. “I will point to each part of the dragon. You are to give me the correct anatomical name.”

She points the stick to the middle portion of the dragon. This is easy for me.

“Flank.”

She continues to point and I call out the specific names. “Hip. Loin. Phalanges. Withers. Stomach. Metacarpals. Esophagus. Pastern. Elbow. Alula. Knee. Gaskin. Ulna.”

Abruptly, she stops, and I am breathless. It went so fast, and I wonder if I missed any of the terms. Without turning around she says, “Thank you, Miss Frain. You will receive a letter within the week with your score.”

“Thank you,” I stammer back to her, standing up to leave, deflated and disappointed. I was hoping to receive my results when we finished.

I stumble out of the room, crane my neck to find the clock on the wall. Over four hours have passed. I am tired and suddenly hungry, anxious to get home. As I turn the corner of the hall, thinking about the Assessment, wondering how I did, I crash into another person. We collide like two hateful fists. I step back, apologizing, awash in crimson – a matching Red Cloaker.

“Well, if it isn’t Teak the Freak.” I freeze, staring blankly at the boy…his all too familiar face and stocky frame. I swallow hard, mustering up a glare. It is Reese.

I can tell he has been following the tall, bald man in the silver cloak. Quickly, Reese turns his head toward the man, who continues down the hall, his back to us.

Before I can think, before I can move or even understand why Reese is here, he reaches both hands out, and shoves me in the chest. I sail through the air, like a child’s flying toy, and with an uncanny force smash against the bronze dragon statue, hitting the back of my head and then collapsing onto the floor.

Everything turns black.

**Chapter 8**

I wake in Entho’s clinic, lying on one of the cots. I groan, painfully reaching for my head, and attempt to sit up. Entho is hovering over me – quickly placing a pillow behind my back. I blink my eyes several times, and it appears that he has two heads, two blurry moving heads, and four brown eyes. His thin nose is really two noses and as he speaks, two mouths move.

“Here, here, drink this,” he tells me, his words echoing as if they were coming at me from the end of a long tunnel. He places my mother’s cup to my lips, two green dragons flying in a blurry circle. I try to wrap my fingers around the cup but can’t seem to manage this simple task. He helps me hold the cup, and I swallow obediently, gulping the bitter brew. My head is pounding as if someone were taking a club to it and banging it repeatedly from the inside. Ringing sounds explode in my ears. I take another sip and lean back into the pillows.

“You have a concussion,” Entho explains, his words still warbling in my ears. “And seventeen stitches in the back of your head. But you’ll be fine.” He holds the cup to my lips, and I take another drink and lean back against the soft, clean pillow.

“It’s a good thing Reese was there,” Entho tells me. My eyes shoot open wide and I groan. I am trying to say, “NO,” but it just won’t come out.

Entho continues. “He got help right away when you tripped and fell into that statue.” I want to interrupt, to tell Entho that it was Reese who pushed me, with more force than humanly possible. But I know it is futile. Reese’s father is the mayor of Bay City, and even though he and Entho aren’t friends any more, Entho holds a strange loyalty to Reese’s dad.

I close my eyes, casting the image of Reese’s father that day in the school yard into my mind…the hatred in his eyes…calling the Destroyers over to Canto and me. Taking Reese away from me…forever.

Sometimes I wonder about Entho. For a smart man, a healer with so much training, he certainly should have figured out that if I had tripped, it would have been the front of my head that was injured, not the back. Unless, of course, I was walking backward…which I wasn’t.

His voice muffles in my ears, like a bird chirping from far away. “An Administrator came right away, wrapped your head, and brought you here.” He tenderly takes a cloth and wipes my forehead. “Thank the Angels! Drink up now. You’ll be feeling better soon.”

I do. Within a few hours I can see clearly and can talk. But my head still pounds and I am very tired. To top it off, Entho won’t let me sleep. I am under “OBSERVATION.” I drink a cup of the medicine every few hours and then, when all the patients have left the clinic and it is quiet, Entho takes me up to my room, gently helping me up the steps and tucking me into bed. I sleep deeply.

I wake the next morning with a hammering head and orders from Entho that I am to stay in bed. The hours tick by slowly, and I feel like I might just jump out of my skin. I decide to sneak into Entho’s room and find a dragon book, shoving my blanket aside and placing my bare feet on the cold stone floor, when I hear the faint squeak of someone coming up the stairs. I twist back into bed quickly, which causes my stomach to churn and my head to spin. Just in time, I pull my covers over me.

Entho steps in, bringing me meat broth and eggs, the bitter brew, and a thick black book. *The Book of Healing Volume 1*. The letters are gold and swirly and fancy.

“What is this for?” I ask.

“I just thought you might be getting bored.” He pats my hand and kisses me on the cheek. “How are you feeling?”

“Bored,” I reply.

“That’s good news,” he answers, turning to leave. “I’ll return in a while. I have patients backed up to the street today.” And then he is gone, leaving me in silence with the weight of a book I am not interested in on my lap.

Eventually, after staring into space for the longest time, I open the book, just because there is nothing better to do. It starts with an introduction – a general description of healing, how it is a choice and the great rewards you get as a healer. Blah. Blah. Blah. Then it is divided into sections. Anatomy. Medicines. Herbs. First Aid. Toxins. Patient Communication. Power. I start with anatomy. It is not as interesting as dragon anatomy, but it certainly holds my attention. Several hours pass, and Entho brings me lunch and more medicine, checking my bandage and stitches.

“How’s the book?” he asks, a smirk on his face. He knows how much I love to read. I glance up, feeling like I have been tricked.

“Interesting,” I respond. He kisses my forehead and returns to the clinic.

Three days pass like this. I am starting Volume 2. It is a detailed anatomy book and thicker than the first volume. It has wonderful hand drawn pictures in faded colors of the human body. I can see where someone has drawn the bones and named them… along with the nerves and the muscles. It labels every part of the body by the picture. There is one page dedicated to the hand. Another to the arm. The leg, the foot, and so on.

Entho brings me broth and eggs, as usual, but I no longer need any medicine. We have fallen into a routine. I peek my head out from the book.

“How about you get dressed and come help me in the clinic?” he offers.

I have never thought much about helping Entho…have never been interested in healing. But I have had enough lying around.

“OK,” I say hesitantly.

Entho smiles. “I’ll be right back. Waiting for him, I stretch, listening to his footsteps trail into his bedroom.

When he returns he hands me a thick white robe, as if he were presenting me with something precious, like a jewel. I raise my eyebrows. “I can wear this?”

“Sure,” he answers. “I’ll see you in a bit.”

Stiffly, I get out of bed and stretch languorously. It seems like my muscles have been hibernating and don’t want to cooperate, rigid and angry at the movement. I totter to the wash room and clean up, brush my hair and finally pull the white healer’s robe over my head. It is soft, like cotton, and it smells like Entho – soapy, and clean with just a hint of medicine and herbs.

**Chapter 9**

Tentatively, I open the door to Entho’s clinic. A handful of people waiting on the hard wooden benches stare at me as if I were a circus freak. I ignore them, searching for Entho. He is peering down the throat of a little girl with long, shaggy black hair, matted to the side of her head. She is filthy, ragged, and is gagging as tears stream down her face. There is something about her…something so vulnerable and pathetic that I am drawn straight toward her.

I rush over to her. “It is okay,” I soothe taking her tiny hand in mine. It is dry and dark and filthy. Her eyes find mine, deep brown saucers that seem to be searching for something.

“You have a bad sore throat,” Entho tells her in his soothing healer’s voice. “I’ll be right back. Teak will wait with you while I get you some medicine.” He scurries over to his medicine cabinet and reaches for one of the myriad of jars filled with herbs, medicines, and other substances I am just starting to learn about. I hear him mixing something in his mortar, gentle grinding against the worn stone.

“What is your name?” I ask the girl.

“Winter,” she tells me, casting her eyes downward.

“Where is your mommy?” I question. “Or your daddy?”

She opens her eyes, soulful and sad – staring at me, tears barely outlining them like glistening ponds. Silence surrounds us except for Entho’s movements in the background and an occasional cough, throat clearing, or whisper from one of the other patients. Finally, she sniffles, “Gone.”

I hug her to me. I don’t know if “gone” means dead or if “gone” means abandoned. She must think I am odd, so pale and white, golden eyes, and a bandage wrapped around my head…the Mark of Power on my cheek.

Entho returns with a large, dark brown bottle. “Open up,” he tells her. He takes a dropper and spills the liquid into Winter’s mouth. She gags it down. “Good girl,” he says. He is all business, turning to me and handing me the bottle and dropper. “She is to take a dropper full every three hours until the bottle is gone. Will you take her to her Guardian?” I shoot him a questioning look, but by then he has turned from me, calling for his next patient. Guardian? I don’t even know what a Guardian is. Or how to administer medicine.

“Come on, Winter, let’s go find your Guardian.” She reaches for my hand again as we walk to the waiting room. Her hand is tiny and warm in mine. Trusting. For the first time in years I feel good about what I am doing, that I am helping people…not training to kill them. A short man with a fat belly stands up. He has an orange cloak with a white sash around his rotund stomach. Winter immediately leans into me, as if she is frightened. I place my arm protectively around her shoulders.

“Are you Winter’s Guardian?” I ask the man, instinctively glaring at him.

“Yes, and I’m in a hurry,” he snaps at me.

I scowl at him. I want to grab Winter, rush her up to my room, and take care of her. I am instantly mad at Entho. How can he sit by and do nothing for this poor little girl?

My words come out automatically, emulating Entho’s. I don’t know what else to do. “She is to take a dropper full of this every three hours until the bottle is gone,” I tell him. Then I crouch down, looking into Winter’s eyes. “If you ever need anything, you find me, okay?”

“Get on with it already,” the fat man barks. He tosses a coin at me. My Weapons training kicks in without thought and I catch it effortlessly. He yanks Winter away from me, roughly pulling at her arm.

I feel a red fog swim through my brain as I stand up, a rage like I have never known. I seem to be in a different place, my body separating from my mind. I am shaking and feel energy course through me, energy I can’t seem to control and have never experienced before. I spread my fingers, pointing them at the Guardian, at his fat stomach. He instantly doubles over, moaning in pain and grabbing his stomach. He drops Winter’s hand and falls to the floor.

I glance over at Winter and a wicked smile is pasted on her face, as if she is enjoying this. I also see her hands spread wide, both of them…pointing directly at the Guardian. *Is she copying me?* Startled, I immediately close my hand into a fist, calming myself. I know the penalty for displaying Power in public. But I am not sure if this is even Power. *If it is Power, is it mine or Winters? Or both of ours…something that only happens when we are together?*

The Guardian continues to writhe and moan. “Ohhhh,” he groans, rolling to his side, holding his grotesque stomach. I stoop, reach for Winter’s hands, fold them up into little fists and lock eyes with her. “No.” I mouth the word with no sound coming out, shaking my head slowly. I gently let go of her hands and kneel down beside her Guardian, breathing words into his ears like fire.

“If I ever find out you or anyone else touches her, lays one little finger on her or mistreats her in any way, there will be a lot more of that.” I want to kick him, hurt him until he never stops screaming. But silence overtakes me, and I am suddenly aware that everyone in the room is watching, including Entho. All movement has stopped. Every eye is on the Guardian, Winter, and me.

Entho speaks to me, a little too loudly. “Thank you for helping Winter’s Guardian. I think he just had a stomach cramp.” He quickly grabs a clear bottle with a pink liquid in it. “Give this to him. It will make his stomach better.”

I rise up, stalk over to Entho and snatch the bottle from him. I return to the Guardian, who is now sitting up on the floor, and shove it at him. Sweat trickles down his flabby face onto his enormous belly as he takes the bottle from me.

“Teak, I need you over here.” Entho’s words are firm, and I know I must leave Winter.

“I have to go now,” I tell her. “If you ever need anything, find me, okay?”

“Okay,” she answers in a timid voice. She pauses for a minute, cocking her head to the side. “Bye.” Her little red lips are pursed, her head tilted. Questions seem to steam out of her, billowing off her filthy skin and dark eyes like rain hitting the ground on a hot day.

“Good-bye, Winter,” I say, tears threatening to erupt for a reason I cannot comprehend. She is just a little girl with a sore throat…I can’t understand this odd attachment to her. I have been around other children before, and nothing like this has ever happened.

She turns around, and stands obediently next to her Guardian. He almost snarls as he grabs her hand, and I watch her tiny body exit the clinic with his. I can’t help thinking it should be my hand she holds…not his. Definitely not his.

I hesitantly pivot my body away from hers, knowing I may never see her again, and reluctantly trudge toward Entho.

**Chapter 10**

Across the room Entho is setting a broken arm on an elderly man. I can tell he is in a lot of pain. Thoughts of Winter fade from my mind…there is too much work to be done here.

“Hold his arm like this,” Entho instructs. “I’ll wrap it. It must be immobilized.” I hold the man’s arm, engaging in small talk in an attempt to keep his mind off of his pain…and my mind off of Winter.

“So, how did you do this?” I ask the man as Entho smoothes something I am unfamiliar with around the man’s arm, a white gooey substance.

“I fell on the steps,” he moans. Entho is swift and finishes the arm as I hold it still. The gooey mixture dries and a cast forms around his arm. Then Entho mixes medicine and I give him instructions on how to take it…very similar to Winter’s. Entho sends the man on his way and moves toward the waiting room.

He calls out, “Next pat…”

Before his words are finished a loud crash thunders through the clinic, and the side door flies open. Three men covered in more blood than I have ever seen rush in, holding a woman’s body – a Light Skinned woman. One man tenderly grasps her head as the other men clutch her body tightly. Her head dangles precariously from her body, blood spilling out like a fountain, and I instantly know what happened. Her neck has been slit, almost severed from her body*.* I wonder if she is even alive.

I lose all feeling in my body as Entho rushes over to them. “Place her on the cot,” he calmly instructs. The men quickly set the woman on one of the cots, as blood pours out of her almost disconnected head.

Entho immediately starts to work on her, not even bothering to numb the gaping, immense wound. Blood continues to spurt from her neck – an enormous red waterfall.

“Teak, rags…now.” Entho’s voice is calm but firm. It is enough to shake me out of my fog. I run to the cupboard and pull out a stack of clean white rags. “Put pressure on her neck while I suture,” he instructs. I take several rags and place them on the woman’s neck.

“Push harder,” Entho orders. My stomach churns, and I am afraid I might throw up, but I push on the rags, pressing into the woman’s neck with more force than I knew I had. Entho sews the wound quickly but calmly. I am in awe at how he does this.

“What happened to this woman?” he asks the men as he works on the woman’s neck, step-by-step closing the enormous wound. Silence. He asks again, more firmly this time.

Finally, one of the men answers in a whisper. I strain to hear. “Destroyers got her…she’s a Light Skin.”

“I can see that,” Entho retorts. “But she has the Mark of Power…right here on her arm.”

“It’s getting bad out there…” the man adds, his voice quavering. “She...she’s my wife…will she make it?”

Entho doesn’t’ stop working, putting the finishing stitches on the enormous cut. He minces no words. “It doesn’t look good.” Eventually he looks up, meeting the man’s eyes. “But I’ll do my best.” He mixes a topical medication and orders me to place it on her neck. I seize the bowl and gently dab the medicine on the stitches, staring at the raw and ragged wound. *She has the Mark of Power, but the Destroyers tried to kill her anyway. It’s getting bad out there?* The man’s words echo over and over in my mind. And Bello’s words join in. I can still be destroyed…even with the Mark of Power. Siv Gareth can order me to be destroyed. Like all the rest.

“I need you to wait in the lobby. We’re going to move her to a private room,” Entho tells the men who brought her in.

Why would we move her, I wonder? It seems dangerous to me. I continue to dab the dark brown medicine on her wound, watching her gasp for breath. The smell of metallic blood and acrid medicine turns my stomach into mush.

The men quietly leave, glancing back at the woman, and Entho bends down and fiddles with the bottom of the cot. “Wheels,” he says without looking at me. “Let’s move her…now.”

Together, Entho and I push the cot into another room. The door slams behind us, seemingly on its own. I stand, unsure of what to do, my eyes wide open. The room is dark, and Entho leans over the woman’s body. He closes his eyes and draws in a deep breath. Then he takes his hands, palms out and slowly moves them above the woman’s neck. He holds them there, unmoving, and I can almost see light emanating from his hands. I feel cold, as if the air has gone out of the room. I am afraid to interrupt – to even make a sound. At long last Entho stops. His light brown eyes darting up at mine, and I am startled by how hollow and empty they are.

“That’s all I can do for now.” He drops his hands to his side, and his face is pale – he is shaking, breathless. His eyes lock onto mine. “Will you talk to her family?” he whispers, shoulders sagging. “And cancel the rest of my appointments for the day?”

I nod my head, watching helplessly as he slumps into a chair by the woman’s cot. I don’t know who looks to be in worse shape…Entho or the Light Skinned woman who is fighting for her life.

**Chapter 11**

I search for the three men in the lobby and find them, their heads bowed down as if they were in a church instead of a healing clinic. Two are Dark Skinned and one is neither dark nor light…an odd mixture of both that I have never seen before. “She is alive right now,” I tell them, afraid to give false hope. “Entho is watching her closely.”

“Thank you,” her husband answers, rising up from his seat. “We’ll wait here if that’s okay.” He says it like it is a question, his voice quivering.

I am not sure of Entho’s clinic rules, so I just nod my head. I clear my throat, nervous for what I am about to do. “Ahem.” I clear my throat again. “Ahem.” The clinic lobby is full of dark faces. A few people look my way, but most ignore me. I announce to them, “The clinic is closed for the rest of the day.” My voice is small and weak. Nobody moves.

A streak of irritation rushes through me, and I raise my voice. “There has been an emergency. The clinic is now closed,” I proclaim in my most proper Weapons voice…drilled into me like medicine in Entho’s mortar. “You will have to come back tomorrow.” I stand firmly before them meeting their gazes head on with mine. At last the people get up, wander out the side door, many of them giving me nasty looks as they leave.

I clean the clinic as well as I know how, washing away the massive amount of blood from the floor and soaking the linens. I scrub the rest of the floor and lock the medicine cabinet. Then I wash my hands and arms in the sink, mesmerized by the blood as it stains the water – a morbid mixture of red, pink, and brown. I shake the water from my hands and turn to leave.

The three men are still sitting in the abandoned lobby, heads still hanging, as if staring at the floor could bring someone back from the brink of death. “I have to close up now,” I tell them softly. “You can come back in the morning.” I feel cruel, seeing the look on the man’s face – her husband. I have never had a boyfriend…can’t imagine what it would be like to love someone this much. His grey eyes seem to be searching mine…for answers I don’t have. I bite my lip, wondering what to do. I move over to the office section of the clinic and search for a piece of paper and a pencil.

“Can you write?” I ask the husband.

“Yes…yes. Of course.” I hand him the pencil and small piece of paper.

“Write down your address. I will stay up with her…if anything happens, I will come and get you.”

His voice is low as he thanks me and writes down his address, handing the paper back to me. When I take it, I notice the dried up blood on his hands…the blood of someone he loves. I shudder, wondering how the woman is doing. The three men exit the clinic silently, heads still hanging low.

Shivering, I lock the side door to the clinic, the bolt clicking into place with ease. I scan the lobby area and sigh at its emptiness. Images of the woman keep flashing through my mind…her fair skin and reddish blonde hair. Her neck, sliced open. The gurgling sounds she made as Entho stitched her up. Me pressing down on the open, lethal wound. The faces of the men who brought her in.

My thoughts are shattered, though, by a loud knocking at the side door. The thunderous sound shakes me back into reality. Someone is hurt, I am sure…needing Entho’s healing abilities. But he is with the woman. I struggle with what to do as the bold knocking continues.

Cautiously, I walk toward the door, not sure if I should open it. I stand on my tip toes and slide back the metal viewing plate. It is getting dark, but I can make out the faintest outline of two amber eyes, almost the color of mine.

“Who is it?” I ask.

“I’m here on an errand…to get a package from the healer.” The voice is distinctly male. I slam the viewing plate shut and exhale loudly, my hair blowing up as if it were in a windstorm.

I open the viewing plate again, peer out at the eyes. “He’s with a patient. You’ll have to come back tomorrow.”

“I can’t.”

“Why?” I am losing patience with the man. Or boy. I really can’t tell with the door muffling his voice.

“Because we’re leaving tonight. And we don’t have a place to stay.”

“What do you mean…we?”

“My friend. And me.”

I wait to answer. *There are two of them?* “It is just you and your friend?” I ask suspiciously, squeezing my eyes through the viewing plate.

“Yes…geez would you just open the door?”

“Just a minute.” I slam the viewing plate shut and run upstairs as quickly as I can, turning into my bedroom as my feet slip on the slick floor. My bag is in my closet, and I kneel down, untie the cords rapidly, and reach in it, quickly snatching a dagger. The small knife feels comfortable with my fingers wrapped around it. I stare at it for a second, the steel glimmering at me as if to welcome me back. It has been a long time since I held a weapon in my hand.

I race back downstairs to the door, my feet hitting the steps like rain pelting on a roof. Breathless, I open the viewing plate again. The same amber eyes peer back at me. “Hold on a minute,” I tell them. I shut the viewing plate, slamming it a little too hard against its frame. I slide back the lock and pull open the door.

In the fading light stand two boys about my age. Boys I have never seen before. They are both dressed in beige tunics and pants. Both are tall, but one of them is bit taller with a wide chest and shoulders. He is also a Light Skin. The first Light Skinned boy I have seen since I was a small child.

**Chapter 12**

I don’t know what to say to the boys as I gawk at them, blood rushing through my head like a roaring river and my heart beating rapidly in my chest. The only boys I have been around have been in Weapons, and that was different. I didn’t ever have conversations with them – just competed against them. In the dorms, I kept to myself. Other girls flirted, talked to the boys. But not me. Not Teak the Freak.

The Light Skinned boy has blonde hair, a bit too shaggy as it frames his face. He has a broad chest and firm, muscled arms. His nose is angular, placed perfectly on his face, and on the right side of his cheek is a Mark of Power, so much like mine that I catch my breath.

The other boy seems sullen, his arms crossed over his chest. He is leaner than the Light Skinned boy with an olive complexion and coppery curls that frame his face. His jaw is firm, solid, and his eyes are a vivid green, like emeralds or green diamonds…if such a thing existed.

“Geez, what happened to you?” the Light Skinned boy asks. I blink my eyes a few times, trying to understand what he is talking about.

“What?” I manage to say as I turn to close the still opened door.

“You’re covered with blood.” I glance down at my healing robe. When I woke up this morning it was white…but it would be difficult to tell that now.

“Emergency,” I squeak out, swallowing to clear my throat.

“What, did someone get his head chopped off?” It is the Light Skinned boy, and his golden eyes are twinkling, as if he is enjoying this.

“Yes…well, actually it was a woman.”

“Holy snock…I’m sorry.”

“It is okay. You didn’t know.” The room is awkwardly quiet. The other boy hasn’t said a word, but I notice that his eyebrows furrow and he clamps his jaw tightly when I mention the woman. However, it is the Light Skinned boy I can’t seem to take my eyes off of.

“I’m Thann,” he tells me. “And this is Koree.”

“I am Teak…hi.” I pull my right hand up and do a stupid little wave, trying to keep the dagger concealed.

“Well, Teak, nice to meet you.” Thann is smirking at me as if he is amused. Then his face becomes serious. “Did the lady live?”

I scrunch up my face, thinking about the woman. “So far…”

“Well, that’s good news, right?” he interrupts. I nod my head in agreement.

Finally the other boy speaks. “Come on, Thann, we gotta get going.”

“Oh, yeah.” Thann smiles at me, and when he does, his whole face lights up, as if a candle glows inside his skull. His teeth are white and his grin enormous. “My mom sent us here for a package…or something from…” He rolls his eyes up into his head like he is trying to remember something. “From…Entho. Yeah, Entho.”

“Well, I can’t disturb him…he is with the woman.” I pause for a moment. “She could die.”

“That’s a problem for sure,” Thann answers, but he doesn’t appear to be worried in the least. “Maybe we can wait here…talk to you for a while.”

My heart starts beating in my chest. Talk to these boys for a while? What would I say? “Umm….”

“Come on, Thann, we need to go and you know it,” Koree interrupts. I sigh with relief.

“I can look in his office…” I offer.

“Hey, that’s a good idea,” Thann says. “I could come with you.”

“No!” I answer too quickly. “You can sit there.” Without thinking, I motion to the lobby sitting room with the dagger still in my hand.

“Geez, you don’t have to stab us,” Thann quips. “We’ll do what you say.”

I realize what it must look like with the dagger in my hand. I feel my face getting hot, surely flushing into a bright shade of red. I am also sure my Mark of Power is pulsing and growing into a horrible purplish color. I wonder if when Thann gets embarrassed his Mark of Power changes into an ugly color like mine. I stare at him for a second, and I find it hard to believe that anything about this boy could be ugly.

“Um…sorry.” I immediately pull the dagger back down, but I don’t let go of it…I have had too much training for that. “I will be right back,” I tell them, glancing over at Koree, who looks bored leaning against a wall of the clinic. I stop for a minute, thinking. I look back to Thann. “Do you know what I should be looking for?”

“Just a package…probably for my mom…Kesper Harcourt.”

“All right,” I answer as I walk away, trying to appear calm, even aloof. I pull the door of the clinic open and enter the hallway to our attached house. I shut the door behind me, stop in the hall, and struggle to take air into my lungs. I lean against the door, images of the two boys crashing through my head. Two boys I am talking to, as if I were a normal teenager. In normal times.

As my heartbeat slows and my breathing regulates, I enter Entho’s office. Even though we are privileged because he is a healer, his office is furnished modestly. A bare oak desk rests in the middle of the pale blue room, and the smell of Entho invades my nostrils…herbs, medicine, and soap along with the slightest metallic trace of blood. Or maybe that is from me...I can’t be sure.

Bookshelves line the walls and healing instruments of various sorts are neatly arranged on a tray. His leather healing case is strategically placed by the door, ready for him at a moment’s notice. I wander over toward his desk, looking for a package. But his desk is bare of anything except an enormous, handmade calendar. His billing papers. Some pens and pencils. Paper clips and an ancient stapler I don’t think works any more. A picture of my mother. And me…when I was young. But no package.

I start to walk away when a brown paper catches my eye. It is lying flat on his desk, and I can see Entho’s handwriting on it, scrawled neatly for a change. It is a large envelope that is sealed carefully, and it is addressed to Kesper Harcourt.

*Should I take the envelope and give it to the boy…to Thann? What if it is the wrong one?* I study the huge brown envelope for a few minutes, and I know it has to be the right package. I search the room one more time, knowing that Entho doesn’t like to be disturbed when he has a patient in serious condition…he is using his Power to heal, and if I break his concentration, it could be dangerous or lethal to the patient. Or him. I bite my lower lip, thinking about what to do.

I grasp the envelope carefully in my hands and step out of Entho’s office. With the dagger in my left hand and the envelope in my right, I scurry back to the clinic, hoping that I am doing the right thing.

I swing the door open to find Thann and Koree sitting in the lobby. Thann’s back is slouched against the bench, his long legs stretching out in front of him. Koree is sitting beside him and leaning forward, his elbows resting on his knees. I catch my breath at the sight of them.

I want them to stay forever, and I want them to leave right now.

Thann stands up. “You found it?”

“Ummm…I think so.” I hand the envelope to him. Koree stands up at the same time, both of them inspecting it together.

“Yep, has to be it,” Thann says.

Koree nods his head, finally speaking. “It has Kesper’s name on it.”

“Yep,” Thann answers again, grinning widely. “Okay, thanks, Teak. My mom will be happy, but we gotta fly…”

“Dragons are outside waiting…you know,” Koree adds, as if we are suddenly friends. He finally smiles, and a dimple creeps up on the right side of his cheek. It is a slow smile where I don’t see any teeth, but for some reason it is mesmerizing.

“Yes, of course,” I breathe out.

“Thanks, Teak,” Thann says, turning to go. Koree has already led the way to the exit door. Thann twirls around, “Maybe we’ll see you around some time.”

“Sure,” I answer half-heartedly.

“If you’re ever in Harcourt, look us up,” he smiles.

“Harcourt? But that is far away…”

“You never know,” Thann answers, shrugging his broad shoulders.

“Yes, you never know,” I repeat as I watch the two boys walk into the encroaching darkness, their long legs hitting the cobblestone path in a rhythm only close friends or relatives can have. Koree walks slightly ahead of Thann as they approach the outlines of what appear to be two small dragons in the distance.

I close the door quietly and slide the lock over, breathing in the masculine smell they left behind, clean and sweaty and salty all mixed together. I wonder for the first time what it would be like to have a boy in my life… a real boyfriend.

Impossible, I think as I turn toward the mirror above the sink in the clinic, staring at my pale reflection…at Teak the Freak. Totally impossible.

**Chapter 13**

I inspect the clinic one more time, making sure everything is clean and in place. I double check the lock, then, like an old woman, I take the steps into the house to prepare dinner, something I have rarely done. I put an apron over my filthy robe, too tired to go all the way upstairs and change. I am making a simple meal of dried beef and vegetables when Entho enters. He sits at the kitchen table, and I am glad to see the color has returned to his face.

“How is she?” I ask.

“Alive…but barely…I’ll be staying up with her.”

“No, I will. You need some sleep.”

“You aren’t trained enough…if something happens…”

I interrupt him. “I will come and get you.”

I am surprised when Entho agrees. I set a plate before him, even more astonished that he doesn’t wash his hands before eating. He has always been meticulous about cleanliness.

“Entho?”

“Hmmm?” I can barely hear his response, but I forge ahead anyway.

“I know this probably isn’t the right time to bring this up, what with the injured woman, but two boys came here asking for a package for Kesper Harcourt. I didn’t want to disturb you, so I went to your office and found an envelope addressed to her.” I pause for a moment, not sure if he is going to be mad at me. “I gave it to them. I hope that’s okay.”

He draws his head up and his caramel colored eyes appear to be a dull shade of beige in the flickering candle light. “Two boys?”

“Yes, and one was a Light Skin.”

“Awww. Kesper’s son, Thann. I wish I could have seen him.” A thin smile forms on his lips. “I delivered that boy…when your mom and I lived at Harcourt.”

“No way,” I answer. “I didn’t know you lived at Harcourt.” He takes a bite of food, and I want to press him about why he never told me this before, but I let it be. “So you know Kesper?

“Yes, I know Kesper well.”

“I gave Thann the envelope for his mom, Kesper…I hope that is okay.”

“Yes, that’s fine, Teak, that you gave him the envelope.” Entho’s smile fades and he gazes off into the distance. “That’s very good.”

I let out a sigh of relief as he eats another bite of food, chewing so slowly that it almost seems painful. He leaves half of the food on his plate, sets his napkin on the table and then stands up.

“Come and get me…if anything…”

I interrupt. “I know… I will.”

“I mean anything…”

“Got it…go to bed.”

“Thanks, sweetie,” he answers as his blood stained robe disappears around the corner and his footsteps shuffle up the stairs. I know he will fall into bed exhausted.

Hurriedly, I eat, do the dishes, and then rush to the private room where we placed the woman. On my way, I grab a book off of Entho’s shelf – something to do while I keep watch.

I open the door to the room and am relieved to see the woman still breathing – shallow, ragged breaths. I pull up a chair beside her and open the book. I read for a bit, watch her, read for a while, watch her some more.

The night passes slowly this way, and I fight off sleep, occasionally finding my head on my chest as I start to doze off. Each time this happens, I slam my head backward, stand up and stretch, opening my eyes and mouth wide. I walk in circles, like a dog digging for a perfect sleeping position, then sit back down again, placing my hand on the woman’s arm or another part of her body, a reminder to me of how serious the situation is.

I gaze down at her prone body, struggling to breathe and live, more than once and think that it could be me. I could be lying there instead of her.

Somehow morning arrives, and I close the book, stand up and stretch. I bend down to check on the woman – she seems to be breathing more evenly. I sigh in relief just as the door opens. It is Entho.

He barely acknowledges me, but immediately leans down, tending to the woman. He performs an assortment of procedures, some I am familiar with…some not.

Then he lifts his head slowly, meeting my eyes. I let out a breath of air. “She’s alive…and doing a lot better,” he tells me, his brown eyes wide…and rimmed with shock.

“Yes,” I yawn.

“Did you do something?” he questions.

“No, I just watched her and read this book.”

Entho’s eyes fix onto mine with what appears to be confusion and maybe accusation. I wonder why. He speaks to me slowly, quietly, as if it pains him to use his voice. “Why don’t you go get some sleep? I left you some breakfast in the kitchen. You did a good job.”

I start to leave as Entho grabs the woman’s wrist, checking her vitals yet again. Then I turn around. “Entho?”

“Hmmm?”

“Where are Winter’s parents? And who is that awful man with her?”

Entho slowly brings his head up and crinkles form in his forehead. “Winter’s parents most likely died in the Final War,” he explains.

“Why can’t we help her?

His earthen eyes are dull, sad. “There are laws…about the orphans…you must know this.”

“No… what laws?” It seems like every day there is a new law enacted. I find it difficult to keep up.

“The orphans…they can’t be adopted…none of them…not even by family members. They are wards of the city.”

“Wards of the city? That is just stupid,” I sputter.

Entho returns to his work, his long fingers positioning themselves on the Light Skinned woman’s neck. But his mood suddenly changes, like a storm has just blown through. His voice becomes harsh. “What happened yesterday, with her Guardian?” He clears his throat, raises his eyebrows. “What did you do, Teak?”

“I…I don’t know what happened….I just got so mad at him, at how he was treating her.” I pull the huge book up to my chest, squeeze it to me. “I don’t know if it was me or if it was Winter…or if he just had a stomach ache like you said.”

“Teak, you need to be careful…you must never do that again in front of others…the laws are firm about displaying Power in public…”

“I know…but it wasn’t Power.”

“That is what it appeared to be.”

“Wouldn’t I know it if I displayed Power…after all, isn’t that what Bello has been griping to me about for ages?” I tilt my chin up defensively.

“Just be careful,” he whispers to me, his brown eyes wide.

“Okay,” I answer. I close the door behind me and exit the clinic, tramping upstairs in an exhaustion I didn’t know was possible. I remember the breakfast Entho told me about, but I am too tired to eat. I drop into my bed, filthy and tired beyond reason. I lay in my bed for a few minutes, thinking about the long day and night in the clinic.

The shadowed sun of a new day filters through my bedroom window, arching down on me in a colorful, speckled pattern. I gaze out the window for a while, thinking about the woman with the slit throat, which is only natural. But three other faces haunt me more than hers.

**Chapter 14**

The days pass this way…I hand Entho bottles, bandages, scissors. He teaches me names of herbs and medicines, their uses and functions. I have read a bit about them in Volume 1, but seeing Entho use them is exciting, real. If we aren’t too busy, I can ask him questions.

“What is that called?” I ask as he reaches for a large jar with a light brown powder in it.

“Yarrow,” he answers patiently. It is used for healing wounds and cuts.

“Where do you get it?” I question as he gently dabs at a cut on a little boy’s arm.

He never takes his eyes off the small boy’s wound. “I buy it from an herbs dealer. But it is found in the forest – it is the root of a flower.”

“Do you have a book I can read about herbs and medicines?” I ask Entho after everyone has left and we are cleaning up the clinic. I am sterilizing a large pile of bloody, contaminated bandages. Blood once bothered me, but after these days in the clinic, it doesn’t even faze me anymore.

He ambles over to a bookshelf, surveys the books as if they were prizes, reaches for a thick volume, and hands it to me, obviously pleased.

I wipe my hands on a clean towel and greedily snatch the book from his hands, then tear out of the clinic, a thrill surging through me. “Thanks,” I call back as I race up the stairs, kick open the door to my room, and plop onto my bed.

I study the cover. *A Healer’s Guide to Herbs and Potions*. The book is decorated in the same fancy, gold writing as the other Volumes I have already read. But it also has pictures of flowers and bottles and roots…all hand drawn. I open it to the first page.

Nausea and vomiting. *Yuck!* There is a picture of a brown root. Ginger root. And peppermint. I am familiar with that. Entho has brewed peppermint tea for me most of my life. Chamomile, a daisy like flower. And catnip. *Catnip*? It is an ugly brown herb that helps with not only nausea and vomiting but infection by increasing perspiration to release toxins from the body, and to help with fevers.

Each night I fall into bed, totally engrossed in the book until I fall asleep in my downy bed, not even bothering to change out of my healer’s robe. I wake each morning, opening my eyes, my pink bedroom curtains greeting me, as I breathe out a mixture of relief and thanks. I am not at Soldier Academy. It is all I need.

I wash up, put on a fresh robe, make breakfast, usually just toast and tea, and rush into the clinic, falling into a speechless rhythm with Entho and the patients, like a song that is really a dance. When we are done in the clinic for the day I race into the kitchen, prepare a quick meal for us and then run upstairs to my room for more reading of Entho’s healing books. My mind seems to be craving knowledge, and just like dragon anatomy, I am soaking the information up, reveling in it.

Over three weeks pass and I have given up on Dragon Academy. I should have received the letter by now, revealing my scores. I am disappointed, but I have put it out of my mind. I wish I could get Winter out of my mind, though. And Thann and Koree…they has pervaded my thoughts more than I thought possible. I catch myself daydreaming about them, especially Thann, then immediately shove the thoughts out of my mind. Thann would not be interested in me, that is for sure.

It is a Friday and the clinic is slower than usual. Several children are brought in by Guardians in orange. Some of the Guardians seem kind. Some are horrible, like Winter’s. After they leave, I ask Entho about all of the orphans – I didn’t realize there were so many of them. So many Winters.

He sighs, looking up from a compound he is mixing. “Oh, Teak. They just aren’t as lucky as you. The wars….so many were killed, especially in the Final War.” He exhales again, his chest heaving, his voice raw with rare emotion. “There are so many orphans, almost a hundred here. The Alliance is….feeding them….and giving them shelter. It’s all we can ask right now.”

“Where do they keep them,” I ask. “Where do they live?”

“Near Chrissy Park. In the old warehouses.”

“I want to help them,” I whisper. “I want to help Winter.”

“I know.” He reaches out and pats my hand, turns back to mixing herbs and medicine. “I do what I can…I send money to them every month, don’t take payment unless it’s offered…but I know it’s not enough.

“Why…why can’t we do more?” It doesn’t make sense to me.

Entho looks around, as if to see if anyone is near, listening. He turns to me, whispering, “They are training them for the New Alliance. These poor children are their next band of soldiers. They’re getting them young…and cheap.”

“Soldiers?” I ask, shocked.

Entho nods his head, and I think of little Winter…training to be a soldier. Just like me…whether she wants to or not…only she doesn’t have a home to go to on the weekends. A mother or father to love her. I vow to help her someday…somehow.

A tear falls down my cheek and lands on the stone floor as my chest pulls into a tight ball, a fist that clenches my heart like a vise, and I am not sure if all the pain I feel is for Winter…or if some of it is for myself.

**Chapter 15**

The Bay City fog rolls in, dark and gloomy. It feels as if I have been trapped inside the clinic for a lifetime. I am restless, wanting to take my bow and arrows out for a practice run. But I know I can’t, that I am not allowed at the training center any more. And it’s not like I can just take a bow and arrows to a park or something. I never thought I would miss anything about Weapons, but I miss the feel of the bow in my hands, nocking the arrow, aiming….

It has been a long day in the clinic…countless injuries and illnesses. The last patient leaves well after dark, and finally we are able to release the woman with the cut throat. I am covered in blood, as usual. So is Entho. I offer to clean up.

He agrees and tromps into the house to prepare dinner. When I enter the kitchen I am surprised to find a more elaborate meal than usual – potatoes smothered in cheese with broiled chicken. We eat in relative silence – I am just not that hungry. I can’t seem to get Winter out of my mind, and every orphan that comes into the clinic distresses me beyond reason.

“I’ll do the dishes,” Entho mutters. He seems to have picked up on my mood.

“Okay, thanks.” I push my chair back and turn down the hall that leads to our front door. Thunder claps loudly outside, and there is a quick flash of lightning that illuminates the entry for just a moment. Rain is pouring outside, not the usual drizzle we get this time of year but a rough pounding on the tile roof like angry stones pelting down from the sky.

A chill runs through me, through the entire house. I am anxious to get cleaned up, to get under my covers and read some more, hoping for a good night of sleep, something that has eluded me since I met Winter…and the two boys who came into the clinic.

For some reason, their faces swim before my eyes each night as I try to sleep, and an odd thrill runs through my entire body. Boys…who would have thought I would be thinking about boys? Thann especially catches my attention, and I keep seeing him smiling at me, hearing his voice offer to help me look for the package…

I flash back to Weapons…to the silly girls giggling and whispering in the dorms…usually about Glendon and Reese, the most popular boys there. Disgust and fury would creep through me at them, and I vowed to never be like them. But Thann…another Light Skin. Like me. I shake my head, realizing I am no different than those ridiculous girls.

As I round the corner for the stairs, something unusual catches my attention on the floor. It is by our mail slot. Entho gets all of his mail deliveries at the clinic. I can’t remember the last time we received any correspondence from this mail slot. I turn back toward the front door, reach for the small beige envelope on the floor. Slowly, I bring it up to my face, squint my eyes so I can read who it is for.

It is addressed to me. **Miss Teak Frain.** The writing is intricate and embossed in gold. I look at the return address and instantly drop the envelope to the floor, as if it were burning my hands. It is from the Assessment Center.

I am stuck in place…clamped to the stone floor for several minutes as if I have glue on my feet and can’t move, even if I want to. In time, I pick up the envelope, run upstairs and light a candle. I plop onto my bed.

My hands tremble as I open the letter, the thick envelope crinkling under my fingers. Thunder explodes outside as I pull a piece of paper out of the envelope and open it up. I am afraid to read it, not sure if I even want to know what it says. I finally muster up the courage to look at it, at first scanning it quickly, then reading it again slowly, cautiously.

**Dragon Assessment Score**

**Teak Frain**

**348/350**

**Prepare to attend Dragon Academy**

**Harcourt Training Stables**

**3500 West Valley Mountain Drive**

**Harcourt Township**

**August 8, 2087**

**9:00 a.m.**

**A driver will be sent to pick you up.**

I am in shock for a few minutes. I can’t seem to get a grip on this new piece of information. Dragon Academy? I had given up on it. My mind shoots off into what seems like a million different directions. Suddenly the thought of leaving Entho terrifies me. How will he get by without me? I am enjoying learning about healing…. but dragons…I love dragons. And…and what about Winter? How am I going to help her if I am away at Dragon Academy? But dragons…the pull is strong.

I launch myself off of the bed and run full speed back to the kitchen where Entho is cleaning up the dishes. I hand the letter to him, speechless, waiting for his reaction.

He wipes his hands on a towel and takes the letter from me. Reads it. I wait, shifting back and forth from one foot to the other.

“Congratulations!” He smiles at me, his brown eyes twinkling. “I’m proud of you.”

As I watch Entho, something shifts inside of me. I think of all of the lost years with him…of the resentment and anger I felt for him over losing my mom and then being sent away to Weapons…of how he is a father to me now…and I am finally able to be a daughter. I bite my lower lip, coming to an abrupt decision. “I am not going.”

“What?” Entho raises his voice at me, something he has rarely done.

I look up at him, find his eyes. “I want to stay here….with you….I…I...like healing.” It isn’t a very convincing rebuttal.

“Nonsense!” Entho argues. “You have loved dragons ever since you were little. I was the one who kept you away from them.” He sighs, his lips pointing down. “Teak, I have enjoyed having you with me in the clinic. I’m as proud of you over that as getting into Dragon Academy, and placing first in Weapons, but you must follow your dreams, not mine.”

“But what will you do…without me in the clinic?”

“Well, with all the money I’ll save not putting you through Soldier Academy, I’ll hire an assistant. I’m sure whoever it is won’t be as good as you, but…” His voice trails off. Then he smiles at me.

“Isn’t Dragon Academy going to cost money?” I ask.

“Yes, but not nearly as much as Soldier Academy. Didn’t you ever stop to think that everyone in Weapons is a Red Cloaker?” He seems to be enjoying himself. “That cost me a load of money!”

“But I hated it.” I wait for a scolding – to hear how ungrateful I am. I immediately feel guilty – I can’t remember ever seeing Entho joking around, and I don’t want to ruin it.

“I know,” he soothes. “But now you’re going to Dragon Academy…just like your mom!”

“I am not.” I stubbornly stick out my chin. The thought of going away, of meeting new people, being taunted… or worse because I am a Light Skin…it doesn’t sound appealing any more. “I am staying right here and I am going to become a healer, like you.” Once the decision has been made, I feel lighter, happier. “And I am not leaving Winter, either. She might need me.”

Entho breathes in and out, strums his fingers on the counter. He is deep in thought, the silence between us thick and heavy.

“Teak…” He turns his head, gazing at the door with foggy eyes, as if someone were on the other side listening in. He speaks, his voice throaty and low. “I’m safe here…because of what I can offer the Alliance. It’s getting bad out there…in the city. You…you must leave. You’ll be safer in the country – at Harcourt – than here in the city.”

“Harcourt?” I ask, remembering Thann and Koree. I am sure that is where they said they came from.

“Yes, of course,” Entho answers. “It says so on the invitation.” He hands it back to me and I read it again. Sure enough, it says Harcourt. Dragon Academy is at Harcourt. I don’t know why that didn’t register with me before.

I think of the two boys who came to the clinic, how exciting it was to talk to them…and how scary and uncomfortable it was. Images of their faces dance in my mind, like they have so many times, and even though I want to see them, want to be with them more than anything, and I want to learn about dragons and become a dragon trainer, the thought of leaving Entho and Bay City scares me deeply. “I am not going. And that is final.” I cross my arms over my chest.

“Teak, you have to go. The city…I fear...”

“What?” I interrupt. “What is happening?” I turn my entire body toward Entho, searching his eyes for answers that don’t seem to be there.

“Nothing, nothing.” He stops talking for a moment, his eyes meeting mine…sad smoky brown eyes… along with something I have only seen once before in them…fear. He speaks quietly but firmly. “For the love of the Angels, you have to go.”

I don’t understand why he is being so stubborn and cryptic. I can tell he knows something and won’t tell me what it is. I narrow my eyes at him and wrinkle my brow, shooting him the most rebellious look I have ever come up with. “I don’t care. I am staying here. I am going to become a healer. And that is final.” Like a small child, I stomp my foot on the floor.

“Teak, it’s too late. You chose Dragons. You can’t just change your mind on a whim. It’s the law…you took the Dragon Assessment and passed. You have to go.”

“What if I don’t?” I ask stubbornly.

Entho swallows, looks down at the floor, then back up to me, sadness flowing from his eyes like a bleeding wound. He answers with one word, but it is enough to convince me.

“Imprisonment.”

**Chapter 16**

I didn’t think telling Entho good-bye would bother me so much. We have both woken before dawn, and he carries my bags downstairs, sets them by the door without fanfare. He hands me some money, which I place in one of the bags. Then he hugs me, holds me tightly to him. I wrap my arms around him, wondering when I will see him again. He pulls away, kisses my cheek.

“I have to get to the clinic…you know…”

“I know.”

“I love you, Teak.” His eyes are serious. Deep and dark.

I nod my head.

“And Teak,”

“Yes?”

“Stay away from purple dragons.”

“Okay…” I gaze at him, puzzled, but he doesn’t explain. I seriously doubt that I will see any purple dragons at Harcourt…those are only for Siv Gareth’s elite army…his soldiers and Destroyers.

Entho kisses my forehead, turns around and leaves, his body diminishing as he scurries down the huge corridor that leads to the clinic. My throat tightens and my chest pulls into a tight ball of emotion. Why *didn’t I tell him I loved him?* A yearning runs deeply through my body… “Entho,” I yell. “Entho!”

He turns around, far away down the corridor and waves at me. “I…I…” Words trap in my throat as he pivots around, bustling away back to the clinic. Without me.

I plop down on the floor, landing with a thump. I can’t stop thinking of Entho, and as memories of his brown eyes, his long fingers, his healer’s knot swim in my head, tears begin to trickle out of my eyes. I blink, trying to hold them back, but they leak down my cheeks silently and drip down onto the stone floor like baby raindrops. I don’t bother to wipe them away. I sniff time and again as a small puddle forms. A miniature lake of regret that seems to be talking to me – telling me that nothing will ever be the same again.

After a while my entire body feels dehydrated, and the tears stop all at once, as if ordered to do so. I wipe my eyes on the sleeve of my red cloak, settling in to wait for the driver. I sniff loudly and wonder how long the ride to Harcourt will be. I glance at my watch every now and then.

This continues for quite some time. I double check the invitation. Sure enough – it says 9:00 a.m. By now the driver is more than two hours late, and irritation creeps through me like a spreading disease.

I lay on my back by the front door, tapping my foot impatiently against the thick, carved wood, leaning against my packed bags. Tap. Tap. Tap.

Rap. Rap.

I continue tapping, impatient and frustrated – angry and edgy.

Rap. Rap.

I hear it now. It is not my foot but a knock on the door. I bolt upright and swing the door open wide, ready to get going. My jaw drops in surprise.

It is a boy, a tall, broad-chested boy standing in the doorway – a Light Skinned boy who I never thought I would see again.

“Hello, I’m Tha…,” he starts. Then, “It’s you. From the clinic.” He grins widely. “Sorry about being late.”

The words muffle in my ears as I stare at him. “Um, it is okay.” A few minutes ago all I could think of was the multitude of saucy remarks I would be giving the driver for being so late and now I am staring once again at this boy who has invaded my thoughts more than I ever thought possible. I study him, moving my eyes across his tall body. This boy…he is perfect. Angelic. Golden. I am in a trance.

I shake off my thoughts, reaching for my bags. I have been packed for days, and at this point I am not sure if I should have included my bow and arrows, but they have been such a part of my life I can’t leave them at home. Thann grabs the bags out of my hands.

“Allow me,” he smiles, hefting the bags over his shoulder. The muscles in his back flex as he picks them up. I try not to gawk at them as I follow him.

I step outside, shock crashing through me at the sight of seven dragons waiting perfectly still – like statues in a garden park. Three are giant Crimsons, two are smaller black Ebonies, and the other two are glistening Metallics, shining brightly in the specks of sunlight that peak through the gloomy sky. I was expecting a driver and cart and I am instantly confused. *Are we riding dragons to Harcourt?*

Then I notice three boys and two girls perched on the dragons, their eyes focused on me. I instantly recognize two of the boys and stop dead in my tracks, slamming the door behind me with a heavy bang.

The first boy is Koree, perched nonchalantly on one of the Metallics, as if he were an extension of the giant beast. But it isn’t Koree who disturbs me.

It is the second boy… Reese, and he is sitting on one of the Crimsons, leaning slightly forward with the reins clutched in his hands as if he were the leader of an army. A sick, sinking feeling settles in my stomach. I thought my days with Reese were over. As my eyes travel over his red cloak, his dark face and glaring expression, I realize he must be going to Dragon Academy. With me.

Thann hoists my bags on the back of one of the Crimsons behind a well worn leather saddle. He groans, smiling. “How many pairs of shoes did you pack?” I am speechless, not sure what to say. I have only packed one pair of boots.

He waits a few minutes for a response. When he doesn’t get one, he grins at me. “Well, mount your dragon, and let’s go.” He strides over to his dragon and lithely puts his leg in a stirrup and throws his other leg over, settling on the Ebony with ease. The others watch, waiting in complete silence.

That is when it occurs to me. I have never ridden a dragon by myself, and I have no idea how to actually mount one. Being tossed onto a dragon as a kid and taking a test and reading about it is one thing but this… I tap my fingers on my leg, thinking of what to do next. I bite the inside of my cheek, trying to form a plan.

Thann waits, perched on the Ebony. “Don’t tell me….”

I interrupt. “You got it – I have never ridden a dragon before.”

Thann throws back his head and laughs. The others watch silently, except I hear a loud snort, and I am sure it belongs to Reese. It is enough to propel me into action. I storm over to the bright red dragon, put my foot in the stirrup, and throw my leg over the saddle.

I promptly go sailing into the air and land on the ground with a hard thump. The wind is knocked out of me as I lay flat on my back, struggling to cast air into my burning lungs. It feels like a thousand pound weight is pressing down on my chest, and to top it off, I think I twisted my knee. It is throbbing violently, and as I lay there immobilized, warbled sounds in the background muffle in my ears. It feels like I am wading through water in my mind.

“Stupid Ghost, can’t even stay on a dragon.” I instantly recognize the voice. It belongs to Reese, and I want to get up and knock him off his dragon, jump on top of him and pummel him. But, as usual, I ignore him as I tentatively force myself to sit up, rubbing my knee.

Still gasping for breath, I attempt to stand up, but before I can, Reese is knocked off of his dragon, flies through the air like a bird, and is slammed onto the ground beside me. It is as if an invisible force took hold of him, lifted him from the dragon, and hammered him into the bare earth. I look around, confused. Everyone is sitting on their dragons. *Who could have slammed him to the ground like that?*

The other boy who came to the clinic, Koree, jumps down off of his dragon and ambles over to Reese. He holds his hand over Reese’s still body on the ground, his fingers spread wide. For the first time in years, I see fear in Reese’s cold dark eyes. Reese is pinned to the ground, paralyzed by a strong Power, and it must be coming from Koree. I stifle a giggle.

“Let me up, you baggers…I will get you for this,” Reese threatens, sweat pouring off his forehead as he struggles against the Power holding him down. His eyes shoot off flames of anger, and I cringe, worrying what he will do to Koree.

“Don’t ever say that word again…*Reese*.” Koree seethes, accenting Reese’s name as if it were an infectious disease. “There are no “Ghosts” at Harcourt…we’re all equal.”

Koree stares with ambivalence at Reese… as if he were a bug he wants to squash. “You have just earned twenty demerits. I know we haven’t explained anything to you yet,” he mildly intones, as if he were talking to a lesser being, “But Thann and I are your squad leaders, *Rookie*, and from this moment on your placing at Dragons will depend on a lot of things, but it’s mostly merit based.” He pauses for a few minutes, his eyes flashing green daggers at Reese. “And so far, *Rookie*, you aren’t doing so well.”

He continues to stand over Reese, their eyes locked in a battle I hope that Koree can win. I have been on the hurting side of Reese’s fury and hate too many times. After a while Koree pulls his hand away from Reese’s prone body. I watch in awe as Reese’s body relaxes, and he hesitantly stands up. Watching from the ground, I pick up on the death glare he rivets back to Koree, which Koree seemingly ignores.

Then Koree turns to me, his green eyes glistening. “What’s your name?” I feel foolish as I stand up and brush the dirt off of my red cloak. Then a wave of anger drives through my body. He wants to know my name? As if he is too important to remember it from the night he and Thann came to the clinic.

“Teak…Teak Frain,” I sputter, biting down on my jaw with annoyance.

His emerald eyes match mine. “Teak…right.” He seems to be thinking for a second and then speaks. “I remember now. The girl from the clinic. You looked different then.”

“I was covered in blood.”

“Maybe that was it,” he says nonchalantly, but his eyes turn dark, and for the briefest moment he furrows his brow. “Are you okay?” he asks me.

I hesitate for a moment. “Yes, I am fine.”

“Good.” He visibly sighs and his lips curl up. “Well, Teak, you’ve just earned ten merits for not responding to antagonism and for trying something new.”

“Um, thanks,” I murmur, lifting my eyes up to meet his.

He continues. “Lesson one – you mount a dragon on the left side – the dragon’s left – or you might get thrown off.” He is grinning now, a dimple forming on the right side of his cheek. For a moment all I can do is stare mutely at it…at him.

I knew to mount a dragon on its left side. I just got so carried away with Reese’s taunting that I forgot to think.

“Okay,” I murmur, feeling foolish.

“And lesson two,” he continues, “When you are on or near a dragon, you must always be thinking – not reacting.” *Was this guy reading my mind, or what?*

“After all, they are animals. And large animals at that.” I can tell he knows a lot about dragons and I am suddenly embarrassed – the only information I have learned is from books.

I simply nod my head.

“It’s okay,” he tells me. “We all have to learn. I’ve been thrown off of a lot of dragons.” His lips curve up, ever so slightly. I wait for the dimple to form, but it remains hidden, as if he is selfishly keeping it for himself.

Koree helps me mount the dragon – the proper way this time. I watch intently as he demonstrates how to hold the reins and steer the dragon. I pull back on the right rein to make her go right and pull back on the left rein to make her go left. Easy enough. Or so I think.

I give it a try. The huge scarlet dragon walks in a complete circle, and all I can hear are the muffled sounds of Thann and the others laughing in the background. My face is hot now, and I am sure it must be turning all different shades of red.

“Pull back on the reins and she’ll stop,” I hear Thann call out. I pull back hard on the reins and the Crimson digs her hind end into the ground and stops so quickly I almost go sailing over her head. By now there is a small crowd of people watching us, and I want to crawl away and hide.

Koree gets off his dragon – yet again – and walks over to me. He patiently takes the reins and evens them out, stuffing them in my hands.

“Just keep them like this. And don’t hold on so tight.”

Koree hops on his dragon with ease and turns in the opposite direction. The others follow him. Somehow I manage to turn the dragon in the proper direction, and we slowly plod out of my neighborhood, Bay City, and the only life I have ever known.

**Chapter 17**

I balance on the enormous red dragon, rocking back and forth as if I were riding a huge circus elephant. I concentrate intently so that I don’t fall off…or make a fool of myself again. I am in last place, following the others, hoping they don’t notice me. It is an odd position for me…I am accustomed to being in the front of the pack.

My knee throbs with each movement, and I long for some herbs and medicine to take the pain away*. Why didn’t I think to bring some?* The rancid smell of the city begins to dissipate as buildings and debris become sparse. The ground beneath the dragon’s feet begins to smooth out. Still, we must maneuver around scrap metal, a dilapidated abandoned bus, and broken chunks of concrete…a wrecked trolley car, turned on its side. I have never been this far from home.

After a while we reach the edge of the city, and Koree stops his dragon, turning to face the rest of us. The sun shines directly down on him, and his coppery curls glisten like bronze. Sun…full rays of sunshine. I can’t help but marvel at the feel of it on my own face, warm and clean and soothing.

“I’m taking the lead with Reese,” Koree starts, dramatically turning his head toward Reese, as if to give him a warning. “Gunter, you can come with me.”

“Righto,” a small boy on another Crimson answers, trotting with ease next to Koree.

Reese falls silently into place beside him, scowling. His entire face is scrunched up as if he just tasted something bitter. He is perched awkwardly on a shimmering Crimson, and it swishes its tail back and forth, almost violently, obviously unhappy and distressed. More than once I notice that Reese almost falls off its side. I wish more than anything at this moment that he would fall off the gigantic dragon. I don’t know if I would laugh, but I certainly would enjoy it.

Thann’s voice pulls my thoughts away from Reese. “Okay, that leaves me with the three girls…just how I like it.” He grins directly at me. *Is he flirting with me?* I can’t help but smile back, even though a streak of discomfort runs through every vein in my body.

My eyes travel to the other girls. One is petite and dark. The other is a Light Skin like me, only she is smaller and her hair is shorter. I don’t see a Mark of Power anywhere on her – maybe it is hidden. She has grayish blue eyes, and a dainty nose.

I am mesmerized by the sight of her. And of course Thann. My head spins at the thought of two other Light Skinned people with me… on our way to Dragon Academy. The only Light Skins I remember seeing since the Purification Law passed are Entho, Bello, Thann, the woman who was brought into the clinic, and a few others in passing.

I keep glancing at her, and then at Thann, hoping they don’t notice. Thann seems perfectly content with his skin, but she seems more like me – nervous and on edge. I wonder what her name is. *Could we possibly become friends?* I shake my head… friends? Highly unlikely. That has been drilled into me since I was six years old.

I feel rather than see the city fade away, like a candle burning to its end. Thann is quiet, except for some whistling and occasional humming. I keep silent, unsure of what to say, if anything. My knee continues to throb, but I don’t dare complain. The other girl, the dark one, finally turns to me, “My name is Echo, what’s yours?”

“Teak,” I reply. Silence lingers. She turns to the other girl.

“And what’s your name?

“Um, Soot.”

“That’s funny,” Echo laughs.

“Yeah, kind of a play on words.” Soot isn’t smiling though.

I feel like I should say something to Echo, to keep the conversation going. But I remain quiet. She has short dark hair that tapers toward her face and big oval eyes that are deep blue, the color of storm clouds. She is wearing a blue cloak, and the contrast to her dark skin and hair is astonishing. I feel pale and ugly in comparison. She turns to me. “I love your hair.”

“Mine?” I ask, almost choking as my jaw drops in surprise.

“Yeah, yours.” Echo lets out a giggle. *She loves MY hair?* I think of all the times I have tried to tame my wild, long hair, wishing it was dark, that it would form around my face in a shapely fashion…like Echo’s. Wishing I could look just like Echo…like everyone else.

“I always wanted long hair, but it just seems to matt up, and I never have time to take care of it. I have so many chores…”

“Um…what kind of chores?” I am finding it hard to believe I am in an actual conversation with a girl my age, that I am not being humiliated, deliberately left out, taunted, pinched, hit…or worse. That the first word out of her mouth isn’t “Ghost”. Or Teak the Freak. She seems oblivious to Soot, Thann, or my skin color.

“Oh, my family owns and operates a small dragon farm. We all have to pitch in – I have five brothers...I’m the youngest. Dirty snocks make me do most of the work. I have to get up early every morning to feed, scoop dung, you know….”

I don’t know. But I have dreamed of knowing. “A dragon farm?” I ask, enviously. Soot remains quiet. I somehow want to involve her in our conversation, but I am doing my best just to talk with Echo.

“Yeah. We have twenty-seven dragons right now. We breed them, hatch them, train them, and then sell them. It doesn’t pay so well, that’s why I’m a Blue Cloaker and not a Red Cloaker like you!” She turns to Soot then. “And you’re a Brown Cloaker? How the holy dragon balls did you get into Dragon Academy?”

At that, Thann chuckles.

“I’ve been a stable hand,” Soot tells us, hanging her head. “I got a scholarship.” She has shaggy reddish brown hair, but it shapes around her pale face and I can’t help notice how pretty she is. Something about her seems familiar, and then I realize what it is. Memories of Canto’s long red hair flash into my mind…her pale face. It might have been Canto beside me if not for Siv Gareth and his cruel laws. I fight to keep anger from bubbling up inside of me.

“You both must know a lot about dragons,” I nervously tell them, hoping my voice doesn’t tremble. My hands are sweaty, clammy.

“Well, you’d be surprised how little I do know,” Echo openly admits. “I barely made it here. I took the Assessment and failed it….three times.” She laughs heartily. “My brothers called me a dumb bagger over and over again.”

“Well, how did you get here?” Soot asks, her voice scratchy and hoarse. “I thought the Assessment was the only way to get to Dragon Academy.”

“My father petitioned the Administrators for a Practical Assessment. They came to our farm and found out that I handle dragons well and can take care of hatchlings and dragonlings.” She stops, smiles, and continues, “So here I am!”

“Wow,” I manage to get out.

The conversations dwindles as the huge Crimson jostles me back and forth in the saddle – a slow rhythm that makes me sleepy. My mom’s dragon bracelet jangles on my wrist, a lullaby adding to my stupor. I remember Koree’s warning to be alert at all times, but I find it is becoming more and more difficult. I shake my head, warding off the thickness that is filling my brain.

To keep my mind occupied, I scan the war ravaged countryside. The ground is flat, bare, and brown. We are traveling on a dirt road and there is a sprinkling of trees on each side, survivors of the Final War. The sky is almost blue and it reminds me of dreams and pajamas and sleeping late. My knee still hurts and my legs are beginning to cramp – I had no idea riding a dragon could be so painful.

Before long, Echo turns to Thann, who is juggling three golden balls, only he is not using his hands; they just float and turn in front of him as if they have a mind of their own. I feel a pang of envy. He looks so content, so natural at this. And obviously, he has Power. His Mark of Power must actually mean something.

“Hey, G.B., how long before we get there?” Echo asks him, her voice husky.

G.B.? I wonder what she is talking about.

“G.B.?” Thann questions, mirroring my own thoughts.

“Yeah, Golden Boy… I’ve got to tinkle…what do you suggest I do?”

“Well, B.G., I usually stand up to do it, but I suggest you squat…it’ll keep your cloak cleaner.” A huge smile engulfs Thann’s face, his teeth glistening in the sunlight.

“B.G.?”

“Yeah, Bronze Girl….It will be a few hours till we get there. We’re going to stop for a break in a while. Can it wait?”

“I knew it…typical male. Can’t stop the dragon till we get there even if my teeth are literally sloshing around in my mouth!”

“We can pull over,” Thann laughs.

“Well, cockandballs, I hope so. If not, you’re going to have a wet saddle.”

I turn to her, shocked. “Cockandballs?”

“You know. She says it slowly for me. Cock. And. Balls.” My eyes pop open wide. We would have been disciplined harshly for saying such words in Weapons, and I have never heard a girl speak like this before.

“Oh…” I am blushing, feeling the familiar red heat engulf my face. Soot breaks into laughter and Thann joins her, which only makes me blush more.

He leans out of his saddle, toward me. “Did you pack your crown, Princess?” Echo and Soot giggle some more, and it occurs to me that this is the first time I have been playfully teased since I was a child, and I don’t know how to respond.

“Uhhh….I think I left it at home.” It is a pathetic response, but all I can think of at the moment. They all laugh again, and a thrill of happiness, a new feeling that I am almost afraid of, rushes through me.

By now the excitement of riding a dragon has diminished, and I ache everywhere. My arms are accustomed to holding weapons, not reins. I wouldn’t have dreamed they would hurt so much from holding small strips of leather. To top it off, I am thirsty. Extremely thirsty. I cough as dirt from the road blows in my face.

Thann leads us to a grove of trees by the side of the road. “I’m going to catch fire from Koree over this,” he booms, I think mostly at Echo.

“He’ll get over himself,” she answers. Quickly, she dismounts her dragon, pulls up her cloak and takes off full speed, disappearing behind a tree. I dismount gingerly, and follow her trail, my legs rubbery and shaky, limping on my still sore knee. Soot walks next to me. Thann travels in the opposite direction, jogging away on long muscular legs.

We all finish our business at about the same time and return to the dragons. I am afraid to ask for a drink, and I chide myself for not packing a water bag. I don’t know if Thann is a mind reader, but he digs in his pack, pulls out a water bag, and tosses it to me. Of course, I catch it. “Thanks,” I tell him, so relieved I almost want to cry. He takes another water bag, drinks greedily from it, and I watch as Echo and Soot both dig water bags out of their bags, tip them back and guzzle the water down.

“No problem, Princess.” Thann tells me.

All I can muster is a smile, wishing I could come up with a witty retort.

We hop on the dragons again and continue plodding along. We can no longer see Koree and the boys. “Think you can go a little faster?” Thann asks me. I guess he knows that Echo and Soot can.

“I will try…” I answer to nobody…because Thann has already ridden off. He is chasing Echo, who has moved her dragon into a trot and is riding in huge circles…around me.

Thann follows her, whooping in the powdery dust. Soot joins in with a loud yell, as if she were going to battle. My lungs are protesting the enormous amounts of dust particles I am ingesting. I cough and clear my throat and wish more than anything that I could join them.

They ride around me in huge, large circles for quite some time and then start leaping the dragons over logs, running in and out of the surrounding trees, circling me again, and laughing hysterically. I feel left out…a familiar feeling. I decide to pick up my pace a little and am surprised that I can make the dragon go faster without losing control.

Finally, Thann, Soot, and Echo trot up beside me. I can see the faint outline of the others ahead of us – they have pulled over. We sidle up beside them. Koree, Reese, and the other boy have dismounted and are standing in a semi-circle. Koree is pointing to something on the Metallic.

I marvel at the giant Crimson I am straddled on as she stretches in the sun, her red scales glimmering like rubies. Hesitantly, I throw my leg over the saddle to dismount, not realizing how rubbery my legs feel, and when my boots make contact with the hard packed dirt, I struggle to hold myself up. My tender knee gives out, and I stumble, almost falling to the ground again. I take two or three awkward steps before I regain my balance.

“Look at the Ghost…can’t even walk.” Reese’s voice. Again.

I don’t have time to even look his way before a loud crackling noise resounds in the clearing, and suddenly a giant ball of red flies through the air. My eyes follow it, and my head turns to keep up with the moving blur. It stops with a crunch as Reese is pinned against the trunk of a huge elm tree, hanging from it like a rag doll. I can’t help but release a small grin at the sight of him dangling by his red cloak, held up by an invisible hook. Koree’s Power…of course.

Koree stands nearby, not even looking at him, cleaning his fingernails or fiddling with something...I can’t quite tell what. “You earn twenty more demerits, Rookie,” he calmly tells Reese. For a moment we all stare at him.

Then, as if nothing out of the ordinary has happened, the other boy, the only one I haven’t met yet, saunters over to me. I wait for the usual “Ghost” comments to start, but instead, he holds out his hand. “My name is Gunter. What’s yours?” He, too, is wearing a red cloak. He is short and thin with a small nose and squinty eyes. When he smiles, his face seems to disappear into it. And he is smiling at me. I am unnerved, as usual, but I take his hand and shake it, something I don’t recall ever doing. His hand is warm and dry and raspy.

“Teak…Teak Frain,” I murmur, my mouth thick like it is full of sand. I look up, waiting for something to happen, a comment, a kick from behind, a poke. The usual Light Skin treatment. But nothing happens.

“Pleased to meet you, Teak, and who is this?” He is looking at Echo, raising his eyebrows, and if it is possible, his smile seems to have grown.

Echo easily hops off of her small metallic dragon, landing softly on the dirt. “Echo, at your service, sir,” she smiles. They shake hands as well. “And this is Soot.” She points to Soot, who is still on her dragon, a sleek Ebony. Soot holds up her hand, sending Gunter a tiny wave and a tentative smile. Gunter waves back, and I notice his dark hands seem to be too large for his body, like a puppy that hasn’t grown into its paws.

Thann arrives as if on cue. “Who doesn’t have a water bag?” he casually asks. The sun glistens off of his blonde hair, and I find it hard to even breathe as I gape at him.

Gunter raises his hand. Thann smiles. “Figures,” he says, smiling. “Prince to go with a Princess.” The rest of us dig around and find our water bags, emptying them easily. Water trickles down my throat, cool and fresh and cleansing. Gunter greedily gulps from his new bag. He turns to me.

“Guess coming from the city doesn’t prepare us for all this, does it?”

“Um, no,” I answer uneasily. I wonder how he knows I am from the city, then glance back and forth from my red cloak to his. Not too hard to figure out.

Gunter’s smile is infectious, though, and it puts me at ease.

“I forgot one, too,” I tell him. “Thann had to give me this one.” Gunter lets out a high pitched laugh.

Our attention is drawn to Thann’s voice again. “Do you think he has a water bag?” Thann asks, pointing to Reese, who is still pinned up against the tree.

“I doubt it…he’s a Red Cloaker. We…ah…Red Cloakers seem a little unprepared for this overall,” Gunter answers. Thann sighs, as if he is babysitting naughty children and digs around in his bag. He brings out another water bag.

“Stop.” Koree’s voice is steely, dark. “I think a dry mouth might be good for his smart mouth.” He casts his eyes toward Thann, and soon they both are grinning at each other, nodding their heads as if in deep contemplation. With the sun beating down on Thann’s light skin and his golden hair, I stare at him, frozen in place. He is like a statue, chiseled out of pale stone, and when the sun shines on him everyone else seems to disappear from my vision. For some reason I feel a strong pull toward Thann, as if an invisible cord was reaching out from him to me. Or the other way around.

Koree’s voice pulls me out of my thoughts, and I shake my head. I quickly look around at the others, hoping they didn’t notice that I was gawking at Thann.

“Take your dragons to the stream and let them drink.” Koree orders. He adds, as if it is an afterthought, “And bring your water bags to fill up.” It is becoming obvious that he is the leader of our little crew, which I find odd. When the boys came to Entho’s clinic Thann seemed to be in charge.

“Stream water?” Gunter asks. “Is that safe?” Immediately, Koree and Thann bust up laughing.

“Safer than city water, I swear,” Thann answers. His lips are full as he smiles and his golden eyes sparkle. I am fascinated by his easy demeanor. Thann’s skin is more golden than me, as if he has been in the sun a lot. No wonder Echo calls him Golden Boy.

I slyly inspect him as he grabs Reese’s dragon as well as his own and heads toward the stream. He is tall like me, but much more muscular, and his shoulders are very broad. What is so distracting about this boy? Just his light skin? No, it is more than that, but I can’t seem to place what it is.

I take my beautiful scarlet dragon by the reins, and she obediently follows. Somehow Koree is walking beside me with his dragon, the majestic Metallic. He doesn’t even need to hold the reins – the dragon just follows him. It feels good to stretch my legs, to actually move.

“How is that knee?” Koree asks, his brow furrowed.

I am curious how he knows about my knee; I haven’t said a thing about it to anyone. “Um…fine, nothing a little arnica and marshmallow root wouldn’t fix.” I am suddenly embarrassed that I broke into healing talk. I feel my cheeks grow hot and know they must be turning red.

“Well, do you have some?” he asks in earnest, stopping and turning to me. His green eyes are so serious that I am almost frightened.

“Uh, no, Entho, my dad just taught me this stuff.”

“Wow, that’s smash.” He pauses for a moment, as if he is deep in thought. “So that’s what you were training for?”

“No.” My eyebrows crinkle at the thought of it, and my lips curl down. “Weapons,” I answer.

“No way!” he exclaims. It is the first time I have seen him act excited.

“Yes.” Another one word comment…I am turning out to be quite the conversationalist.

“That is way smash!”

Koree begins to ask me numerous questions about Weapons. I rattle off the answers almost like I did in Assessment. He is especially interested in bows and arrows, which secretly pleases me for some reason.

“So, you didn’t qualify in Weapons, and that’s why you’re here?” he queries.

I pause, not sure if I should go on. I glance over at Thann, walking with Echo, Soot, and Gunter, and I long to be with him instead of this serious boy who asks so many questions.

“No.” I bite down on my lower lip, not sure if I should go on. “I qualified…first place.”

“No way,” he replies, his voice rising again. The others look over at us, but he shrugs them off and begins walking again. I want to discuss something else – like dragons – talking about myself makes me uncomfortable, and having a boy think something I have done is smash only adds to it.

Purposely, I change the subject. “Um…what is her name? The dragon I am riding?”

“Pebble,” he tells me. Then, “So, in Weapons, did you learn how to throw spears?”
“Well, yes, of course.” I am still curious about the dragon. “What kind of a name is Pebble for a dragon?” In my childhood fantasies dragons always had glamorous names like Midnight, Remington, or Sasparilla.

“The kind of name a little kid names a dragon that just hatched,” Koree quickly answers. His eyes are serious again, almost accusing, and his voice has turned to ice.

I don’t know if I should just be quiet or continue talking, but I can’t seem to stop myself. “Pebble…she’s your dragon?”

“Pebble’s her own dragon. But, yeah, I guess you could say she belongs to me.”

“Then, if you hatched her, you’re bonded, right? How is it that I sound so stupid asking all these questions about dragons?

His voice is quiet, steely. “Yeah, we’re bonded.”

“Wow.” Another one word reply that leaves the conversation in the dust. Koree seems content to leave it that way.

We reach the stream, fill our water bags and let the dragons drink. I gaze into the blue green water as the dragons reach their mouths into it and contentedly lap it up. I kneel down and fill my own water bag, remembering how parched I was before and not wanting a repeat performance.

When the dragons are finished, we stroll back toward the giant elm tree, conversation among the others flowing freely. I remain quiet, taking the rear with Pebble behind me. Koree is next to me again, and I feel a wave of irritation toward him, wishing it was Thann instead.

I am sneaking another peek at Thann, who is walking next to Echo and Soot, wishing I could just go up and talk to him…that things could be easier for me…when I hear a “whish” of movement as something short and hard zings through the air, almost hitting my head. My years of Weapons training propels me to action so fast I don’t have time to think about it – I instinctively duck down in response. I turn to see what it is in one fluid movement. A red handled dagger is whistling through the air in a straight line – directly toward Echo’s head.

“Get down,” I shout, but by the time the words come out of my mouth, she lets out a high pitched scream, and a sinking feeling settles in my stomach as I catch sight of the knife lodged directly in the middle of her forehead.

Guilt rushes through me, as blood pours down her face. The knife was sailing straight toward my head. If I hadn’t ducked down she wouldn’t have been hit. Echo wails louder as her hands fly up to her head, blood continuing to gush out, pouring at a rapid rate into her eyes and down her neck.

In one quick movement, I shove Pebble’s reins into Koree’s hands and take off running at full speed toward Echo, glancing at the elm tree on my way.

I stop for a split second and inspect the tree. Something doesn’t look right. Then I realize what it is.

Reese is gone.

**Chapter 18**

I can’t believe that Reese would stoop this low. I know the knife was intended for me...there is no denying the direct path it was taking. I reach Echo in a few minutes, grab her quickly by the shoulders and settle her on the ground, as gently as I can under the circumstances. She is screaming loudly, and blood is rushing out of the wound, staining her face a horrible shade of red.

I inspect the knife…it isn’t too deep. I think I can pull it out and stop the flow of blood. I bite my lower lip, thinking. If it is too deep, I know she could die. Still, I can’t leave it there until we get to Harcourt. She will surely die if I do. I toss the options back and forth in my brain. Do I pull it out? Or leave it? Pull it out? Leave it? I inspect it again. It is only about a half inch deep, maybe more. Her skull should offer enough protection…

I talk quickly, knowing I have to move fast. “I am going to have to pull this out,” I tell her as I rip at the bottom of my cloak, forming a make shift bandage. “It is going to hurt something fierce, but I will wrap it, and that will help, okay?”

Echo is letting out something between a scream and a moan – her hands flailing, blood drenching her blue cloak, turning it an odd color of reddish - purple. I reach for the knife – it has a ruby red handle and looks to be made of excellent steel. As I grip the handle, ready to pull it out, I am interrupted by loud yelling and what sounds like a scuffle.

Reese’s voice and some others that I don’t recognize catch my attention. I glance away from Echo, my eyes traveling toward the voices. Two Destroyers, clad in dark black cloaks with glistening ruby handled swords placed in sheaths at their waists are standing near the giant elm tree. They are holding Reese; each has a hand firmly on one of his arms. It doesn’t take much to figure out that it wasn’t Reese who threw the knife – it must have been one of the Destroyers.

My chest tightens in response and my breath comes in fast, rapid pants. Destroyers. Fear ripples through my body as Reese, pale-faced and sweating, blubbers incoherently. He points directly at Thann and Soot, then over to me.

“There…there…they are ….I….I…told you….they were here.” Fat, ugly tears trickle down his face and yellow snot is leaking out of his nose. My stomach recoils at the sight of him. “Three of them…three Ghosts,” he continues.

One of the Destroyers turns toward Thann and fluidly pulls out his sword, aiming it directly at him. He is taller and bigger than Thann, and all I can think of is decapitation – their favorite form of killing…of Thann’s golden, stunning head sliced off of his body and hitting the ground. Koree’s voice pulls me back into the moment – he has somehow made his way next to Thann, who stands like a statue…motionless and mute.

“They all have the Mark of Power,” he logically and bravely tells the Destroyers, his voice low and serious. His hands are splayed wide in a gesture I have never seen before. “We come from Bay City…they would have been destroyed by now if they didn’t have the Mark.”

The smaller, younger Destroyer, breaks out into throaty, dark, laughter. At this point, Koree is holding his hands out in front of them, as if to ward off their Power. Or maybe he is doing something to them. I have seen Koree’s Power before…is it enough to fend off the Destroyers? To save Thann and Soot? Soot is locked into place behind Thann and Koree, her face bearing the same empty expression as Thann’s. Gunter is behind all three of them, an expression of shock on his face. His eyes are bigger than I have ever seen them.

“Stupid kid,” the tall Destroyers snorts. “Your circus tricks won’t work on us.” The shorter Destroyer holds out his hand, directing it toward Koree, and moves it in a fluid, swirling motion. Koree is immediately yanked off of his feet, astonishment overtaking his usually solemn face as he soars high into the air, sailing across the clearing and landing roughly on his back by a thicket of brush.

I gasp as his head bounces off a large rock before he settles, immobile in the dust. His neck rests at an odd angle against the rock, and I worry that it might be broken. My first instinct is to rush over to him, but my attention is diverted, shock at what I hear sending a new wave of fear through my entire body.

The tall Destroyer lets out a throaty laugh, almost a cackle. When he speaks, his voice is deep and low like a dark tunnel closing in on me. On all of us. “There’s a new law…the Purity Law…all Light Skins are to be destroyed, no matter what.” He sneers at Thann and Soot, two innocent rabbits about to be eaten by wolves. I have heard enough…seen enough. A cold tingle trickles up my spine.

I quickly yank the knife out of Echo’s head, trying not to hurt her, but my focus is on the Destroyers, especially the one advancing on Thann. Echo squeals – a sound so menacing it causes me to shiver, goose bumps forming on my arms. I feel remorse, but only for an instant. Blood gushes out of the hole in her forehead, spurting like a bright red faucet. I sigh in relief. Just blood. No brains or tissue leak from the hole. I shove the rag I made from my cloak on her wound, none too gently and stand up.

I grip the bloody knife in my hand, take aim, and launch it at the tall Destroyer who is by now next to Thann, his sword waving perilously before him, a maniacal grin on his repulsive face.

The knife sails through the air, swift and clean, and my lips curl up, ever so slightly. Its trajectory is strong and firm and precise… hitting the Destroyer directly in his heart…a bull’s eye…exactly like I have been trained. He might have had a target on his chest, I think, as he falls to the ground with a thump, blood leaking out of the wound I made with his own knife. Or his partner’s.

His giant, red handled sword bounces onto the ground beside him. For a moment all is still and silent and then he lets out a final gurgle, a rattle from his chest that speaks in only the language of death. A look of surprise smears onto his face as blood trickles out of his mouth like a wiggling red snake trying to escape.

Immediately, my stomach turns queasy and foul, flip flopping as if an animal were inside of it. I have killed someone…really killed a human being. I bend over, my hands on my knees as my head swirls with dizziness. I am gagging repeatedly and then vomit spews from my mouth onto the ground. I am a killer. I am a killer. It is all I can think. I am a killer. My hands are shaking and the taste in my mouth is sour and burning. I am about ready to vomit again when I hear a loud roar.

I look up. A primeval growl erupts from the other Destroyer’s open lips as he turns away from Soot, his sword already pulled, shock registering on his face as he stares at his dead partner.

I know three things at this moment. I don’t have a lot of time. I need another weapon if I am going to save Thann and Soot. And, I know I will have to kill again. If I am to save them, I will have to kill the other Destroyer. My stomach roils in protest, and I pause for just a moment. Can I do it again? Can I kill the other Destroyer?

I push the thought away and conjure up the image of my bow and arrows in my bag… if I can just get to my bag. I rise up quickly, judging the distance between Pebble and me to be about twenty feet – I am sure I can make it.

I start running, pumping my feet as fast as I can, legs flying underneath me, ignoring the screaming pain in my knee. I reach Pebble, grab my bag and rip it off her back, my breath coming in ragged gasps. It tumbles to the ground. I am panting, bending over, my hands flailing with urgency as I untie the cords, searching frantically for my bow and arrows. My clothes and belongings spill out onto the ground like dead soldiers. Soldiers that I ignore.

I find my bow and instantly nock an arrow into it. I stand up and turn around, pulling back on the string, searching for my target…the Destroyer.

But before I can let go of the arrow…before I can even aim, the Destroyer draws his sword, ripping it in one swift movement across Soot’s neck.

My arrow drops to the ground and I freeze, watching in helpless horror as her head hits the ground, blood spraying out like a torrential red rainstorm, drenching the Destroyer, the tree, Reese, Gunter, and especially Thann, who still hasn’t moved.

I can’t seem to breathe, as I almost collapse onto the ground. But something inside me surges like a thunderstorm, a primitive scream threatening to explode from my lungs, my mouth, my entire body… an animalistic roar of fury and rage and sickness.

Soot’s reddish hair and the face I barely got to know are gone – mottled and covered in blood, face down in the dirt. Then, with a sickening thud, her body follows, hitting the ground and landing beside her head, two pieces of a person lying side by side, like twins separated at birth, never to be joined again.

**Chapter 19**

My stomach is somersaulting out of control. My hands tremble…tremble…with my bow shaking in perfect rhythm with them, except they are useless and lifeless. Lifeless. Like Soot. Soot. Soot is dead. I keep replaying it in my mind.

Anger shoots through my body like bolts of lightning. Soot is dead. Soot is dead. She was talking a few minutes ago, and now she is dead. I take a fleeting look at the two distinct pieces of her body and hate for the Destroyer…for all Destroyers and Siv Gareth himself, rise up inside of me like an inferno out of control.

Thann. Thann. Thann. Thann. I say his name over and over in my head, as if I need to hear it to thrust me into action. He is still standing, immobilized with a blank stare on his face like a slate that has been wiped clean.

The sole Destroyer releases another roar, so loud my ears buzz. He lunges forward, one precise step after the next, swinging his crimson stained sword back and forth, poking and jabbing as he moves methodically, terrifyingly toward Thann, a crazed expression overtaking his face.

My hands are still shaking, trembling as if I were freezing from the cold. I nock anther arrow into my bow, the string vibrating from my own quivering. Odd, I think…quivering. I just pulled an arrow from my quiver and I am quivering. I shake my head. *Why would I be thinking such things now?* Everything before me seems to slow down…to move with exaggeration. Each step the Destroyer takes, each swinging of his sword takes a minute, an hour, a day…I can’t be sure.

But then I think of Thann…I see Thann before me…motionless, expressionless, and helpless, the Destroyer advancing, perhaps slowly, but definitely advancing. If he reaches Thann…I know what will happen. I breathe deeply, narrow my eyes, aim, and pull the string back. I let the arrow go.

I close my eyes, then, because I know I can’t watch Thann die. I can’t witness his spectacular head separate from his body. Like Soot’s. I keep my eyes closed tightly, hearing the arrow hiss through the air, knowing deep down that I have failed Thann, like I failed Soot.

Someone else needs to look...to see where the arrow went. Because I can’t. I cannot do it anymore. I exhale. And inhale. With a chest so tight it feels like it might explode, that each breath I take is an earthquake, a storm, a hurricane.

But it is deathly, strangely, eerily quiet for several seconds…the only sound a hiss and then a resounding whump.

Could it be?

Slowly, I open one eye, just barely enough for the grisly scene before me to unveil. The arrow has hit the Destroyer directly in his left eye – it is no surprise that my aim was off. He shrieks then, a loud, horrible sound, like an animal wailing. He drops to his knees and pulls both of his hands to his eye, yanking at the arrow. Fat, thick sheets of blood spurt out of his eye, washing his face in a scarlet liquid that pleases me in a way I never thought possible. My lips curve up in response.

I narrow my eyes and bite my lower lip as I grab another arrow and nock it into place on the string. I feel my target as I aim…the beating of his brutal heart. My eyes pierce his black cloak as my hands turn to ice, frozen in place. The trembling is gone now as I focus on my kneeling subject…the man who just cut off a young girl’s head, killing her because she had Light Skin. Like Thann’s. Like mine.

I breathe in and out, focused…focused…focused on two things. His heart. The Destroyer’s still beating heart. And Soot’s heart that will never beat again.

I pull back and release the arrow. It flies in a solid arc and lands with a sickening thump in the center of the Destroyer’s chest. He is motionless for a split second, then falls over as if he were a bowling pin being hit suddenly by a heavy ball, his hands still trying to grasp the arrow in his eye.

I lower my bow, and for a moment I am rooted in place, like a tree that wants to move but can’t. I have killed again, and it seems wrong on some level, despite all of my training…in spite of the fact that Soot was killed, and Thann was about to be. She was annihilated, broken into two distinct pieces. Destroyed. But Thann…my lips curl up in response. Gloriously, Thann is still alive.

I am shaken from staring at the ghastly scene before me by a sniffling sound, familiar yet strange. I slowly turn my head in the direction of the sound. It is Reese. Blood has sprayed over his red cloak and is misting his once dark face as he continues to sob like a snotty two-year old. Hate like I have never known bubbles up inside of me. I march over to him.

“I should put an arrow through your head, you coward.” I spit out. “You…you bagger.” I can’t think of enough words to hurl at him, so instead I blaze my hand out and slap him across the face. My hand leaves an almost perfect print on his cheek, a pink print outlined in traces of red blood. Echo’s blood mixing with sprays of what can only be Soot’s.

My hand stings from the strike, pins and needles poking at it like a nagging wife. This is nothing I learned in Weapons. “You are a bully of the worst kind,” I shout at him. He brings his hand up to his face, as if he has been burned, poisoned, or worse. Just for a fleeting moment we stare at each other, the years passing between us… and for a split second I wonder if we could be friends again, if there is any goodness left in Reese.

But his eyes turn black, cloudy storms that glisten with a darkness I will never understand. He gradually brings both of his hands up then, and a grin appears on his face, so nasty and evil I know that he is getting ready to use his Power.

At that moment I know for the first time that his Power is dark - as evil as Siv Gareth’s, the Destroyers...and the entire Alliance. He splays his fingers, pointing them toward me.

I am determined now…that Reese will not get the best of me. Ever again. I concentrate, deeply, thinking of a canyon…blocking him, desperately trying to stop him from hurting me. Like he has so many times before.

Suddenly, I am lifted off my feet, but just for a moment. I fight against it – his dark Power. I blaze my amber eyes into his black ones, and we tangle on some level that cannot be explained…it is beyond physical.

With a soft thud I land on the earth, my feet settling with a surety I didn’t know I had. I leer at him, taunting him in my own way, and he scrunches up his face into a tight ball. I wonder how someone can be so handsome and so ugly at the same time.

Reese crouches and holds his hands out in front of his body – a perfect hand-to-hand combat position. But before he can attack, I lunge forward at him like I did with the Brown Cloakers – an animal out of control. My arms are flailing… I am kicking, screaming and hating him more than I knew possible. Spit flies from my mouth as I scream his name over and over again. “REESE! REESE! REESE!”

If Bello were here she would discipline me harshly for not following proper procedure. But I am beyond that now. I have killed, not once, but twice, and I know it wouldn’t take much for me to kill Reese, too.

Reese stands transfixed for the slightest second, his dark eyes wide, and just like the Brown Cloakers, he retreats. He turns and runs, like the coward I know he is…into the trees and rocks and whatever else is beyond. As his fleeing body disappears from view, all I care about is that he is stays away from me. And forever wouldn’t be long enough.

**Chapter 20**

I stare into the distance for a few minutes, gaining control of myself. Then, as if I hadn’t just watched Soot die, killed two Destroyers, and tangled with Reese and his dark Power, I take off at full speed toward Echo, my feet thumping on the hard packed earth.

She is just as I had left her, and I kneel down beside her. Immediately I notice the bandage I made for her has fallen to the ground, mixing blood with dirt. I can’t use it again – the risk of infection is too high. I place both of my hands on her forehead, pressing down onto the open wound, trying not to hurt her but knowing that pressure is the only way to stop the blood from flowing. Her blue, fear filled eyes find mine as blood continues to pour down her face.

“Snock, it’s bad, isn’t it?” she asks, her voice raspy.

“No…head wounds just bleed a lot,” I tell her, my voice like Entho’s…sure and confident. I push my hand onto the hole in her head harder as deep red liquid spills over my hands. “You’ll be fine.”

“How do you know?” she asks, her voice quavering.

“My dad is a healer. He taught me. We just need to stop this blood from flowing or we will have a problem.”

“Can you do that?”

“Of course…basic first aid.”

“Okay.” She says it more like a question than a response.

I keep my hands pressing down on her forehead. “She’s losing a lot of blood. I need more rags,” I yell out to anyone, realizing that “anyone” would have to be Gunter. My fingers and hands continue to swim in the scarlet liquid spewing out of Echo’s head.

Footsteps on the soft dirt cause my eyes to lift. Gunter is running toward me, ripping at his cloak as he moves. In different times I might have laughed at how comical he looks, hopping and tearing as he runs. He stops next to me and shoves a huge piece of red cloth at me – the front half of his cloak is missing, and his dark legs poke out like long skinny sausages.

I fold the piece of his cloak into a long bandage and wrap it tightly around Echo’s head, making a knot on the side.

“Thanks,” I tell him as I drop to the ground, settling her head into my lap. “Get me something soft to prop her head up, to help stop the flow of blood.”

“I’m on it.” Gunter races to his Crimson and brings back his matching red bag. Together we gently place the bag under her head. Blood continues to leak out of the bandage, but it is slowing. I let out a gigantic breath.

Echo’s blood has leached onto my cloak, and my hands are leaking red like spilled wine. “I need to check on Koree,” I tell Gunter, wiping my hands on my cloak. “Stay with her, try to keep the bleeding down. If you need to, put pressure on the wound.” Gunter is so white and pale that he almost looks like a Light Skin.

“Sure,” he squawks, fear in his almost black eyes. I don’t have time to worry whether or not he can handle it. Koree’s neck flashes into my mind. I rush toward him, noticing that Thann is still locked in place beside the three dead bodies – the two Destroyers and Soot. I will deal with him next.

I reach Koree and perform a quick assessment. I run my fingers along his neck and let out a sigh of relief when I realize it is just bruised and not broken. I take his wrist in my fingers and count his heartbeats like Entho taught me. I count 59 in one minute…not bad. He is breathing, shallow and slow, but his eyes are closed. I shake him. “Koree, wake up.” He doesn’t respond. I shake him more roughly, time and again, but he fails to wake up, to open his eyes. Is he under a spell like Thann?

I survey the countryside, looking for anything aromatic, something that could wake him up. I spot a sage brush, rush over and pluck off a strand of it. I run back to Koree, shove it under his nose as I continue to shake him.

Nothing happens. I shake him, calling out to him as I rub the sage back and forth. “Koree, Koree, wake up,” I shout, running my hands on his muscled, firm shoulder. This continues, and frustration overrides every nerve in my body. I bite back tears, not knowing how much more I can take. I want to curl up in a ball and let the tears out…let someone else deal with all of this. I long for Entho…he would take over. I tamp back more tears at the thought of Entho. Then, I swallow. A deep hard swallow that seems to have words of its own… Entho taught me better than this.

I stand up, realizing I need to just let Koree be…I can’t do anything more to help him at the moment, but maybe I can help Thann. I twirl away from him, beginning to sprint toward Thann when I hear a soft moaning sound, like one from an injured animal. I rotate around and kneel back down as Koree’s eyelids quiver, ever so slightly. He groans loudly now. I pull him up a little.

He is strong and muscled, but leaner than Thann. Still, I strain to prop him up, wishing I could see his green eyes, hear him ask me question after question in that serious voice of his. I watch him closely, noticing him for the first time. I reach out and touch his copper curls, push them away from his quivering eyes. His eyes open wide, glazed and green.

“Where….what….”

“I think you have a concussion….

“Thann!” he yells, his hoarse, panicked voice overriding mine as he jumps up rapidly. His eyes are glassy emeralds darting left and right. I stand as fast as I can, grab by him by the shoulders so he won’t fall.

“He is alive….Thann is alive, okay?” I grip his shoulders more firmly, meet him face to face and stare intently into his eyes

“Where?” He pulls his hand up to his neck, rubbing at it fitfully. “Where…is….Thann?” His eyes land on mine, puzzled.

“By the tree. We need to get to the others…can you walk?” I ask him.

“Uh, yeah…I guess.” He swallows, then the panicked expression returns. “Where is he…where is Thann?” he asks again. I hope this doesn’t go on for too long.

“By the elm tree…he is alive but I need to get you to the others so I can help him, okay?” I speak slowly.

This seems to make sense to him. He nods his head in understanding and I place his arm over my shoulder. I struggle to hold his weight as we begin an unsteady walk toward Echo and Gunter. Every step feels like I am treading through quicksand with a thousand pound weight on my back. Drops of sweat form on my forehead and drip down into my eyes.

After a while I adjust to his weight and we begin to make better time. I try to put everything out of my mind…Koree’s weight on me, my still aching knee, Echo’s wound, Soot’s death. Killing the Destroyers. As we near the elm tree, though, Koree suddenly stops, leaning heavily against me, his eyes wide. I stumble, barely able to hold him up.

His jaw drops and his eyes pop open wide as he surveys the gory scene. “What…happened?” His voice is low, accusing…more serious than I have ever heard it. *Is he blaming me?*

“They got her…the Destroyers…killed her.” My words come out hollow and weak.

Koree falls down to his knees, his eyes fixated on Soot…her head and body separated like a broken doll that can’t be repaired, blood surrounding her like red glue that failed to work. “No…no…no,” he wails. He beats his fists on the ground. “Not again…just like her…”

I don’t understand what he is saying, and I don’t know what to do*. Should I comfort him? Leave him be?* “I…I tried…I just wasn’t fast enough.”

Koree is shaking, almost violently. A darkness settles over him, like a black brewing storm cloud. His eyes move over to the dead Destroyers and his voice is ice. “Who killed them…the Destroyers?”

I hesitate, hanging my head, not sure what his reaction will be. “Me,” I tell him, swallowing deeply then biting at the inside of my cheek. Memories of killing the Destroyers…of watching helplessly as Soot was killed overtake me, and tears suddenly erupt from my eyes and quietly stream down my face. I wipe them with blood stained hands, and morbidly watch as they mix with blood and turn pink, dropping to the ground. Pink tears. Pink tears. Pink tears. It is all I can think of…pink tears.

Koree’s voice is hoarse, ragged as it interrupts my monotonous thoughts. “Good,” he murmurs between clenched teeth. “I hate them.” He looks up at me, a fire in his eyes I have never noticed before. A green fire. To go with pink tears.

He places his head in his hands and breathes deeply. In and out. In and out. He stays that way for a while, and I let him. At last he looks up and tells me, “This isn’t helping. We need to get going.” His sharp green eyes fixate on mine.

“I know.” A stillness settles between us for a few minutes as we gaze into each others’ eyes. A shiver runs up my spine, a pleasant shiver…something I have never experienced before.

“You need help up?” I ask him, breaking the silence. He nods his head, as if speaking is too much work. I move behind him and pull at his armpits, heaving his body upward. I throw his arm back around my shoulder, and we begin trudging away, step by slow step…away from Soot and the Destroyers…away from death.

**Chapter 21**

I gently pull Koree’s arm off of my shoulder and settle him to the ground next to Echo, who is pale, but the bleeding from her wound has subsided. Blood trickles down her face like painted rivers of red and her blue eyes travel to mine, as if for encouragement.

“You’re looking better,” I tell her.

“Yeah, right,” she answers sarcastically. But other than that she is quiet.
Gunter is sitting by her, his knees pulled up, and the color has returned to his face. Every now and then he dabs at her forehead with a piece of his torn cloak.

Red on red on blue, I think, remembering the little bit of history I had when I was small...before the Alliance was formed. Before the Purification Law. Before Weapons.

I remember studying the pictures of our country’s flag – the red, white, and blue that represented a thriving country. But now it has dwindled to a few cities and townships. There is a new flag now…purple and black…with the words “Alliance” formed out of block letters and a giant Lav flying in the background.

I close my eyes and breathe deeply. I am tired, beyond thirsty again, and my stomach feels like it is spinning in circles. But, I wobble over to Pebble, pick up my belongings that had spilled out of my bag and carefully tie it back up. Then I drag it over to Koree, propping him up against it.

“Thanks,” he tells me in a slurry, tired voice. Our eyes meet again, and I wonder if he is trying to tell me something. “You look…” he says but then swiftly stops.

“What?” I ask, defensively. Of all the people I have met today, Koree seems the least likely to make fun of me or call me a Ghost. But I am sure that is what he was about to say.

“Nice…” he finishes as his lips curl up, ever so slightly. The dimple on his cheek barely appears.

“Oh,” I quietly answer, confused by what he said. I wonder what “nice” means. Am I a nice person? Do I look nice covered in blood? Is red a nice color on me? Maybe Koree thinks all Light Skins look nice. Maybe he tells Thann he looks nice all of the time. No, I doubt that. “Thanks,” I answer in a monotone. I have never been told I look nice by anyone except Entho, and he is my dad so that doesn’t count.

My heart is racing as I plop to the ground next to him. I keep hearing Koree telling me that I look nice. I glance over at him, and his glassy green eyes meet mine. I bite my lower lip, not knowing what to say, just as his eyes close.

“Koree,” I snap. “Koree, open your eyes!”

He slowly opens his eyes. “What,” he grins.

“You have to stay awake, okay?”

The smile disappears from his face. “I was dreaming of a beautiful girl.”

My heart falls to my stomach. He must be delusional. Of course he is. That is why he told me I looked nice. “You have a concussion. If you fall asleep it could be dangerous.”

“Okay, healer. I’ll do as you say.”

“I am not a healer,” I weakly answer as I watch him intently for a few minutes, making sure his eyes stay open. Then I reach for the bottom of my cloak, where it is ripped but blood free and wipe my forehead, dabbing at the sweat that has trickled down my face. Gunter, who is kneeling next to Echo, hands me a water bag, perfect red hand prints on the sides…just like Reese’s face after I slapped him.

“Here, looks like you could use this,” Gunter tells me.

“Thanks. You are pretty good at all of this for a Red Cloaker.”

“I’m learning fast,” he answers, smiling hugely as his eyes form into horizontal slits.

At the mention of Red Cloakers, I remember Reese. I turn my head in all directions, tensed, searching for him. “Have you seen Reese?” I ask Gunter.

“Nope.”

“Good.” I tip the water bag back– the cool water streams down my throat like liquid candy. As I greedily guzzle it, quenching my seemingly endless thirst, I wonder if this day can get any worse.

“I did what you said….I put my hands on the…hole…and…and…the bleeding is stopping.” His hands are bright red, as if he has been squishing juicy red berries. Gunter leans back on his legs, his dark eyes flashing at me.

“Excellent…now you need to watch Koree. Make sure he doesn’t fall asleep. I think he has a concussion…..shake him, rub this under his nose if you have to….keep him talking….” I pull some sage out of my pocket and shove it at him.

“Righto,” Gunter answers, fiddling with the sage, his eyes now cast downward as if the simple plant held all the answers to our problems. “I’m on it,” he adds. But his voice lacks conviction.

I breathe deeply, selfishly sucking in air like sweet ocean waves and sit with Gunter silently for a few minutes, gathering myself together. Then, as if a fire has erupted underneath me, I jump up and take off running as fast as I can toward Thann.

It only takes a few minutes to reach him, my feet digging into the earth as the gruesome scene before me unfolds. I halt, smelling the acrid air, breathing remnants of blood and life and death into my lungs. My mind freezes at the view before me… two bodies, unmoving and bloody, with arrows sticking out of their chests…and two distinct pieces of Soot – all drowning in an ocean of blood.

Thann is still entrenched in the same spot, the only remnant of life, staring blankly at nothing. I reach my arms around him. “Thann,” I yell as loudly as I can. Nothing happens. “Thann, Thann, Thann,” I scream over and over until my voice is hoarse.

I grasp him, try to turn him around. Nothing…he is solid, like a statue, definitely too big for me to manhandle. I think of the Thann who showed up at Entho’s clinic, the Thann who raced his dragon around with two girls, the Thann with a perpetual smile on his face, and I swallow back tears of frustration. Bitterness burns my already raw throat. That Thann seems to have disappeared.

Thoughts of what to do with him swirl in my mind…we can leave him here and come back for him later. Or, maybe Gunter and I can rest for a while and then carry him back and put him on a dragon. Or bring a dragon over here. I size up Thann. He is huge. I suppose together Gunter and I can lift him onto a dragon.

I am jolted out of my thoughts as I feel Thann soften, just a little. I grab his arm, and his body moves. “Thann, follow me, come with me,” I say softly. His eyes are empty and hollow, but he allows me to hold his arm. I let out a deep breath as he takes a step with me. We walk slowly, like an old couple taking a stroll. Thankfully, Thann doesn’t need to lean on me like Koree did, only to be guided.

Slowly, step over step we traipse toward the others, and when we arrive, I settle him next to Koree and Echo. He sits obediently, still staring into space, his golden eyes blank, like coins or marbles. I look at Gunter, who is still holding the sage in his hands, rubbing his thumbs over it time and again. Pieces of the sage fall to the ground, but he doesn’t seem to notice. He stares straight ahead, speechless and mute…not too different than Thann.

“I am too tired to go on,” I tell him. Or all of them. Or none of them. Or maybe just myself…as I fall to the ground on my back, staring open eyed at the still blue sky spattered with soft, puffy clouds…clouds like pillows that I can lean against…if only for a moment.

**Chapter 22**

It is Gunter who eventually breaks the still silence, his voice like shattering glass. “We need to clean up. And get going.” I don’t move…don’t answer as his voice attacks me…an army of weaponless soldiers. “Come on, get up. We need to get some fresh clothes.” He is standing now, shadowing over me. He leans down then and clasps my hand in his, pulls on it.

He is giving me a hand up…something that a friend would do. A friend. Gunter is my friend. I have made a friend. I breathe deeply, savoring the feeling…the first time since I was six years old. Gunter pulls me to my feet, and I stand shakily. “Thanks,” I tell him.

“No biggie,” he answers. “But we better get going.”

“I know.” I sigh deeply and shuffle over to Pebble, stop and lean against her. She is warm and alive. Her stomach moves in and out with each breath, and she doesn’t seem to have a care in the world. She reaches her head around, looks at me with soulful black eyes, and then she nudges me as if she is telling me to get my act together. “Okay, okay,” I mumble to her, patting her gently on the head. She turns her mouth up, and I swear if dragons could smile, she just did. I can’t help but laugh at her.

I reach into my bag, poking around for a clean cloak, but instead something familiar brushes against my fingers…something I know I didn’t pack. I snatch it out of my bag – it is leather and black and heavenly…something I have seen my entire life... Entho’s healing case. There is a note attached to it in his scribbly writing.

**Teak,**

**I am so proud of you. You have become such a talented healer. I am sending my case with you should you need it. You will know what to do with everything in it.**

**All my love,**

**Dad**

I grab the case greedily and open it up as Entho’s note falls back into my bag. Ahhh, just what I need. I mix a brew of white willow bark, curcumin, ginger, and a drop of pain killer in Reese’s water bag, which I picked up off of the ground. I rush over to Echo. “Here, I am going to have you drink this…it tastes terrible, but it will take the pain away.”

“Okay…sure,” she answers. Her blue eyes are almost milky. I put the water bag up to her lips; she coughs, gags, and spits. “Holy dragon tits, that tastes terrible,” she complains as she wipes her mouth. I stifle a laugh, and we try again. This time she gags some down. I stay with her until the bag is emptied.

I search for Koree’s water bag and find it hanging off his Metallic dragon. It is half full. Good enough for now. I mix a different brew of St. John’s Wort, skullcap, ginkgo, and capsicum…taking each bottle tenderly out of the case and thinking of Entho, remembering every time I have seen him do the same thing.

I trot over to Koree and I tell him what I told Echo. He takes the brew willingly. He does grimace in disgust, squishing up his face and wrinkling his nose, which makes me want to laugh for some reason. His green eyes are glassy, and his pupils are dilated. “The pounding in your head will stop soon.” I tell him, remembering my own concussion not too long ago.

“Thanks,” he tells me, and a lopsided grin sprouts on his face. I can’t help but stare at him again, gawking at the dimple that pops out of his cheek. I blink my eyes. “Uh, I better get going.”

“Okay,” he answers. I turn away from him, wondering why I don’t want to leave him.

I find Gunter standing by his dragon, holding a fresh red cloak. “You ready?” he asks.

“Yes,” I reply. “Let’s go.”

Finally, I feel like I can breathe, like maybe we are all going to be fine. I put the healing case back in my bag, find another cloak and start walking toward the stream with Gunter by my side when I hear Koree call for me.

“Teak…no red.” I turn to him, startled. I size him up quickly. He is having a difficult time talking, his words coming out in a slur, but he still seems coherent…aware. “My bag…get some tunics and pants.”

“No red?” I ask, confused.

“Don’t want to…be…noticed,” he wheezes.

“Okay,” I tell him, bewildered. I don’t know if he is delusional or actually knows what he is talking about…just like when he told me I looked nice. I puzzle over Koree for a few minutes, feeling my stomach do a flip flop when I turn back and find his green eyes blazing at me, a glassy green fire. I stare back at him for a few minutes and that same shiver runs up my spine and my heart races…not from fear or anger but something pleasant like waiting for a birthday present. Only better.

Hesitantly, I turn from Koree and I take a few steps toward his Metallic and dig out two beige tunics and two sets of pants from his bag. As I do, I breathe in Koree’s masculine smell – musk and woods and a tinge of sweat. I fight back the urge to stand there and just drink it in…smelling it and savoring it like slowly sipping a cup of Entho’s tea.

“Teak…come on!” Gunter’s voice snaps me out of it. “Geez, it’s like you’ve never seen a guy’s clothes or something.”

“Well, I haven’t,” I seriously answer, turning my attention to him. He sniggers, and I laugh in return. “I have no sibs, you know, and the boys at Weapons are creepy.”

“Like Reese?”

“Yeah, only some worse.”

“Holy snock,” he answers, shock on his creamy, dark face. “That’s rough.”

“You have no idea,” I answer as Gunter and I take the long route to the stream – neither of us even mentions avoiding the dead bodies – we just do it. The gurgling stream greets us, and we wash off, watching the blood from our hands mix with the water, turning it a horrid shade of reddish-pink…just like my tears. It trickles away, swirling slowly, almost methodically, and then returns to its original clear bluish-green color again.

I lean down and rinse the cool water over my face, splashing like a child at a pool, the droplets trickling onto my lips. I lick them, tasting the sweetness of each drop. Then I plunk my entire head into the stream, cleansing not only my hair, but the entire day away. I reach my head back then, squeezing the water out of my hair and take what feels like the first real breath I have had in hours.

Gunter has done the same, and his dark head pops up from the stream, splaying water as he shakes his head like a dog. I focus on his dark hair…his dark skin. My head begins to spin. There might be other Destroyers on the way to Harcourt – that is what Koree was trying to get across to me. If the Purity Law really passed, that means there might be Destroyers searching for Light Skins. Like me. Like Thann.

The bank of the stream is sandy with bits of rock and wood scattered about. There are no real plants or life that I can find. But water filters into a little pool at the edge of the stream, and it forms into dark, loamy mud. Black, gooey mud. Mud…I ponder the thought. Black mud.

I rush behind a tree and slip into Koree’s beige tunic and pants, which are way too baggy for me, hanging off of me as if I were a child playing dress-up. I emerge and find Gunter swimming in Koree’s clothes as well; he looks so silly I almost bust up laughing at the sight of him. “Let’s go find something to use for belts, okay?”

“Sure…I guess I’m the only skinny guy around here.” He shoots me a crooked grin. We both grab the waists of our way too large pants and start walking back to the others. When we reach our spot I search around and find some rope on one of the saddles. I travel back to my bag, dig for something that might cut the rope and discover that there are three ivory handled daggers in it. Three daggers that I didn’t pack*. More gifts from Entho?*

I cut a belt for Gunter and myself, and we both tie them around our waists, rolling up the pants legs so they don’t drag the ground. Finished, I look over at Gunter, my eyes boring into his. “Go fill everyone’s water bags,” I tell him, reverently placing the dagger back in my bag. “Make sure you are upstream of where we washed up.”

“Uhh, okay,” he answers as he gathers the water bags and starts off toward the stream.

“Oh, and when you’re done, bring back as much of that black mud as you can,” I call out to him. “Thann and I are getting ready to become Dark Skins.”

**Chapter 23**

I locate Entho’s healing case again and find exactly what I am looking for – iodine. I also find an old undershirt that I packed and take it with me. Then I tiptoe over to Thann; I don’t want to startle him. When I speak, it is if I am talking to a small child or infant, and I don’t even know if what I say registers in his brain.

“I am going to put this on you to make your skin darker…in case we come across other Destroyers.” I want to explain about the new Purity Law…the danger we are in, but I end up pouring iodine on my old shirt and just wiping it on his face and hands. He remains motionless, unmoving as he turns an odd color of orange-ish-brown, but at least it isn’t white. I then do the same with myself, the sharp medicine smell burning my nostrils as I continue to wipe the iodine on my body, wincing at the sting of it on my skin, especially near my eyes.

Gunter returns with the dark, gooey river mud piled into his old cloak.

“What in the blazes do you want this for?” he asks.

“Watch and see,” I tell him as I reach my hand into the mud, feeling it squish between my fingers, and rub it in my hair, hoping the dark mud will cover up the lightness of it. It feels dirty and smelly and heavy, weighing down my head. I don’t like it, but the thought of a sword cutting my head off doesn’t sound too appealing, either. I do the same to Thann. Once again, he doesn’t respond. I worry about him. If the iodine and mud didn’t bring him out of shock, I have no idea what will.

Koree is calling to me again, his voice thin and raspy, so unlike the Koree I first met. “Teak…”

I rush over to him, prop his head up a bit, his copper curls glistening with sweat as the sun beats down on his face. “The Destroyers….you’ve got to get rid of them…and Soot.” I have no idea what he is talking about.

“Get rid of the Destroyers…Soot? How?”

Koree motions me to come closer with his finger, moving it slowly back and forth. I kneel down. I am so close to him I can feel his breath on my face as he talks to me – sweet and minty and salty. And very masculine. His jaw is firm and the slightest amount of stubble scatters his face. His green eyes glisten as he whispers, so quietly that I can barely hear him. “Have the dragons burn them.” He stops then, taking in a huge breath. “Send their bones down the stream…” He closes his eyes as sweat continues to drip down his forehead.

“The dragons…they can still breathe fire?”

He nods his head.

“How…how do I get them to do it?”

He swallows again, his dry lips making contact with each other. For a moment I am fascinated by his lips. They are neither full nor thin, and when he purses them, he seems to do it with a movement that is gentle, purposeful. He answers with a hoarse voice, “Say breavo…in their ears.” With that, he falls back against my bag, exhausted. But two more words escape the lips I can’t seem to stop staring at. “Whisper it.”

For some reason I hesitate to leave, staying a little too long and watching his chest move up and down, staring at his curls falling down onto his forehead, and his reddish-brown eyelashes that cover those green, piercing eyes.

“Teak…come…on!” Gunter snaps me out of it.

“I am coming,” I call out as I scurry over to Pebble and Koree’s Metallic, taking one last glance back at Koree. “Gunter, bring a dragon,” I yell. “Or two,” I take the dragons by the reins and lead them over to the dead Destroyers and Soot. All of a sudden getting rid of them makes sense to me.

Gunter arrives with another Metallic and an Ebony. I wonder if four dragons will be enough to burn the bodies. *Burn the bodies? How has my life come to this?* I shake my head, closing my eyes for just a moment. *Focus. I need to focus.* I glance over at Gunter – his face is pinched into a tight ball.

We line the dragons up in a row, incinerators or cremators of the most unholy sort. They stand obediently and I think they surely must have some knowledge of what is going on. I peer into Pebble’s eyes. She blinks them placidly, as if she stands before dead, brutalized bodies every day. I breathe deeply before I traipse to the dragons, whispering , “Breavo” in each one’s ears, just as Koree told me to. Instantly, flames shoot out of the dragons’ mouths, red and golden fire, so hot that Gunter and I have to back off, covering our faces with our elbows.

The huge elm tree disintegrates first…a black waterfall dropping to the earth with a crackling crash. Next, the two dead Destroyers ignite. I watch, fascinated, feeling an odd satisfaction at seeing them awash in flames. I wonder if Koree can see them. “I hate them,” he said to me. What could have happened in his life for him to hate Destroyers so much? It’s not like he is a Light Skin.

My heart clenches into a tight ball when Soot’s body starts to burn. Sadness overtakes me, the same desperate feeling I had when I watched Canto enter the building…only worse. I have witnessed this death firsthand. I stare at what is left of Soot, watch as flames engulf the ragged pieces of her body while she disappears from us. “She deserved better,” I say to Gunter. “I failed.” There is nothing but rawness, an open hole inside of me.

“Um…yeah,” Gunter answers. “We all failed…I should have done something.”

I stare at him for a moment. “Like what?” I ask.

“I don’t know. I’ve never had anything like this happen…snock, I’m a Red Cloaker.”

“Me, too.”

“But you were….were…so smash. You killed those guys…the Destroyers.” He turns his body toward mine as the flames behind us cast a red shadow over him. “You saved Thann. I watched you save his life…I didn’t do a thing.”

We both stare straight ahead, mute and yet frozen amid the most heat I have ever felt in my life. Gold and red flames continue to spew out of the dragons’ mouths, a furnace that seems to get hotter by the second. I take a tentative step back. So does Gunter. “I was trained for it…you weren’t.” My words, a late answer, come out of nowhere. I am not sure if he even hears me.

Gunter turns his body toward mine again, sweat pouring off his forehead, the reddish light reflecting eerily on his dark skin. He narrows his eyes and takes my hand, squeezes it. Our eyes meet…dark against light as cinders and ash circle around us…black snowflakes falling from the sky. Another wave of heat rolls over us, and we both step backward again, still grasping hands.

The dragons continue to breathe fire, off and on, starting and stopping, spitting flames, alternating like children taking turns at a game. Time seems suspended, like watching a building burn down. Gunter and I keep stepping back, away from the waves of heat and smoke that continue to roll toward us.

And then a roar…the loudest sound I have ever heard, pierces the already war ravaged countryside. I instinctively know it is the fire…that it is spreading. I place my hands over my ears, stepping backward rapidly, but I can’t seem to stop staring at the enormous flames. The dragons are moving back as well, retreating with me. Within a couple of minutes I can barely see in front of me. Or beside me. I am blinded by the heat, the fire raging like it has a mind of its own.

I retreat more, turning now and running at full speed. I hope that Gunter does the same. I scout around, searching for him, scanning the countryside, the fire, any place I think he can be. Heat like I have never experienced continues to roll over me. But I can’t seem to find him. “Gunter!” I yell loudly, hoping that he can hear me. “Gunter…where *are* you?”

Panicked, I search for Gunter but can’t find him through the haze and flames. I am coughing now, holding my hand over my mouth as soot and ash shoot into my eyes, mixing like poison with the remnants of iodine that are dripping into them. I can barely see ahead of me, my eyes are stinging, and my lungs are burning as if there is a fire inside of my chest. Hot mud drips down onto my cheeks, and I brush it away as I pull further back from the dragons, not knowing how to make them stop. *Why didn’t I ask Koree how to make them stop?*

“Gunter,” I am screeching now, almost hysterical. I can’t bear the thought of Gunter getting burned, or even worse, finding him dead. I can’t fail another person.

“Gunter…Gunter,” I continue to yell, each breath an effort. I turn from the fire, running at full speed, each step bringing a shade of coolness, air that I can actually breathe. I cough again and again as I turn around, surveying the darkened, smoky countryside for Gunter.

My heart is beating fast, like a rabbit’s thumping foot, over and over again. Through the smoke I can see the injured group by the other dragons and they appear to be fine. I continue searching, each step an effort. I call out for Gunter again, louder this time. “GUNTER!!”

I approach a large rock, a silvery boulder next to a group of three saplings, which are withering from the heat. I hear something…coughing or sniffling. Could it be Gunter? Maybe it is just Reese.

I round the corner of the boulder and find Gunter, huddled into a tight ball. Instantly, my shoulders relax, and I breathe out, relief spewing from me like a fresh summer breeze. I kneel down next to him, put my arm around his shoulders. “Are you okay?” I ask, watching as tears stream down his soot stained face, like someone had brushed swirling lines down his cheeks.

“I…I…just can’t….take…any more…” he answers, wiping at his face. I plop down next to him.

“I know.”

Gunter and I huddle together, his wiry frame leaning against mine, his head between his knees. It might be minutes or it might be hours that we stay this way. I don’t know if I doze off or if I just fall into a daze, but I finally open my eyes to find Gunter staring at me, his eyes wide for a change. I breathe deeply, turning to him.

“What?” I ask him.

He hesitates. “Nothing.” But he is staring oddly at me. And then he starts laughing, a maniacal, hysterical laugh. “You look….you look…like…. a….dirty Brown Cloaker!” he snickers as he grabs his stomach and falls to the ground laughing.

I study my hands, stained a terrible yellow orange, dabbled with soot and the black mud of my hair draping down my shoulders. I can only imagine that my face appears to be the same way. I stare at Gunter. He, too, is covered in soot, his beige tunic and pants singed, dark hair blacker than it should be,

“So do you,” I say in defense. The entire day is welling up inside of me like a volcano about to erupt…and I don’t know which way it will spew.

My chest heaves up and down, every nerve inside me ragged with emotion. Gunter, lying on the ground, squints his eyes up at me. I stare at him, the mess he has become, and something inside me unleashes – the last thing I would have expected. It starts as a giggle that I can’t seem to control, a ridiculous reaction to what he said, but then it crescendos into frenzied laughter, matching his own like two singers in harmony.

But even as I laugh, a feeling so rare and precious I never want it to end, a piece of me wants to take off running – terrible memories of hiding behind a boulder with friends taking over. Even though I want to stop time, to trap it in a can or a jar and keep it like this forever, I can’t help but wonder if this day will end the same way as the other…or even worse.

Because last I checked, Entho is still in Bay City and I am in the middle of nowhere…with Gunter, two injured people, a huge, comatose Light Skinned boy, and Reese on the loose.

Not to mention…a new law that calls for my death.

**Chapter 24**

Gunter and I eventually gather our wits and tromp over to the dragons, who have stopped breathing fire. I don’t know what made them stop – I am just relieved that it is over. True to Koree’s words, there are bones and skulls scattered on the ground, smoke and steam wafting off of them*. How would he know this?*

We each take two dragons and lead them back to the others. Echo is sitting up and holding her head, which is a good sign. Thann is in the same position, dazed and unmoving. Koree watches us, his eyes glassy green orbs. He slowly nods his head in approval. Reese has shown up, leaning against his dragon with his arms crossed, watching us with cold, dark eyes. I ignore him with the exception of sending a nasty look his way every now and then.

“I imagine the bones will still be pretty hot,” Gunter tells me. We look around for something to handle them, to keep our hands from burning. We find our old tattered cloaks, finish shredding them into rags, and head over to the bones. It is eerie thinking about what we are getting ready to do.

“Let’s get on with this. I want out of here,” I tell Gunter, sending a deathly glare in Reese’s direction.

He nods his head. “Me, too. I’ve had about enough of this snock to last a life time.”

We hike over to the site of the massacre, steam and smoke still billowing up from the remnants of life…ash and smoke whispering to us…as if telling us to leave them alone. Hesitantly, red rags in our hands, Gunter and I approach the bones, neither of us making a move to actually touch them. The thought of what we are doing suddenly makes me ill. Human bones…Soot’s bones. What is left of Soot…being thrown in a stream. “Maybe we should say a few words.” I offer, bile creeping into my mouth from my throat. A different kind of burning.

“Okay…good idea.” Gunter pauses, thinking. Then he speaks, his voice solemn but eloquent. “Soot was a good person. We didn’t know her long but she was nice. She was a Brown Cloaker who was making a better life for herself…I respect that. I respected her.”

I wait a second, thinking about her…about the real Soot – how I barely even knew her. “She was funny and kind,” I add. “And a Light Skin who didn’t deserve this…I….”

Words trap in my throat as I turn to Gunter.

He must sense my hesitation, and I will always be grateful for what he does next. Without fanfare, he grabs a skull with one of the rags, wraps it in another red rag stained with blood, runs over to the stream, and tosses it in. The rag encased skull floats down the stream, bobbing up and down slowly like a last attempt at taking a breath. I wonder whose skull it is…could it be Soot’s?

Gunter saunters back toward me, but he doesn’t speak. For a minute I wonder if he is angry, but then I realize it is more a look of determination on his face. Determination…I could use some of that. I shake my head and charge over to the scattered, charred bones. I wrap a long bone, perhaps a leg bone, in my rag, and as heat penetrates through the rag, almost burning my hands, I drag the heavy bone to the stream and toss it into the swirling water, watching with fascination as it floats down the stream, playing follow the leader with the bobbing skull.

We work, back and forth like this until there are no more bones. Gunter and I stop, almost at once, staring straight ahead at the blackened clearing…boneless and bloodless. “Let’s get out of here,” I tell Gunter, wanting to leave more than bones and fire behind me.

“Righto,” he answers, flashing me a grin. I marvel at his eyes…how they almost disappear every time he smiles. We take off toward the others, discussing the logistics of getting all of us to Harcourt.

“Echo is doing the best,” I tell Gunter. “Koree and Thann are in rough shape.”

“You’re telling me the person with a hole in her head is better than those two mountains?”

“Mountains?” I have no idea what he is talking about.

“Yeah, those guys are huge. How are we even going to get them on a dragon?”

“Oh…mountains. I get it.” I think for a minute. “I will ride with one, you with the other,” I inform him methodically as we approach the small group. “We can see if Echo can ride on her own. If not, then Reese will just have to help her.”

Gunter nods, but when I look at Koree and Thann, at how big they really are, especially Thann, doubt creeps in. I give Gunter a once over, wondering if he can even hold one of the bigger boys on a dragon. One of the “mountains”. And can I?

I turn to Koree, “How long before we get there?”

“Bout an hour,” he mumbles. His eyes are still dilated, and his speech is more slurred than before. Still, I trust him.

“Okay…” I bite my lower lip, thinking.

“We can do this,” Gunter offers. An hour is no time at all.”

“Yes…” I let out a long wind of breath. “Okay, let’s just get on with it.” Together we lift Thann up on Pebble, straining under his weight. When we finally get him situated, he wobbles in the saddle, so while Gunter holds him I go on a search for more rope. I find some on one of the other Crimsons, cut four equal strands, and we tie him to the saddle, pinning his legs to the stirrups. He sits obediently, staring blankly into space.

Koree is easier. We lift him onto the Metallic, and he is able to help us a little, to hold on and balance by himself. Still, we tie his legs just to be careful. When we finish, I fondle the dagger, thinking of Entho. *Did he know something that I didn’t?*

I think of getting my invitation to Dragon Academy, how I wanted to stay with him. Would I really be imprisoned for wanting to be a healer, or is that something he said because he knew about the Purity Law? Was he just trying to keep me safe again? I blink my eyes several times. It is too much to think about right now. With reverence, I place the dagger back in my bag, as if it were a holy object, and I tie the cords of my bag tightly.

Echo is already standing by her dragon. “You baggers can just give me a leg up and I’ll be fine.”

“My pleasure,” Gunter answers as he holds his hands low for her. She steps up easily onto the dragon, and I hand her the reins.

“If you aren’t okay to do this, we can have you ride with Reese,” I tell her.

She glances over at Reese, squinting her eyes at him. “No, I’m fine,” she says with resolve. Reese, perched on his dragon by now just scowls.

I catch sight of Reese’s red cloak. “You should change into a tunic and pants, like us…in case we meet another Destroyer or something.” I doubt if he will follow my instructions and am surprised when he obediently dismounts his dragon, tromps over to Thann’s bag, gets out new clothing, and jogs behind a charred bush. A few minutes later he strolls back in his new clothes, rolls up the legs of his pants, and mounts his Crimson again.

Gunter and I tie the other three rider-less dragons to Pebble, Gunter’s Crimson, and Echo’s Metallic. I climb onto Pebble behind Thann, and Gunter jumps up behind Koree. We lead our motley crew out onto the dusty dirt road, feeling the steady plod of the dragon’s feet, a sleepy rhythm of hope. One hour. That is all we need. One hour.

The sun is setting, casting a mist of grey on the countryside, and it is beginning to get cool. I shiver, with my arms around Thann, holding him up while I steer the dragon. My arms begin to tremble from exhaustion, as well, but I keep holding on. Gunter and Koree are beside me with Echo and Reese following. I don’t trust Reese to tend to Echo, so I keep looking back to check on her. She is doing fine, but I notice that blood is starting to leak out of the side of her bandage again.

We continue to trudge along, and I am beginning to relax, to think we just might make it. We travel along in silence, each step becoming a painful tug on my shoulders and arms as I clutch the reins as well as hold Thann tightly. My eyes are heavy, and I fight to keep them open, to stay awake. I think of my soft bed at home, of the healing books I could be reading right now. And for the first time all day, my stomach rumbles in hunger. When was the last time I ate? It had to be this morning before I left.

I turn to see if anyone brought any food; maybe Koree will know. His head is bouncing off his chest, almost like he is asleep, although his eyes are open, so he must be awake. “Koree, do we…”

But I am interrupted by a screeching sound coming from above us, so loud and piercing I know it can only be one thing. Suddenly the entire sky darkens into an enormous black eclipse. I tilt my head back as the skies above me disappear into black shadows that greedily engulf the last shreds of daylight. Fear pulses through my entire body. It can’t be, I think. It just can’t be.

**Chapter 25**

Enormous wings flap, stirring the air around us like a windstorm. I don’t dare take my eyes away from the two dragons that land beside us…Lavs. I blink my eyes…hoping, sending up a prayer to the Angels, but there is no mistaking what I see. The dragons are indeed Lavs, and that can mean only one thing. As the dragons settle, spewing dust and dirt along with a blasting screech, two Destroyers rapidly dismount. And they march directly toward us.

I am petrified, stuck to my saddle, unable to move or think. My mind is a foggy tunnel. A deep dark tunnel. Destroyers…Destroyers…Destroyers. It can’t be, I think again. It just can’t be.

But it is. The Destroyers slither toward us like the lethal snakes I know they are. They stop in front of our pathetic group and slowly survey us like we are goods to be bought in a store, their eyes moving up and down in the dim light. One of the Lavs shoots a flame, shadowing the men in brilliant light. All I know is at any moment I could end up like Soot. And so could Thann.

“What are you kids doing out here alone?” one of the Destroyers growls. His voice is deep, menacing. He places his hand on the ruby handled sword tucked into the sheath on his belt, twitching his fingers on it as if he can’t wait to chop off someone’s head. He is taller than the other Destroyer, thin and lanky. He has a huge nose that seems amplified against his flat face.

I think of my golden sword at home…of the blades I was trained in. And although my mind is moving at the speed of mud, it spurs me to think of the daggers in my bag behind me. *Can I get to them in time?*

I chide myself. *After all the training I have had, why didn’t I keep a dagger by my side? Or my bow and arrows? I know better…what was I thinking?* I swallow, bitter spit leaking down my throat. The poisonous spit that only fear of death holds. It is eerily quiet, except for some crickets chirping, an occasional howl somewhere far away.

One of the Destroyers speaks then, his words riveting through the darkening sky. “You kids dumb or just can’t talk?” He is short and stocky but not nearly as frightening as the other Destroyer. His eyes are dark, but behind them I sense something I have never seen in a Destroyer. Humanity? Compassion? I can’t be sure.

I remember wondering if this day could get any worse. I know the answer to that question now.

It is Gunter who finally talks, although his voice is so high pitched and shaky that he almost sounds like a girl. “We’re traveling to Dragon Academy…to Harcourt.” Sweet, brave Gunter…the only one of us with the courage to say anything. I manage to lick my lips. They are dry. Like Koree’s. A weird thought enters my mind, an odd totally inappropriate thought. What would it feel like to have a boy like Koree kiss me? Or Thann? I stare at the Destroyers, realizing I will probably never know the answer to that question.

The Destroyers strut around us, slowly scouring us with slanted eyes. “You look like you’ve been attacked,” the taller one says, pulling his sword out of its sheath. The silver sword glistens, a jewel in the dimming light, and goose bumps form up and down my arms. The image of Soot’s head hitting the ground cascades into my mind yet again. I grip Thann tighter, as if that could help either of us.

The Destroyers are slowly moving from one of us to the next, as if we have committed a crime. “We’re looking for two of our men, who have gone missing. You wouldn’t know anything about that, would you?” The Destroyer’s tone is full of accusation.

For several moments it is quiet, nobody responding to his question. We know the answer all too well, and every finger will point directly at me. Then Reese’s voice booms, crashing the silence like a plate hitting the floor. “Yes,” he almost yells at the Destroyers. “She killed them.” He points directly at me. “And she’s a Light Skin.”

*Shut up, Reese, I think. Just shut up*. But he continues. “And so is that guy in front of her. They put stuff on their skin and hair…but they’re Ghosts all right.” With that last comment he turns to Koree and sneers, almost daring Koree to do something…as if demerits would matter now. Koree’s chin flops on his chest, his glazed eyes expressionless.

I remain silent; there are no words I can think of to change the situation. My mouth is dry, as if someone had put cotton in it. If Thann were normal, if he were coherent, I know he could talk his way out of this. But not me.

The two men amble over to Thann and me. One ruby handled sword stays by its owner’s side; the other is pulled, swaying back and forth. Ready for action. Ready to kill.

I think of the other two Destroyers…the two that I killed. Slowly, I reach my left hand back toward my bag. Two knives. Two knives are all I need. My heart hammers against my ribcage so hard that it is almost painful as I stretch my hand back…back…back. Just a little bit more and I will have my bag. And then, once I get the daggers, I know I will need to act fast.

But before I reach my bag, the tall Destroyer grabs my left hand, squeezing it roughly. “What are you up to, Ghost?” he scowls. His grip remains tight on my hand as he examines my face. The pain is incredible, and I try not to scream as I almost feel bones crushing beneath his strength. Anger shoots through me then, and I glare at him, my eyes golden marbles of hate.

The other Destroyer speaks, then, his voice a holy whisper. “It *is* her. I can tell by the mark on her face.” He stares at me, his brows furrowing and his eyes dancing with something I don’t understand. “Let go of her hand, Dorgan. Lord Gareth wants her.”

“What about the boy? Is he a Ghost, too?” Dorgan, the tall ugly Destroyer asks as he drops my hand. It falls to my side, as useless as the daggers and weapons in my bag. He moves closer to Thann, examining him like an animal to be purchased at auction. Thann stares dumbly at nothing, but I feel him move in the saddle. Is he waking up from the stupor he has been in?

The shorter Destroyer’s voice splits the sky into two pieces…one is mine. The other is Thann’s. “It’s the boy as well. He has the same mark. Lord Gareth wants them both.”

Dorgan chortles, “It’s our lucky day, Lanton. Two birds together, ripe for the plucking.”

“Yes,” he slowly answers. I glance over at Koree, and he is struggling to pick his head up off his chest as Gunter clutches him tightly…holding up a “mountain”. Koree’s eyes flash at me, glistening and green and full of hopelessness. I move my eyes to Echo, and she has a look of complete shock on her face. But it is Reese I stop my eyes on. Reese. I glare at him, wishing my eyes were weapons. If they were, they would kill him. My thoughts are broken by Lanton’s voice, though. “Get them off this dreadful Crimson and put them on the Lavs.”

Dorgan answers simply, “Sure, boss.” He slips his sword back into its sheath and pulls a small dagger out of his boot and begins cutting the ropes that bind Thann to Pebble.

Lanton leisurely pulls his dark leather gloves off his hands, as if he is thinking about something. I watch in a daze. *Siv Gareth wants me?* I think back to the day I shot an arrow at him. Maybe it has something to do with that. But Thann. *Why would he want Thann?*

Lanton strides over to Reese and stops before him. “Thank you for the information, son. It really helped, although we probably would have figured it out anyway.”

Reese is smiling. “No problem, I…” But before he can finish, the Destroyer takes his gloves and smacks them across Reese’s face, so hard that Reese cries out in pain and immediately shoots his hand up to his cheek. I think back of when I slapped Reese. Maybe slapping a face *is* something they teach you at Soldier Academy.

“A soldier never rats out the members of his troop.” Lanton seethes at Reese. “Never. No matter what.” He stares Reese directly in the eye and smacks the gloves across his face again, only this time in the opposite direction. “I should kill you for that.” He continues to glare at Reese.

“You don’t know who my father is…he’ll have you for this,” Reese sputters indignantly, red outlines glowing on both cheeks.

Lanton leans into Reese. “I don’t give a rat’s ass who your father is. I am second in command to Lord Gareth.” For the briefest of moments it is quiet. “Apologize.”

“Never,” Reese answers.

With swift movement, reminiscent of Siv Gareth grabbing my flying arrow, the Destroyer pulls his sword and brings it up to Reese’s neck. Reese’s pulse beats against the shimmering steel and as he swallows, a lump moves down his throat, cutting against the sharp edge of the sword. A trickle of blood slips down Reese’s throat, fat red droplets that form into the tiniest red stream. *Kill him, I plead in my mind. Kill him.*

Reese’s voice is pitiful now, shaking. “I…I am sorry…sir. I didn’t know.” Lanton continues to hold the sword to Reese’s throat, his thick chest heaving. Gradually, then, he lowers it, turning away from Reese as if he is nothing more than a pesky fly. He faces the rest of our group.

“Be gone with you all,” he announces, his voice a low growl. “Now, or we will handle you ourselves.” With that he smacks Gunter’s Crimson on the rear, and it takes off running. Gunter struggles to hold Koree’s body upright, and I fear they are going to fall off, but amazingly, Gunter finds his balance and I watch with relief as he and Koree thunder away.

Echo’s indigo eyes meet mine, a mournful expression holding me captive. I nod my head to her, ever so slightly. She nods back to me, fresh blood trickling down her face. She hastily turns the glimmering Metallic around and follows the same path that Gunter and Koree took, dragon feet pounding hard against the earth. Her short dark hair flies behind her, the red bandage still covering the top of her head. And then she is gone.

Suddenly, rough hands pull at me, breaking at my thoughts. I am wrestled from behind and almost thrown onto the ground. My knee gives out, and I nearly fall. But I regain my footing, hurling my chin upward and blazing my eyes at the Destroyer. Dorgan grabs me by the arm and leads me over to one of the Lavs .

“Get on,” he orders.

“Never,” I spit at him, words forming at last. Immediately he pulls his sword out of its sheath, bringing it to my neck in one smooth motion. “We can do this the hard way or the easy way. Your choice.” His breath is foul and his flat face seems to swallow my entire body.

I gulp air into my mouth, the edge of the sword pushing against my throat. I swallow, just as Reese did, and it doesn’t occur to me until later that I used the very same word as Reese. “Never”, I said. Just like Reese. I weigh my options for only another second, because I know that there really is only one option. Just like Reese, then, I capitulate. “Okay,” I breathe out, feeling like a coward.

He sneers, lowering the sword. I reach my hand to my neck…still attached to my body. I sigh in relief and then frustration mounts. I bite the inside of my cheek so hard that I can taste blood in my mouth. The last thing I want to do is climb onto a Lav.

Obediently, as I have done before, I lift my leg and manage to mount the giant Lav. Lanton has Thann in tow, leading him toward me. Thann isn’t putting up a fight, but he is walking normally, a slight swagger to his mountainous frame. I wonder if he has come out of his daze. If he has, then why isn’t he speaking…trying to help us?

Thann hops easily onto the huge Lav as if he does it every day, his long legs swooping over the beast’s back and settling his enormous frame in front of mine.

My hand is throbbing, my knee is aching, and I have no idea where I am going or what will happen to me. Or to Thann.

Darkness creeps up on us, like an evil spell, as Lanton smacks Pebble on the rear and she takes off at full speed, hopefully after the others. I wrap my arms around Thann’s waist, hugging him tight to me…confused, angry, and more scared than I have ever been in my entire life.

**Chapter 26**

“Hold out your hands,” Dorgan orders me. I start to ask why but decide to stay quiet. I bite my lower lip, plans of possible escape tumbling through my mind. I hesitantly take my hands away from Thann’s waist – the only comfort I have, and hold them straight out toward Dorgan…flash backs of the sword by his side and how quickly he can draw it pummeling through my brain.

My mind shifts, then, like finding yourself in the wrong room looking for an item you can’t remember. This could have been me, I think. I could have been made into a Destroyer. Or the elite guard of Siv Gareth’s Alliance. I shudder at the thought as Dorgan crudely ties my wrists together, so tightly that I can barely move my hands.

The thick cord cuts into my wrists, and if I move my fingers it somehow digs in deeper. I try to remain still, to keep from moving at all, the crippling pain a crude prison guard. He does the same to Thann, who offers no resistance. Dorgan then jauntily strides away and catapults himself onto the other Lav.

Lanton wastes no time. He jumps onto the Lav behind me and wraps his thick arms around my waist. I can feel his body behind mine, each of his movements a reminder of where I am and where I am going as the odor of dirty sweat, spices, and smoke fill my nostrils.

My mind is a whirl of thoughts as both giant Lavs take off into the starless night sky, at first so slowly I have no idea that we are even off the ground. And then, the flapping of their wings jolts me, both physically and mentally. As the black, empty sky engulfs us, part of me is relieved that we are still alive. But I wonder if it is just a momentary reprieve. I can’t help but think that Siv Gareth has something terrible planned for us…more painful and dramatic than a simple beheading. But Thann, I wonder again. Why would he want Thann?

We fly for about an hour through the solid black sky. I am disoriented, not sure which direction we are going, but I think it is west. Toward Mount Gareth. There are no words spoken, but I feel Thann begin to stir in front of me. Is he really waking up? Or is it just a subtle movement? Then he leans back into me, ever so slightly, as if to tell me he is indeed awake. I nudge him back. I know that Thann has Power, but I also know that it is nothing compared to the Destroyers’ Power. Bello’s words haunt me. *“…if you don’t harness your Power soon…”* They play over and over in my brain, like a musician singing the same song again and again.

Why couldn’t I have tried harder to harness my Power? I have the Mark…it shouldn’t be that difficult. Stubborn. That is what I was. The dead Destroyer’s words echo in my ears as well. *“…stupid circus tricks…”* A sudden realization so strong it feels like I might collapse washes over me. I know, without a doubt, that we are powerless against these men, and Thann must know it as well.

Eventually the Lavs start descending, and a giant, shadowy mountain materializes in the distance. Could it really be Mount Gareth? So close to my home? *Maybe Entho will save me again…*

I shake my head. Entho thinks I am on my way to Harcourt. Or there already. Without fanfare, the dragons land in a clearing. The Lav we are on hits the ground with a gentle thud, its feet spreading out beneath it like a huge bird’s. I struggle to stay astride as it skids to a stop, clamping my legs around the huge dragon to keep my balance. Lanton reaches forward, wraps his arms protectively around both Thann and me – his precious cargo. “We are stopping here for the night,” Lanton tells us, his words whipping against the wind.

From the ground, all I can see are trees and the slightest hint of a mountain against the backdrop of the dark sky. The moon casts an eerie shadow against it, though, swirling in odd shades of purple and pink.

Lanton pulls me off the Lav first, and my legs are rubbery as I try to stand, but I pull my head up defiantly. He laughs at me. “You shouldn’t be so saucy. If you only knew what’s in store for you…” He stops, shaking his head, as if he has a conscience. Then, almost tenderly, he pulls Thann down, settling him beside me. We stand before him, as if he were a judge prosecuting criminals.

“Don’t try anything stupid. Lord Gareth will be just as happy with a head as a live body.” He grabs us both and shoves us toward a huge tree, an almost identical twin to the one that we had the dragons set on fire.

Lanton ties us together on either side of the tree. The ropes continue to bite into my wrists, as if a wolf is clamping down on them with its powerful jaws and won’t let go. To top it off, my left hand feels like it is nothing more than mush. I try to shake my hands, to let the blood flow, but every time I do, the rope digs in deeper*.* I decide to stay as still as possible.

Dorgan has landed and dismounted by now, and he is starting a fire, rubbing shreds of kindling together. They light quickly, almost too fast…of course he would use his Power to start a flame. He turns to Lanton. “I am starved, my good man,” he says as flames sprout like tiny red and gold flowers. He reaches into his pack and pulls out something, apparently a hunk of meat. He neatly places a stick through it and holds it high over the flames. It begins to sizzle, and the smell wafts over to me. My stomach rumbles.

“Are you going to feed those kids?” Lanton asks.

He glances over at us, tied to the tree like dogs. “Naw, they look like they are well fed. They can miss a meal or two.”

“I suppose.” Lanton lets out a sigh, as if making these decisions is painful. They eat quietly, passing the stick of meat back and forth. Each man takes a bite, drinks from a bag and then passes it to the other man. They don’t speak to each other but just stare straight ahead, as if the fire were a play and they were entranced by the plot. My mouth is parched, and I lick my dry, cracked lips as my stomach growls.

After the men eat, they pull blankets out of their bags and roll them out. “You take first watch,” Lanton tells the other man. “I will take second.”

“Sure,” Dorgan answers, but he yawns as he settles onto the blanket. I am facing him from the tree, my hands hidden from his view. That is when I begin to rub the ropes on my wrists against the tree. Maybe I will have enough time to unravel the rope. I keep my movements slow, deliberate, careful. But with each movement, the cord cuts deeper into my skin.

I try not to scream out in pain, as I struggle to continue moving my roped wrists against the tree. I feel blood erupting from the cuts that have emerged on them. Cuts I know are there but can’t be seen. But I don’t care…it is the only solution I can think of. My mind wanders to stories I have heard about animals caught in traps…how they have actually chewed off a limb to release themselves. *Could I do that? Could I really keep this up until my hands fall off?* Pretty soon, I feel Thann moving his wrists against the tree – doing the same thing that I am. For some reason, it comforts me.

Lanton falls asleep quickly, his snores resonating through the woods. Thann and I continue to rub at the ropes. Back and forth. Back and forth. We saw at the tree with our bloody wrists, monotony setting in like riding a dragon in a stupor. At some point my eyes become heavy, my chin falling onto my chest. The reprieve from pain is enticing, luring…

But I think of the Destroyers. Of Siv Gareth. Of Entho and Gunter and Echo and Koree. Of Thann, who is still rubbing the ropes of his wrists back and forth against the rough tree bark. I snap my head back up. Swipe the rope against the tree again. Over and over. Back and forth, the feel of blood leaking down my wrists and onto my fingertips. Mixing with Thann’s. This continues for hours, and at some point I hear the rhythm of not one person snoring but two. *Could this be the break we need?*

“Thann,” I whisper as softly as I can.

“Shhh…” is his response. I curl my lips up, just a little. The Golden Boy is back.

I continue to saw my burning wrists against the tree, my hands joining in now and screaming their own kind of pain…a throbbing like I have never felt before. Frustrated, I can’t tell if I am making any progress.

I rub repeatedly until my wrists become numb, and I don’t feel anything except blood spilling out from them. Over and over again I stroke them against the rough bark. Back and forth, back and forth I saw at the tree…a lullaby of its own kind that sings to me, calling to me like my mother from her grave.

I lose track of time and the repetitive movement, exhaustion, and the black night combine into a fuzzy cloud that wraps around me, lulling me into a form of sleep or maybe just darkness.

And I become still…so very still.

**Chapter 27**

I am snapped awake by movement…not the kind I would expect. I feel something on the ropes of my wrists, a sawing motion that I fear and treasure all at once. It is a knife. Of that I am sure. I am also positive that it is cutting the ropes that bind my wrists.

It is still pitch black, but I search with urgency for who is doing this. Lanton? Dorgan? Why would they cut us free in the middle of the night? I squint my eyes tightly, straining to see in the darkness, and I spot the outline of a diminutive figure. It is a small man. Or a large boy. I start to speak, to ask him who he is and what he is doing.

But before I can say anything, the silhouette of the man – or boy – places his finger to his lips as if to shush me. Then he takes his other hand, points to the Destroyers and makes a slicing motion across his neck. I pull my eyebrows down. *What is he trying to tell me?* Oh… I need to be quiet or the Destroyers will wake up and cut my throat. I nod my head, clamping my lips tightly together.

Thann stands up, shaking his wrists free and then rubbing them, his mammoth frame silhouetted against the black night and the tall tree. Just then the ropes snap off my wrists. Freedom and relief flood through me like a tidal wave, and I turn my attention to the ropes that fall to the ground, like dead white snakes lying in a small pile. I shakily stand up, stroking my bloody wrists, wanting to scream out with both joy and pain. I scan the darkness in all directions, searching for Thann, blood dripping from my wrists onto the ground. He is nowhere to be found, and my stomach sinks at the thought of being alone.

The little man motions for me to follow him, and I have no choice but to do so. He lithely steps through the leaves and branches without making a sound, and I wonder once again where Thann is. Could this be a trap?

I follow as quietly as I can, shaking my bloody wrists as I go. But I was raised in the city. Twigs snap under my feet and leaves crunch beneath me like dried up paper. Will the Destroyers hear it? I try to step more lightly, and sweat forms over my body from the effort. Finally, the little man stops, and I am concentrating so hard that I crash into him.

As I gather my bearings, I spot the faintest outline of a small black dragon ahead of us, and a tall, broad person already straddled on it. It must be Thann. I exhale, perhaps a little too loudly.

The little man pushes me toward the dragon, and I obediently jump on it…right behind Thann. I sigh in relief. His familiar body comforts me, even though my knee continues to ache, my left hand is throbbing, and my wrists are raw and oozing blood. I ignore them as I grab onto Thann’s midsection with my right hand, my left hand lying limp by my side.

The tiny man hops onto another dragon, so small and dark I can barely see it. He motions for us to follow him, and Thann nods. The man and the small dragon take flight, silently soaring high into the starless ebony sky.

Our dragon spreads its wings, so different from the Lav we just rode on – peacefully, gracefully. Like an oversized butterfly, it takes off smoothly into the night sky. I wonder what time it is and squeeze my eyes against the bleak darkness, but there is no way of telling. The moonless sky and the stars seem to be playing hide and seek with me. I gaze up, feeling the wind blow across my face, Thann’s strong body in front of mine, and the pure joy of being in the air…away from the Destroyers.

I don’t know where we are going, who the little man is, and why Thann seems to trust him so much. I do know that it has to be better than where we just were and who we were with.

Or being turned over to Siv Gareth.

**The Mountain**

We rise steadily, the black sky and cool wind washing over me like a cleansing shower of rainfall. After we level out, Thann turns around. His perfect face is a silhouette against the darkness, and I can’t help but smile a little.

“Are you okay?” he asks, his voice beating against the wind.

“Yes, I guess so.” I hesitate, not sure if it is safe to talk. “Are you?”

“My wrists hurt like a bagger, but I’m fine.”

“Hey, Thann?”

“Yeah?”

“Who is that guy…the little man?”

“It’s Yaren. He works for my mom.”

“Oh.” I think for a moment, contemplating the small man, the dragons we are on, fleeing the Destroyers. “Do you know where we are going?”

“Nope…no idea.”

“Oh.” I reply again. I am disappointed by his answer and more so that Thann seems undisturbed by our lack of information. “Hey, Thann?” I don’t know if I am being a pest, but I can’t seem to stop myself.

He swings his golden head around toward mine, and just for an instant, in the dimly lit night sky, my breath is taken away by his pure beauty. “Hmmm?” His voice is a hum singing in harmony with the wind.

“What made you wake up? Did you know you were in some weird daze for most of the day? It was like you were under a spell or something.”

He doesn’t answer at first, and I wait as the wind whips my mud encrusted hair around my face. He eventually responds. “Don’t know…might have been the different Destroyers’ Power. I just remember waking up…coming to…whatever you call it, on a Lav with you behind me. I started filling in the missing pieces.”

I remain quiet. Although it is early fall, up this high it is chilly, and I begin to shiver. Soon my teeth are chattering. But Thann, as usual, seems unaffected. A piece of me wants to nestle in closer to him. For warmth. Or just the feel of another human body against mine.

Maybe it is just his body…his firm stomach muscles erupt under my right hand, and once again, I feel pulled toward him…but not just physically. It is something more, something so different than with Koree that I bite my lower lip, thinking about the two different boys who have somehow entered my life.

Just then, Koree’s face explodes in my mind…his piercing green eyes and coppery curls. That dimple…his olive skin and angular jaw. My stomach spirals out of control and tingles travel up my spine. I suddenly miss him so much that my heart actually hurts.

More images of Koree spin in my mind. “You look nice,” he told me. His intense, green eyes haunt me as I continue to hold Thann’s waist, almost wishing it were Koree’s. I remember the feelings that washed over me when he was staring at me, the shiver up my spine…the squirming in my stomach. His dimple…teasing me in a way I have never been teased before. But then, there is something about Thann…

As my mind bounces back and forth between both boys, the dragon begins to descend. Trees become larger and Mount Gareth shadows before us, greeting us like an out of place, over dressed host. Why are we going toward the mountain…Siv Gareth’s mountain? It doesn’t make sense.

I strain my eyes against the darkness. Yes, I am sure it is Mount Gareth. My heart skips a beat… it has to be a trap. Thann’s friend has led us right to Siv Gareth…to his hideous mountain…the ostentatious amethyst mansion on top of it…the prison right below it.

I gulp for air, memories of Siv Gareth, crowding every thought out of my mind, as the little black dragon lands directly next to the mountain. Mount Gareth…so close that the smell of dirt and freshly dug earth overwhelms me. Ocean waves blast against the other side of the mountain, brutally slamming water against it.

Thann hops off the small Ebony with ease. For some reason, I struggle to dismount, but Thann holds his hand out for me. I take it willing with my right hand, my left hand dangling by my side. I land on a slick surface, and my feet slide as I struggle to regain my footing.

Ocean waves continue to crash against the mountain, and the smells of salt and water and earth float into my nostrils. I swallow it up for a moment, like an alcoholic taking a forbidden drink.

“You be followin’ me,” Yaren tells us in a soft voice. I marvel at his odd accent.

“Okay,” Thann quietly replies. Then he turns to Yaren, his voice a rare solemn whisper. “Why are we here at the mountain…couldn’t we have just flown the dragons to Harcourt?”

Yaren pauses for a minute. “Dey be passin’ de new law, de law dat kill you, boy. Dere be Destroyers all over. Hundreds, maybe t’ousands. Dis be de place dey not expec’ you. An’ dis be de way yourn mom tol’ me to take you.”

Thann nods his head. I struggle to make sense of what Yaren said…not sure if it is his odd accent or the words he actually spoke. *Hundreds, maybe thousands of Destroyers?* My hand instantly flies up to my neck, as if by doing so I can hold it onto my body. Still, Mount Gareth does not seem like a reasonable place for us to be, no matter what Yaren says…or Thann’s mom.

We follow Yaren for about fifty paces, and he stops next to the mountain. I tip my head back and gawk at its vastness. We are at the back side of the monstrous mountain, and although it has always been here, ever since I can remember anyway, I have never been this close to it. Wordlessly, as he leans his head back as if evaluating the mountain, Thann slips my right hand into his and entwines his large fingers around mine.

Yaren takes a few more steps toward the mountain and then stops. I watch, both interested and confused as he pushes his small, weathered hands against it, feeling and groping for something on it. What can he be doing? And why?

I wait quietly by Thann’s side, his hand still holding mine – warm and rough and large. It feels so comfortable to have my hand in Thann’s, as if they had been formed for each other. Still, I am distracted by what the little man is doing.

My eyes snap open in surprise when a piece of the mountain slowly spins in a circle, a revolving door of mud and dirt. A grinding sound reverberates in my ears, a pathetic contrast to the distant ocean waves that endlessly blast against the mountain.

Yaren continues to push. I am in awe at the moving door in the mountain, wondering how it works…who built it…and why. I spot boards, thick, rough wood encasing the mud and dirt…camouflaging it. Brilliant, I think.

Yaren steps through the door, motioning for us to follow. Thann pulls on my hand, and we take off at a silent trot toward him. But, just like I am pulled in two directions about Thann and Koree, the same feeling overtakes me at this moment. I think of letting go of Thann and running. I know I can find my way home…get to Entho’s clinic. It isn’t too far away. Memories of Entho’s words muffle in my mind. “I’m safe here…because of what I can offer the Alliance. It’s getting bad out there…in the city.”

I think for a minute, knowing what the Alliance will do with me…if they even allow me to live. I know how I will end up after all of my Weapons training…like Lanton and Dorgan. Like the two dead Destroyers I killed. Or worse. “Imprisonment…” Entho’s words trail off in my mind. And, do I even know if Entho is alive? My heart squeezes shut at the thought. He is a healer…but he is also a Light Skin, and with the Purity Law…

I am wrenched, pulled in two distinct directions so strong that I stop dead in my tracks. Do I continue with Thann…follow him into the ominous mountain? Or do I break free and run home to Entho? I dawdle, my footsteps slowing to a crawl, as I continue to toss the two options back and forth in my mind. Thann stops abruptly, turns around and faces me. In the dim, grey light I can barely make out a puzzled expression encompassing his face.

“Come on,” he whispers, none too patiently. “It’s the only way.” I can feel his breath on my face, we are that close. I cock my head to the side and study him for a second, then breathe him in deeply, the essence of Thann. It is like breathing pure, unpolluted country air. The air I just recently learned about.

Just like when I shot my arrow and made a bull’s eye and won the competition, just like when I aimed an arrow at Siv Gareth, and when I yelled at Bello about Dragon Academy, I make my decision…quickly and decisively. I follow Thann blindly into the mountain.

Yaren has pulled ahead, and darkness surrounds us…I can barely see the outline of Thann’s body. But quickly Yaren returns with a flaming torch. It outlines his aged, wrinkled face. He has leathery, almost black skin and white curly hair. And although he moves agilely, he appears to be about one hundred years old. “Yourn mom be sendin’ me after you. Didn’t know ‘bout de girl. Who she be?”

“This is Teak. Teak Frain,” Thann whispers back.

“Oh,” he nods. “Yourn mom be happy ‘bout dat too den.”

I wonder what that means as he leads us down a mud encased hall, dampness spewing over us like mist from the mountain. The smell of the ocean creeps in, but now it is dank and salty and fishy. I force back a gag as mud and dirt trickle onto my head, caking onto my skull and mixing in with the dried up black river mud I put there not so long ago.

Yaren stops suddenly, kneels down, and swipes at something on the floor. Then he pulls open another hidden door. This mountain is full of surprises.

“You be getting’ down in de tunnel and you be runnin’. You be runnin’ till you be gettin’ to de udder side. You don’t be stoppin’ for nothin’ or nobody once you be down dere. You just run till de tunnel ends.” His voice is smooth, lyrical. Oddly enough, I detect no fear in it.

“You be goin’ straight. No turnin’. De tunnel be havin’ turns in it but you be goin’ straight if you want to get to yourn mom.” His eyes travel to Thann. Thann nods his head at him. “And when de tunnel be endin’ you be liftin’ up de lid you see on de roof of de tunnel, and you be at Har. Court.” He says Harcourt like it is two distinct words.

He stands up, then, his small figure a good luck charm. Or maybe bad luck, I can’t be sure. He stares at Thann and Thann nods his head at him again, and I know some silent form of communication has just passed between them.

I am rigid, locked in place. Yaren closes his eyes, moves his hands in an up and down motion in front of Thann and me. Then he reaches into his pocket and sprinkles dust of some sort on us. I sneeze suddenly, loud and protesting at the odd smelling dust. I immediately cover my hand over my nose as Yaren and Thann both glare at me for a split second.

It is eerily silent for a few moments until Yaren’s voice floats over us. “De Angels be wit’ you,” Yaren chants in a weird, yet enticing melody.

Thann squeezes Yaren into a bear hug, literally lifting him off the ground. “Thanks, Yaren…I owe you,” he tells the little man. He sets Yaren back down, as if he were a doll or a small toy. Then, without another word, Thann steps down into the tunnel, his mud encased head disappearing from view.

I stand still, fear coursing through my veins at the thought of going into a dark tunnel I know nothing about. But Yaren grabs my hand, thankfully my right hand, and I ponder at his strength…how such a small man can have such a strong grip. “You bein’ next little missy. You be stayin’ with Thann and you bein’ okay.” With that he shoves me down into the tunnel, my feet making contact with a rickety wooden ladder.

I step down onto it gingerly, wondering once again if I am doing the right thing. I hold onto the rustic ladder with one hand, feeling the steps with my feet. It is so dark I can’t see anything, and I panic for a minute.

Where is Thann? I put one foot down onto the rung of the ladder. Then the next. I breathe in and out. In and out, gasping for pure air, but all I get is a murky, dense mixture of dirt and dead fish. I force back another gag when suddenly, what little light I have disappears with a loud thump. The door above me has slammed shut, and I know I am trapped…deep in a tunnel. I shoot my head up, start to scramble back up the ladder to the only freedom I know.

But large hands, familiar hands, grip my waist. Thann. It has to be Thann. His firm hands guide me down the ladder, and my boots land with a soft thud on the tunnel floor.

He reaches for my hand again, and the familiar feel of it calms me. He laces his fingers around mine, and it feels like I am home, that I have waited my entire life just to hold this huge hand.

“You ready?” he asks.

I stop. Am I ready? Will I ever be ready? “Sure,” I answer, more calmly than what I feel inside.

Thann takes off at a rapid pace, his long legs flying under him like machines pounding against the black earthen tunnel. Since I am connected to him because he holds my hand and my future tightly in his, I have no choice but to follow.

So.

I.

Run.

**Other Books by L.L. Crane:**

**Mark of Power Series:**

To the Moon

Into the Black Night (to be released)

**Blue Spectrum Chronicles:**

Forbidden Rain

Vanishing Rain

Rain Born (to be released)

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**Author’s Note:**

Thank you for reading *From the Mountain*. I am busy at work on the third book in the Mark of Power Series, *Into the Black Night.* You can get the second book, *To the Moon*, at [www.llcrane.com](http://www.llcrane.com), or Amazon.

If you would like to get To *the Moon* for FEEE, just sign up for my newsletter at [www.llcrane.com](http://www.llcrane.com) .

In *To the Moon* you will find out how Teak discovers true friendship, hatches and cares for her own baby dragon, falls in love, and eventually discovers her Power. But oh, she has some obstacles in every path along her way. The end of the book leaves Teak reeling with surprise, shock, and confusion. She must try to figure out not only her feelings for Koree but the mess that her own family has become.

I wish that I was as brave as Teak! Growing up being persecuted, taunted, and even tortured made a huge impact on her life and the choices she was forced to make. Fortunately, I didn’t have to suffer like she did, but it wasn’t exactly easy being one of the only kids in school with bright red hair and a disposition that seemed to match.

I was called so many names that I’ve lost track of them by now. Carrot Top. Tomato Head. Red. Let’s not forget that my last name was printed on almost every toilet in America at the time! The one that drove me the most nuts? Lisa Crane the Brain, which had nothing to do with my hair but a lot to do with my nerdy, brainy persona. Secretly, I longed to be a cheerleader and not the editor of the high school newspaper. Hey, I really didn’t try too hard to get those good grades, but boy did I get teased about it. Back then being cool was everything, and I was anything but “cool”.

The difference between Teak and me? She imploded.. I, unfortunately, exploded, which got me into a lot of trouble.

Always and still.

I remember pummeling a boy in first grade because he was teasing my older sister and me. I chased him down, locked his head into my arms and beat his nose bloody! He was two years older than me and twice my size. I can still see him running off in tears clad in a yellow sweatshirt stained with a big splotch of blood on the front. I can’t lie. I derived a great amount of satisfaction over that!

When I was in sixth grade there was a boy who constantly tormented me. Actually, he tormented everybody. Tall with curly hair and a cocky smirk, I remember seeing him getting kicked out of class after class. Teachers hated him! He actually never did anything to anyone except run his mouth, but had a posse of friends who did his bidding. He was a miniature “Fonzie”, only I’m not sure if his heart was very soft.

One day I was walking home from school, toting my clarinet like the nerd I was, and he taunted me from across the street. I can’t remember what he said, but I saw red. I pulled back my arm and relentlessly hit him over and over with my clarinet case. He left me alone after that. I didn’t know until I reconvened with my high school crush that every boy in school was deathly afraid of Keith, and there I was hitting him with my clarinet!

But death was never a factor for me. Just my dad’s searing blue eyes glaring at me and a spanking or two. Maybe more… (I seemed to be a regular fan of those!)

Like Teak, Indie authors are up against a lot. It would help me and other authors if you would spread the word by leaving reviews on Amazon and Goodreads about our books. Reviews are the best way for those of us who are Indie authors to help readers like you discover our books. To top it off, when I read a review, it makes my heart sing!

I love to hear from my readers and thank you for the time you spend reading my books. You can get in touch with me at any time by emailing me at lisa@llcrane.com.

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And finally, a one-of-a-kind thank you to Kit-Ten for helping me not only write this book with her constant purring and batting at my fingers as I typed, but for actually saving this book as “-yttttt=”, which was confusing just for a minute, and also for the numerous, zzzzz’s, xxxxxxx’s, ttttttt’s etc. that she contributed. I am sorry I had to take them out. Maybe one day she can write her own book.