

Chapter One

I stare at my reflection, noting how the anger simmers just below the mask of my indifference. I grimace and try to dampen down. I will need to add extra whorls today, a distraction I hope. When the minders get a look at my face this morning I want them to see arrogance and disdain in my embellished tattoo... not the expression of someone fighting for control. My sixteenth birthday isn't here yet, I reminded myself. Today is not my day to die.

I stab the metal tip of the ink scribe into the small black glass bottle. The red ink is the most expensive as it comes from the roots of the Rubia plant, known for its finicky growing needs. It had cost me nearly two weeks' worth of lunch credits, but it is well worth it. The deep crimson color stands out against my dusky skin like fresh blood. I tap the edge of the bottle to remove excess ink and proceed to add extra whorls to my tat, pulling the design up past my eyebrow and nearly into the hairline. I watch, always fascinated, as the metal tip of the ink stylus gently scours my flesh, drawing tiny beads of blood that mix smoothly with the color of the ink. I am one of the few that don't try to hide the stamp of shame society has placed on us. Much to the discomfort of the teachers and minders, I flaunt the mark, make it my own.

The tattoo on my face is mandatory. By law, all twists are tattooed on the day of their sixth birthday, their specific genetic aberration having manifested by then. Parents, upon the discovery that their precious bundle of joy is instead a monster, contact their local Reform Center. They watch, clutching at each other in shock at their misfortune as their offspring are dragged away. I was fortunate to have been tagged as a newborn babe, I will never be hampered by the desire to confront my family for their casual abandonment. The tattoo is a permanent mark to separate those of us with twisted DNA from normal society... should any of us manage to escape the compound. A ridiculous notion to the point of absurdity. Security here is far too tight for anyone, twist or otherwise, to escape. It is a clear sign of just how much 'normal' society fears anything different, how much they fear us.

Most of my fellow discards try to downplay the tat. Long hair, headbands, crazy hats, and hooded cloaks are just some of the ways twists try to hide their true natures. Not me. I have learned early the hard lesson of reality. I will never be allowed to enter what passes for 'normal' society. I know it. My friends and fellow twists know it too, though they all pretend I have just as much chance as anyone to matriculate. And on my sixteenth birthday, all the world will see me for the monster I am.

"Keira! Aito's in the slammer!" A harsh whisper through the door. I start, stabbing myself in the process.

"Dammit!" I hate interruptions and now a bright red spot grows right in the center of an otherwise perfect swirl. "When." I whisper back as I blot the growing dot.

"Late last night. I heard it's bad this time."

"Shit." I mutter to myself.

Having delivered the news, Naoaki is long gone, slinking off to another job. No matter.

She'd done as I'd asked and would continue to do so as long as our training sessions lasted. I intend to draw them out as long as possible. It is quite handy having someone in my pocket who can come and go unseen. Naoaki had sought me out once after losing a fight, she'd relied too heavily on her twist and once visible, she is vulnerable. Warrior code number seven: always have a backup plan.

I stare at my reflection, wild black hair only barely tamed with strategic braids, a black and red tattoo that starts just below my left eye and builds up and out like a storm cloud. Last but not least, the telltale orange eyes, slitted like a cats, burning accusation at an unfair and violent world. I place the ink pen back in the red bottle, the shaking of my hand the only outward sign that I am rattled. I need to watch that. Showing weakness is not an option, not in this place, not so close to my sixteenth birthday, my Trial.

I dress quickly, the two knives I am allowed strapped in plain view, the ten I am not, hidden by custom sheaths thoughtfully designed by the very person currently in trouble. Aito, a huge pain in the ass and my best friend. I shrug into my padded long cloak to hide the knives strapped to my back and head out.

I hurry through back passages, bypassing the kitchens entirely. Though my stomach grumbles, most of the inhabitants of Keimusho Red Compound will be there now and I will be less likely to run into anyone as long as I stay well clear. There are two temperance sections, one near the training grounds and one below, closer to where Aito suspects the unsanctioned labs might be. I hesitate. Which one? Why hadn't Naoaki said? I pause briefly in my headlong rush to think for a moment. Maybe she had said.

The lower section is the worst, only repeat offenders and those who have committed serious infractions are sent there... for re-education.

I alter my direction and head down.

Shivering, I pull my long cloak closer. My memories of this place, triggered by the damp walls of thick, solid stone, urge me to move faster. I had been here. Once. Together, I and the minders learned about at least one of my twists, or genetic deformities as they refer to them. It had not been a pleasant experience for any of us. In the end, we'd come to a sort of understanding; I try to stay out of serious trouble and they give me a wide berth. It is a thin line I walk, a tightrope between the freedom to do as I please and the house of cards falling on my head if I push it too far and they are forced to contend with me for real.

A soft cry.

I know that voice. My anger, simmering quietly until now, surges, and I suspect that the moment of my unmasking is quickly approaching. Sweat beads on my forehead. My breath quickens. It is coming on faster this time and I don't even have a target in view. I wonder as I run if that is a good thing. I wonder if I will be able to rein it in this time....control it....

I round the corner at a dead run, using the wall itself to correct my trajectory. My soft-soled leather boots quietly slap the wall and I push off again, chucking my great cloak in the process. My senses have peaked and I know he is being held in control room six, the farthest away. Suddenly, a shriek cuts the air and I nearly scream with him, panting with effort as I try to remain quiet and keep the element of surprise. I am almost there. I round the last corner

and am nearly brought up short by the horror of the scene. My angel is strapped down to a metal table. Tubes and needles sprout from his delicate birdcage of a chest like worms feasting on a corpse. He has red shock marks down his side and I spot a skull saw....

I scream.

An animalistic sound that tears through my throat, full of pain and rage. I do not know what the minders in that room see as I approach. I can only describe the feeling of my twist taking over, triggered by the rush of adrenaline. There is a suspended moment, a pause in time before I shift. A held breath....and then....a tearing. It is as though my very flesh is ripping apart and re-arranging itself. I am lanced with a thousand shards of glass and the very air seems to shimmer with their reflective hues of orange and red. And yet, despite the pain, there is a euphoric high, unlike anything I can describe. I don't run, I fly. I have no body. I am immense. The knives pressed to my back are a comfort and I relish the cool balm of their cold steel as I sail toward the room and my targets.

I remember little of what happens next. A blur of red shaded images flow through my mind when I try to think of this moment and they make little sense. I know I got Aito, my angel, out of that place. I know at least two people are dead....and I know I killed them.