

FOLLOW THE BIRDS . . .

# SKYLARK



MEAGAN SPOONER

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## About the Book

*Vis in magia, in vita vi.* In magic there is power, and in power, life.

For fifteen years, Lark Ainsley waited for the day when her Resource would be harvested and she would finally be an adult. After the harvest she expected a small role in the regular, orderly operation of the City within the Wall. She expected to do her part to maintain the refuge for the last survivors of the Wars. She expected to be a tiny cog in the larger clockwork of the city.

Lark did not expect to become the City's power supply.

Her only choice is to escape; follow the birds into the wilderness beyond.

Into the Iron Wood.

Perfect for fans of *The Hunger Games*, *Skylark* is an electrifying tale of magic, secrecy and survival.



# SKYLARK

MEAGAN SPOONER

**RHCP DIGITAL**

FOR AMIE

MY MAGIC, WITHOUT WHOM I'D BE A SHADOW.

# PART I

## CHAPTER 1

THE DIN OF the clockwork dawn was loudest in the old sewers, a great whirring and clanking of gears as the artificial sun warmed up. I paused as mortar crumbled from the ceiling and hissed into the water below. Harvest Day. *This could be your last sunrise*, I told myself. *If you're lucky.*

Though I could still hear the screech of the Resource behind the sunrise, I kept moving, gritting my teeth. Not much time to waste if I wanted to see the names for the harvest and get home in time to shower off any sign I was ever down here. After a few moments the dreadful swell of energy eased, as the sun disc outside settled into its track across the dome of the Wall.

At least there'd be a little light now. I knew my way through these tunnels in pitch-black, but that didn't mean I'd turn down the occasional glimpse of sun through a grate overhead. With a jolt, I realized this could also be the last time I ever came here. My last sunrise, my last day of school, my last childish jaunt through the underground tunnels. Though I felt closer here to Basil than anywhere, it wasn't nearly enough to make me want to stay a kid. After so many years, I just wanted it to end. Let Basil's ghost lie here, quiet.

*Two lefts, a right, and down. Easy.* My brother's voice in my ear, I clambered on hands and knees into an access tunnel that would lead to the air cleaners under the school. The bricks were harsh and dry under my palms. The air was thick in this part of the tunnels, untreated and stale. At



least these sewers hadn't served their original purpose in the better part of a century—the only smells were mildew and rotting brick. I tried to slow my pulse again. *It's just a tunnel*, Basil told me. *If you can get in, you can get out, and panicking only makes you stupid.*

Somewhere ahead I could hear the faint hum of the air machines. Another sound—above the usual metallic plinking and watery noises of the tunnels—caught my attention. My heart in my throat, I stopped moving and strained to hear through the background noise. Pixies? Panic robbed me of breath, blinding me for long seconds before logic intervened. Pixies moved silently—by the time I heard them it'd be too late. *Panicking makes you stupid.*

A footstep, sloshing, far away. Caesar, then. But that was stupid, too. Even if Caesar wanted to, he couldn't follow me through the maze of tunnels. If he stopped by our parents' place and found me missing, he'd have to report me, and by that time, I'd be long gone. And surely he wouldn't turn in his little sister?

Now the sounds became clearer. Voices echoed through the tunnels: one louder, another hissing, shushing the other. Another gentle splash, moving closer into the distance. Apparently, I wasn't the only kid on my way to the school.

I veered into a side tunnel, aiming for a less well-known route. My shoulders scraped against the bricks on either side, but I ignored it. Better a few scratches than run into any other kids down here.

Ahead, a glimmer of light outlined the end of the tunnel. I put on a little extra speed and finally lurched out of the tunnel onto my hands and knees in about six inches of mucky water.

I got to my feet and sloshed forward, drying my slimy hands against my shirt. In the distance, the sound of the air cleaner under the school drowned out any noise I made. It wasn't far now.

My path brought me to another narrow tunnel, barely large enough to fit my shoulders. I couldn't remember the last time I'd taken this side passage, but it must have been years ago. Had it always been this small? I stooped and peered into it, only able to see six feet or so through the darkness inside. *Just a tunnel.* And I had to see those names, know if this was all going to end today. I crawled inside.

I inched forward with my arms stretched out in front of me, the sound of the cleaner machinery beckoning me onward. The scrape of damp brick stung against my already raw arms, and the stale air inside reeked of rot and damp. The narrowness of the tunnel forced me to crawl, pushing myself along with the toes of my shoes and the tips of my fingers. Not surprising that no one else knew about this route.

Something snagged my pants leg, jerking me to a halt. I tugged, throat closing when whatever had caught the fabric failed to give way. The tunnel constricted my body in such a way that I couldn't even look down to see what had caught me. I jammed my leg against the wall of the tunnel and felt something hard and sharp stab at my thigh. Some iron reinforcement, perhaps, eroding its way out of the mortar. I tugged again. Nothing.

No one knew where I was. Even if Caesar guessed I'd snuck into the school, they'd be checking the popular route. I wasn't sure if anyone even knew about this way, except for Basil, and he was gone. I could be stuck down here for days—weeks. *I'm not going to die down here.*

I screamed out for help, my voice echoing in the tunnels. I didn't care anymore about getting caught. The idea of slowly starving to death in a brick pipe yards below the ground was worse than whatever they'd do to me for sneaking into the school. I knew there were other kids down here somewhere. Maybe they'd hear and help me.

The air was still, but for the mocking roar of the air cleaner up ahead. I was so close that the sound of my voice wouldn't carry very far over the sound of the machinery.

A jolt of panic shot down my spine, and I tried to calm myself. It felt as though I was smothering to death, forcing me to gasp for each breath. I strained my eyes until they watered, trying to stare through the darkness. Little spots began to dance in front of my eyes. My vision blurred as a roaring fog descended around my ears, accompanied by dizziness so strong I would have fallen if I could have moved.

I knew what was happening.

"When we feel the Resource taking over," the teacher always droned in a bored voice, "what do we do?"

"Start counting and picture an iron wall," half the class chorused back. The other half never bothered to pay attention.

I kept gasping for breath, trying to hold numbers in my mind. *No*, my thoughts screamed at me. *Not now*. But was it better to rot down here? The alternative was unthinkable. Illegal use of the Resource was the only offense a child could be Adjusted for.

The fog thickened, dizziness swelling and making it hard to concentrate. Panic urged it on.

*Iron*, I thought desperately. Images flashed through my mind, none of them what I needed. I needed cold iron, potent enough that the thought of it was enough to stop the Resource in its tracks.

Iron, like the sharp thing digging into my leg. I jammed my leg against it, trying to snuff out whatever was burning inside me. The dizziness eased, letting me blink away the blurry sparks of light obscuring my vision.

I forced myself to drag in a deep breath. *Think of Basil*. The pipe wasn't so tight I couldn't breathe. I was only imagining it. I was just stuck. I got myself in here, and I could get myself out. *Don't panic*.

I gave an experimental jerk of my leg, my pants resisting the movement. I stretched forward with my hands, seeking some kind of hole or crack in the brick or mortar that I could hold on to for leverage. There: a bit of crumbling brickwork. I raked it away with my fingertips, nails scraping against the mortar, until I had enough room to get some purchase on it.

I took another long breath in and then exhaled all the way, making myself as small as possible—and jerked.

My leg came free with a dreadful long *rip* of fabric. I scrambled forward, nails scrabbling on brick, feet scraping. Ahead of me yawned the cleaner chamber, and with a last burst of effort I spilled out onto its floor, the edge of the pipe taking several layers of skin off my arms as I did.

Air. I needed any air but the horrible, Resource-soaked air in the pipe.

Though the mechanics did their best, there were always leaks in the giant bellows moving the air. I crawled forward until I found one, and then turned over and lay there, lungs heaving and eyes shut. Gasps of fresh air brushed my face, tossing my hair around.

Safe.

After a few long moments, the trembling in my arms and legs stilled, and the burning in my lungs eased. I was lying in an inch or two of water, soaked to the bone. I opened my eyes.

The chamber housing the air cleaner was roughly spherical, with the cycling machinery taking up most of the floor space. Gears bigger than I was spun in ponderous, perpetual motion, their bottoms disappearing into grooves gouged in the stone floor. The giant bellows in the middle of it all kept the air moving, pumping recycled air into the school. The noise was deafening.

I would have lay in the muck for an hour, but I couldn't afford it. I could no longer hear the sun disc, had no way of gauging the passage of time. But I'd come this far—I wasn't

going to turn back now without seeing that list, even if it meant Caesar catching me covered in sewer muck.

I sucked in a few deep breaths until my arms stopped shaking, and then reached for the maintenance ladder, just able to grab the bottom rung. I hauled myself up inch by inch, feet kicking against the wall behind it until I could get them onto the ladder.

The hatch came up inside the janitor's closet. I carefully shut it behind me and turned my attention to the door: locked, as always. But Basil had taught me about this, too. Years of practice had made it second nature. Grab the handle and pull, lower your hip, slam it into the laminate just below the lock.

*Clunk.* The lock's tumblers jarred into place.

The door swung open, and I slipped inside the school.

Even though I'd done this every Harvest Day for the better part of five years, praying to anything listening that I'd be harvested next, the sight of my school darkened and empty always gave me an odd chill down my spine. I slunk down the corridor, keeping to the shadows. My steps squelched lightly in the silence, leaving wet footprints against the spotless tile floor. Whoever the other group had been, they hadn't beaten me here. I felt a strange surge of pride at that thought. Basil had taught me well.

The dean's office was just down from the school's classrooms. Its locking mechanism suffered from the same weaknesses as the closet's, and following a loud *thunk* that echoed down the hall, I ducked inside. The faint light of morning filtered in through the windows, illuminating the furniture inside.

There was a leather folder on the desk. Suddenly everything else fell away, the whole room narrowing, roaring in my ears. Nothing mattered, except that here was my ticket out of limbo.

I knew my name was on the paper inside this time. It *had* to be. It had to be. It was as though my eyes could see

through the folder's cover, my name printed there dark and clear as if burned into the sheet. *Ainsley, Lark.*

My fingers shook as I picked up the folder. I didn't care that my damp skin left wet spots all over the folder and the paper inside. My eyes took forever to focus. The letters, written in neat, orderly rows, were gibberish until I forced my mind to decipher them.

Baker, Zekiel, I read, the blood roaring in my ears. Dalton, Margaret. Kennedy, Tam. Smithson, James.

My brain didn't even process that the names were in alphabetical order, that it was over before I'd read the first name. My eyes raked over each of the four names twice. I turned the paper over, but only white space greeted me. Empty.

Water dripped onto the paper, spots of translucence that blurred the names. For a strange moment, a detached part of my mind wondered if I'd started crying. Then I realized that it was dirty water from my hair, which had fallen forward over my shoulder.

As the buzzing in my head began to fade, another sound intruded upon the unnatural quiet of the empty school. It was faint first, like the sound of my own blood coursing past my eardrums. Then I picked out a humming, something almost mechanical, rising and falling. I stood listening for long, precious moments, unwilling to believe the sound.

Pixies.

## CHAPTER 2

I THREW THE folder back onto the desk, not even bothering to make it look undisturbed. The paper inside was already water-stained and crumpled. No hiding my presence now. I took two quick steps to the door, easing it open and peering around it just enough to see a sliver of the hallway.

Dark, still, silent. Except—just there. A flash of copper, darting from one room to the next. The tiniest of hums, the sound of the Resource twined with clockwork.

I froze. A thousand half-invented stories whispered about the pixies flashed through my brain. Part of me had been hoping I was imagining it, sensing something else and jumping to the wrong conclusion. I waited, counting the seconds silently. Again it zipped out of the room and into the one across the hall. Twenty seconds it spent in each room, as steady as the ticking of a clock. Twenty seconds with the corridor free.

There were ten rooms in all, five on each side. The janitor's closet lay in between the second and third rooms on the left. I tried to gauge the distance from the dean's office to the closet.

As the pixie darted into the next room down, I took deep breaths until I was dizzy. As soon as the pixie came out and zipped into the room across the hall, I made for the closet.

My wet shoes squealed against the floor. Pixies weren't supposed to have ears, only a sensor for the Resource, but my skin burned nevertheless as though I could feel eyes on me. I skidded once for a heart-stopping second, then careened into the closet's door. Fumbling with the handle, I

finally got it open and lurched inside. I slammed it behind me and stood listening, straining for sound, the side of my face and my ear pressed against the door.

A voice. "Holy shit."

I whirled to see three pairs of wide eyes glittering at me through the gloom, reflecting the faint light emanating from the crack under the door.

The other kids I'd heard in the tunnels.

"What's with all the noise?" came one voice. Without light I couldn't identify him. I didn't bother getting to know my classmates very well anymore. They inevitably got harvested and moved on without me. "Are you trying to get us all caught?"

"Sorry. I got spooked." The words were out before I could stop them. I blinked in the gloom. Why hadn't I told them about the pixie?

"Is that Lark?" demanded the same voice. He must be the leader of this little expedition.

"Who's Lark?" came another voice, younger.

"The dud, you moron." The leader grinned, a flash of slightly uneven teeth in the darkness.

Of course they all knew me. By reputation, if not by name. The unharvested freak. People on the other side of the city knew who I was. I just got older and older, watching kids three, four, five years my junior march off to their harvest ceremonies.

"Was that you screaming bloody murder down there in the tunnels?" The first boy sounded on the verge of laughter.

They'd heard me. When I believed I was trapped, possibly doomed to waste away in a tunnel below the city—they'd heard me screaming for help. And no one had come.

"Yeah," I muttered, my fingers curling into fists.

One of the other kids giggled, and I gritted my teeth. The first boy said, "Well? Did you see the list?"



I breathed in. “No,” I said calmly. “I didn’t. But you’d better hurry if you want to see it before anyone comes.”

And without waiting for a reply, I dropped down through the hatch and let my weight pull it closed. I dangled from the hatch for a moment before swinging my legs over onto the ladder. I reached back up for the lock, shaking fingers closing over the red handle.

*Just do it,* I told myself, head beginning to ache from clenching my jaw so tightly. *They would’ve done the same to you.*

And lock them in with a pixie. My stomach roiled at the thought, a shudder of remembered terror running through me. I stared up at the hatch for a few long moments and then groaned, dropping back down to the floor, the hatch unlocked.

My heart still pounding, I set off down the larger tunnel, avoiding the one where I’d gotten stuck. My nerves were jangling, and I had to try not to think of how close I’d come to being caught. The punishments for sneaking into the school were dire—minimum rations, isolation, even giving you a lower status apprenticeship when you were harvested and made an adult. Plus there was pride. In all these years, I’d never been caught. My thoughts were lost in imagining the punishments, fear mixed with relief still ruling my mind as I hurried home.

I should have noticed something was wrong. Even though the cleaner chamber was receding further and further behind me, the sound of machinery remained. The humming grew louder as I walked, but I was so relieved at my escape that I didn’t give it a second’s thought.

And so when I reached an intersection of the tunnels and rounded the corner to come face to face with a pixie, I could do nothing but stare stupidly.

It had no eyes, no mouth, only a featureless, round head no bigger than my pinky fingernail. Delicate copper wings were a blur of motion as it hovered, its segmented body

giving it an insectlike appearance. They were the smallest of the mechanimals invented in the extravagant decades before the wars, requiring so little of the Resource to run that they were the only ones the Institute still used. They were nothing more than curiosities then, but now they were the Institute's eyes in the city, able to detect instantly any illegal use of the Resource. Children weren't expected to report malfunctions and submit to Adjustment—children, after all, can't be expected to act responsibly. They need to be watched.

For a moment we were still, me staring at the pixie and it watching me sightlessly in return. The only sounds I could hear were the buzzing of its wings, the whirring of its gears, and the jarring, discordant twang of the Resource twisted to its mechanism.

Then it gave a malevolent whine of triumph and launched itself toward my face, so fast I almost didn't see it move. Without thinking, I threw up my hands, all of the panic, relief, despair, and fury of the past half hour exploding with no time to count to ten, no time to think of iron.

The pixie was thrown against the far wall of the tunnel with such force that it shattered, fragments tinkling against the brick and splashing in the water.

I staggered, lightheaded, a hazy mist descending over my eyes. A wave of dizziness nearly knocked me down, and I stumbled over toward where I'd seen the pixie strike. Dropping to my knees, I felt through the muck.

There was nothing left but a few hollow shards of copper shell.

Shaking, I forced myself to my feet again. The Resource. I'd used it. And not just a tiny spell to save my life in a tunnel somewhere. I'd damaged a pixie, a precious machine, the very eyes of the Institute. No, not just damaged. Obliterated.

It shouldn't have been possible. Even the strongest flow of Resource was barely enough to levitate a pencil without the help of machinery to amplify it. It was a power source—like the tightly wound spring in a watch—nothing more. The Institute had always taught us so. That the architects could be wrong was unthinkable.

At least I'd found out I wasn't a dud.

But at what cost?

• • •

I longed to linger in the shower and let the water wash away the fear as well as the tunnel muck. I'd learned long ago to save my shower ration for the days I'd be going tunnel-hopping, but even so I had only a few minutes at most. It had taken me the better part of an hour to work my way back through the tunnels, and then find a circuitous route home that would avoid having anyone see me, wet and mucky and bleeding.

I scrubbed away the mud and dirty water, my scraped arms stinging. I rinsed my hair as best as I could, in too much of a rush to coax any lather out of the cheap ration soap. After I'd finished, I stood dripping by the window. The sun disc was just clearing the buildings.

I closed my eyes, letting the light wash my face through the dingy window of my parents' apartment. If only I'd stayed stuck in that pipe, I never would've smashed that pixie. In the pipe, I had thought it better to be caught than to rot. Now, having used the Resource, being caught would mean Adjustment.

I was supposed to be in school by now, listening to the names called for the harvest. Suffering through the same drawn-out ceremony. The fat, sugar-sweet Harvest Administrator would be there by now in her red coat, delivering her speech to the kids about sacrifice and efficiency, and the journey into adulthood. She had always

terrified me, despite her pleasant demeanor. I wasn't used to seeing large people, and she got a little wider each year. In the past, fear of the Administrator was always enough to make sure I attended every Harvest Day.

But I knew I wasn't on the list, and no one would notice I was gone. All attention would be on the kids whose names were called. I was still buzzing from what I'd done, little jolts of the Resource escaping from my fingertips and my wet hair when I moved. I couldn't report to class like this. What if they could somehow sense it when I entered? What if it clung to me, like the faint stench of the tunnels still inhabiting my hair?

I drew in a shaky breath and turned away from the window. I got dressed slowly and then went into the living room. Rummaging in the box of my belongings by my sofa bed, I pulled out the paper bird Basil had made for me before he disappeared.

"Don't go," I'd begged him.

"You weren't made to live in a cage, little bird." He kept his voice low, calm. Soothing. But there was a tension behind his gaze that had frightened me. "Someone has to take the first steps beyond it."

"But who will protect me from Caesar?" Caesar, my older brother by five years, and two years older than Basil. He was almost a stranger to me and terrifying in his gruffness.

Basil crouched down to eye level with me. Even then I was short and scrawny. "What if I made you a friend to keep you company?" he asked.

It had been years since he'd last made me one of his paper animals. He'd taught himself how in school, stealing scraps of recycled paper and folding until they resembled creatures out of the history books. Elephants, tigers, dogs, squirrels, once even an eagle.

"I'm not a little kid anymore," I protested.

“I know,” Basil said. “This would be a special one, different from the others. I’ve had this paper—” and he pulled a small, yellow-gray sheet of paper from his satchel, “—waiting for a few weeks now. The animal’s already inside, waiting to be set free. You just have to see it.” He looked back up at me, serious and earnest. “But she’ll need someone to take care of her. Will you do that until I get back?”

I knew what he was doing, saw through his efforts to distract me, but I nodded anyway. It had been so long since I’d watched him fold. He winked at me and turned his attention to the paper. His fingers flew, forming angles by folding and folding back again, creases leaping up along edges and bisecting the center. “Slower!” I begged him, longing to see and learn the trick of it, but he just laughed and kept folding.

I couldn’t see what it was until he was nearly done, at which point my breath caught in my throat.

“A lark,” he said, bending the wings back up into place and then resting the paper bird on the palm of his hand. “Like you, Lark.” He grinned again, and leaned toward me so he could jostle my shoulder with his.

Just before I could reach out to take the paper bird, he pulled his hand back and bent his head, gazing at it with great concentration. I felt a tingle spread outward from the base of my skull, a lightheadedness that caused my vision to spark strangely and the blood to rush past my ears. Even though I knew what I was sensing could not be true, my breath quickened. Eventually he drew in a breath and then exhaled carefully over the bird, blowing against its wings. I heard a tiny sound, like the ringing of a far-off bell. The paper bird flapped its wings once and then soared in a tiny, effortless circle over the palm of Basil’s hand before gliding over to mine.

I stared in horror at my brother as my spine tingled with the thrill of the forbidden. I’d never seen anyone use the

Resource before. It was supposed to be impossible without the alchemists' years of training.

"How did you do that?" I breathed.

Basil grinned at me. "Magic."

My mouth hung open. I tried to remember the last time I'd even heard that word. It was strictly forbidden in school.

He winked, reaching out to tap my chin and close my mouth. "It's okay to say the word, you know. That's what it is. And they think they can control it—control us—but they're wrong."

Magic had made the bird fly from his hand. I'd always assumed he was moving the bird like the architects moved machines like the pixies, using a tiny bit of Resource to power something designed for the purpose. But I should have known better. It was, after all, only a bit of folded paper—the wings weren't designed for flight, the body too fat and the tail too long. There were no gears for the Resource to set in motion. His spell had been effortless—and considerably more impressive than floating a pencil.

But still not exactly vaporizing a pixie with a single thought.

I hadn't touched the paper bird in years, not since Basil had disappeared, but I longed for my brother to walk through the door and tell me what to do. He'd tell me not to be afraid of the pixies, that they were barely more than paper birds themselves, animated by the Institute. He'd tell me my fear was making monsters out of little tin bugs. I didn't have to let that fear control me.

I shivered, thinking of my brother's explanation for his sacrifice. *You weren't made to live in a cage, little bird.* That much, it seemed, was true.

In a city utterly dependent on its every citizen to perform their duties and fit in like clockwork, where was there room for me?

Cradling the bird in my hands, the tingle of the Resource—of magic, I corrected myself—still coursing through me, I drew a deep breath, willing my pounding heart to calm, and exhaled slowly.

My breath brushed the bird, stirring the paper wings. It so resembled the moment six years ago when the bird had come to life and taken flight that I caught my breath again, heart pounding. Had I accidentally done it again? The wings stilled, but before I could relax, the bird cocked its little head—and burst into song.

Three clear notes, and then it dissolved into a fluttering series of chirps that had me scrambling to silence it. I stopped myself before I crushed the thing, but I blew on it frantically instead, praying there was no one in a neighboring apartment to hear it. Birds had been extinct, as far as anyone knew, since the wars killed most animals and twisted the rest.

At first it shook itself with an air of indignant protest, but after a few more puffs it went still again. My head spinning, I crouched by the couch and listened.

For a moment I heard nothing. I started to stand up, my legs shaking with adrenaline.

Then came a pounding on the door. I dropped to my knees. The knock came again, loud and forceful—a city official's knock. How had they found me so quickly?

I folded the bird's wings down flat and then shoved it deep into the pocket of my pants. I scrambled to my feet and stood there, heart slamming against my ribcage. I snatched up a packet of ration crackers from the table and shoved those into my pocket too, some part of my brain reminding me that wherever I fled, I'd have to eat. The front door was the only way out of the apartment—except for the fire escape from the window in the living room. I leaped over the arm of the couch and went to the window, fingers fumbling with the latch.

As I heaved at the window, trying to get it open, a voice from outside the door called, “Lark, what the hell? Open the door!”

I knew that voice. I ran to the door, hands shaking with relief now rather than panic as I twisted the lock and threw the door open.

“Caesar!”

My brother was a tall man, his imposing stature serving him well as a Regulator. He had very carefully cultivated a mustache in an effort to fit in and be taken seriously by the more senior officials. All it earned him was years of being teased for its scraggly appearance. His eyes were so like Basil’s in color and shape, but so different in character.

“What have you been up to?” he demanded. My relief vanished in an instant. Caesar lived across town now, with the other Regulators, though he still had a key to our parents’ apartment—what was he doing here? He took a step into the apartment, and I fell a step back.

“Wh-what?” I gasped. “No—C, I didn’t mean to, I swear. Please.”

Caesar frowned, the mustache drooping dramatically. “What? No, I meant—what were you doing with the deadbolt on? I couldn’t get in.”

I gaped at him. “Oh,” I managed.

“Why aren’t you in school?” He moved past me into the living room, thrusting his hands up over his head and stretching, spine popping.

I shook my head, still trying to process. He hadn’t come to bring me in for illegal use of the Resource. He didn’t know about the pixie, or the paper bird.

“Keep this up and you’re not going to fit when you get your assignment. Hate to send my own little sister’s name to the Regulatory Board. Look, they sent me to find you, since you weren’t in class. I figured you’d be at Mom and Dad’s. Your name was called.”



That brought me up short, panic on hold while I stared up at my brother. “My name was what?”

“Called,” repeated Caesar, his voice casual. He knew what it meant to me, though. His eyes gleamed. “You’re going to be harvested, though hell knows why. Just a scrawny bit of a thing, should just feed you to the shadows over the Wall and be done with it.”

“Harvested,” I echoed, my thoughts moving so slowly it was like swimming through syrup. Despite my flush of excitement, I knew my name hadn’t been on that list. Something was wrong.

“Carriage is waiting for you downstairs. Kind of a crappy driver if you ask me, but hey—he promises he can get you to the Institute. At least you get it all to yourself.”

I swallowed. “But—but the other kids?”

Caesar shook his head. “You’re the only one called this time.”

All happiness fled, leaving me cold, my thoughts suddenly crystal clear. I saw the paper in my mind’s eye as clear as if it were in front of me again. I closed my eyes.

They knew. Somehow, they knew I’d been doing magic. I wasn’t being taken to the Institute to be harvested—I was being taken to be punished. And there was only one punishment for illegal use of the Resource: Adjustment.

“Congrats, little sis,” said my brother, reaching out to ruffle my hair.

## CHAPTER 3

THE CARRIAGE DRIVER was a skinny boy a few years younger than I with too large ears and hair a shocking orange. He swung a leg over his cycle, lines of muscle standing out on his skinny calves. The hitch between carriage and cycle creaked as he let his weight down onto the seat.

I wanted to run—but where would I go? There was no place in the city where the pixies wouldn't find me.

I looked over my shoulder at Caesar, hoping for some last-minute reprieve. I wanted to tell him I was in trouble, but my tongue was thick and heavy. Caesar had turned his attention to the hand-held talkie device that kept him in touch with the other cops, and didn't so much as glance at me.

The driver kicked at the starter, magic coursing through the gears of the bicycle. We pulled away slowly, the kid straining at the pedals. The pedals, like much of the rest of the carriage, were rusty and worn. The only thing in good repair was the gleaming mechanism nestled in the chains that turned magic into motion. The warm glow of copper seemed out of place within its case of rusted, ancient machinery.

I tried to imagine what it must be like to live in the Institute as the architects did, using machines like this every day. Ages ago people used horse-drawn carriages to get around. After the Wall went up, horses took up too much space and ate too much food. And so the Institute had developed these crude carriages, powered by bicycle,

mechanical advantage—and a conservative dose of the Resource.

It took more power to move something directly by raw magic than it took to use magic to operate something mechanical. Clockwork was the best, with delicate gears, pendulums, and jewels that moved smoothly and efficiently, so long as something—magic—provided the impetus.

There was a time, before the wars, when the whole world was rife with technology. Most was gone now, but for the art of binding the Resource to clockwork. Without it, no one would have survived the cataclysmic events that ended the wars, destroying the countryside. We were the last city on earth. Only our architects, and the Wall they constructed, kept us safe. And they continued to do so, forming the Institute of Magic and Natural Philosophy, to preserve the remaining technologies that keep us alive. And to harvest the power they needed to do so.

Another time, I would have enjoyed a carriage ride. Carriages were free on Harvest Day for kids called to the Institute, but at all other times they cost too much for most people.

“Aren’t you kinda old?”

The driver’s voice yanked me back to the present. I was used to this question by now, and I ignored him. My experience in school had taught me that silence usually bred silence, and that by ignoring people I could usually make them stop talking to me.

Not so with the driver. “Your name’s Lark, right? My sis just got harvested last year and she’s only like nine,” he said, puffing between sentences as he pedaled. “But she’s cool. She’s real old for her age, and smart, too. Gonna be an architect’s assistant someday.”

Basil had been told on more than one occasion that he could’ve been an architect if he’d had different parents. As it was, he had set his sights on the glass forge, and dreamed of the day he’d get picked as a vitrarius, one of

the specialized glassworkers in the Institute. It would've meant that his future children, if they'd tested well enough, could've been architects, if they were lucky. So, the idea that the sister of a carriage driver had aspirations of working in the Institute was ludicrous, but I didn't say this aloud. Instead, I found myself asking, "What was your harvest like?"

The boy slowed in order to turn down a different street, and waited to answer until he'd picked up speed again. "It was spec. You're so lucky. You wouldn't believe the kind of stuff they got there. All the fruit you can eat, and syrup and these fried potato slices and—" He had to stop for breath.

"No, I meant the harvest itself, not the feast. What was it like when they stripped you?"

"Oh." No answer for a while, which I chalked up to the slight hill we were climbing. "I don't really remember much about it, I guess. The food was much more interesting. What, do you believe those kids who say it's like cutting off a hand or something?"

I laughed to hide my uneasiness. "Just curious."

I expected him to take this dismissal as a hint for silence, but he kept up his chatter the entire way. We turned down another street, and then another, until I lost track of where we were. When we turned a corner to find the Institute stretching out before us, I gasped.

I'd seen it before, but always from a distance, as if it were a two-dimensional painting instead of a complex large enough to take up a whole quarter of the city, surrounded by an ancient granite wall that must have been fifteen feet high.

My driver seemed unimpressed, but as he approached the curb outside the gate, he turned to flash a grin at me. "I know, right? Eat some of those fried potato things for me." The wistfulness in his voice caught me by surprise.

His chatter the whole way had dispelled a lot of my nervous energy. I didn't care about his sister or her school

project or his dad's job at the sewage recycling plant or how he was hoping to get a better bicycle in a couple years, but I was trying so hard not to listen that I hadn't had any time to spare to worry about having broken the law.

I got out of the carriage when he pulled up to the curb. He smiled at me, all ears and orange hair, and I suddenly found myself wishing I had paid more attention to him. I knew this was where the richer people, the ones who routinely rode on the carriages, would tip a ration chit that could be exchanged for a handful of vegetables or a quarter pound of sugar. I stood there awkwardly shifting my weight from one foot to the other.

"Well, see you around," he said, cocking his head and turning back to his carriage. He knew better than to expect a tip from me.

"Right," I replied. The squashy packet of ration crackers was an uncomfortable lump in my pocket as I watched the driver—I had never even asked his name—start to pedal away.

"Wait!" I called, and he stopped, automatically checking the carriage to see if I'd left something.

"Here," I said, unwrapping the crackers so he could see them and shoving the packet at him.

He looked down at it and then back up at me, mouth hanging open. "Whoa, I can't take this from you."

"I won't need it, I'm going to be feasting in a couple hours."

"But—" His eyes were wide, almost as round as his ears, which were turning pink as he gazed at me.

"Just take it!" I turned away, embarrassed that he thought I was so poor that I couldn't tip him something.

As I hurried away, he called, "Thanks, Miss Lark! You ever need a ride, you ask for Tamren! Thank you! Thanks!"

There was no sign to tell me where to go, no other kids to stand with. As I approached the gate, all my fear came slamming back, making each step forward a torment. There

was a guard in the gatehouse, watching my trepidation with some bemusement. When I finally reached the gate and opened my mouth to speak, he anticipated me.

“Lark Ainsley?” he asked. When I nodded, he got down from his seat and walked over to the gate, unlocking it and pushing it open a fraction for me to enter. The lock on the gate was heavy iron—no amount of magic would free me after it shut behind me. But I had no other choice than to keep going.

I took a deep breath and stepped inside.

The building in front of me was a huge, square, white monstrosity with faux columns and a massive pair of iron doors on its front. I could just make out a copper-colored dome above the façade. Carved into the marble over the doors were the words “*Vis in magia, in vita vi.*” In magic there is power, and in power, life. Latin was the language of the architects, a language forbidden to the rest of us. I only knew the phrase from one of the battered history books I’d read to pass the time in school after I’d outgrown the curriculum.

Before the wars there had been people able to regenerate their innate power—Renewables, they were called, though they’d been called many things before that: Witches, sorcerers, magicians. Demons. But there hadn’t been any Renewables born in generations, not since the Wall went up, and those left outside destroyed themselves by abusing the Resource.

A young woman in a blue assistant’s coat came hurrying down the steps toward me. “Sorry!” she called out to me, coming to a halt a few feet away. “Sorry I’m late.”

She cradled a clipboard against her chest, face peeping at me over its top. She could have been my older sister, with hair a few shades darker than mine, looking almost black in the shade of the building. Her face was round enough to reflect the heavier rations given to the employees of the Institute. With the physical and mental