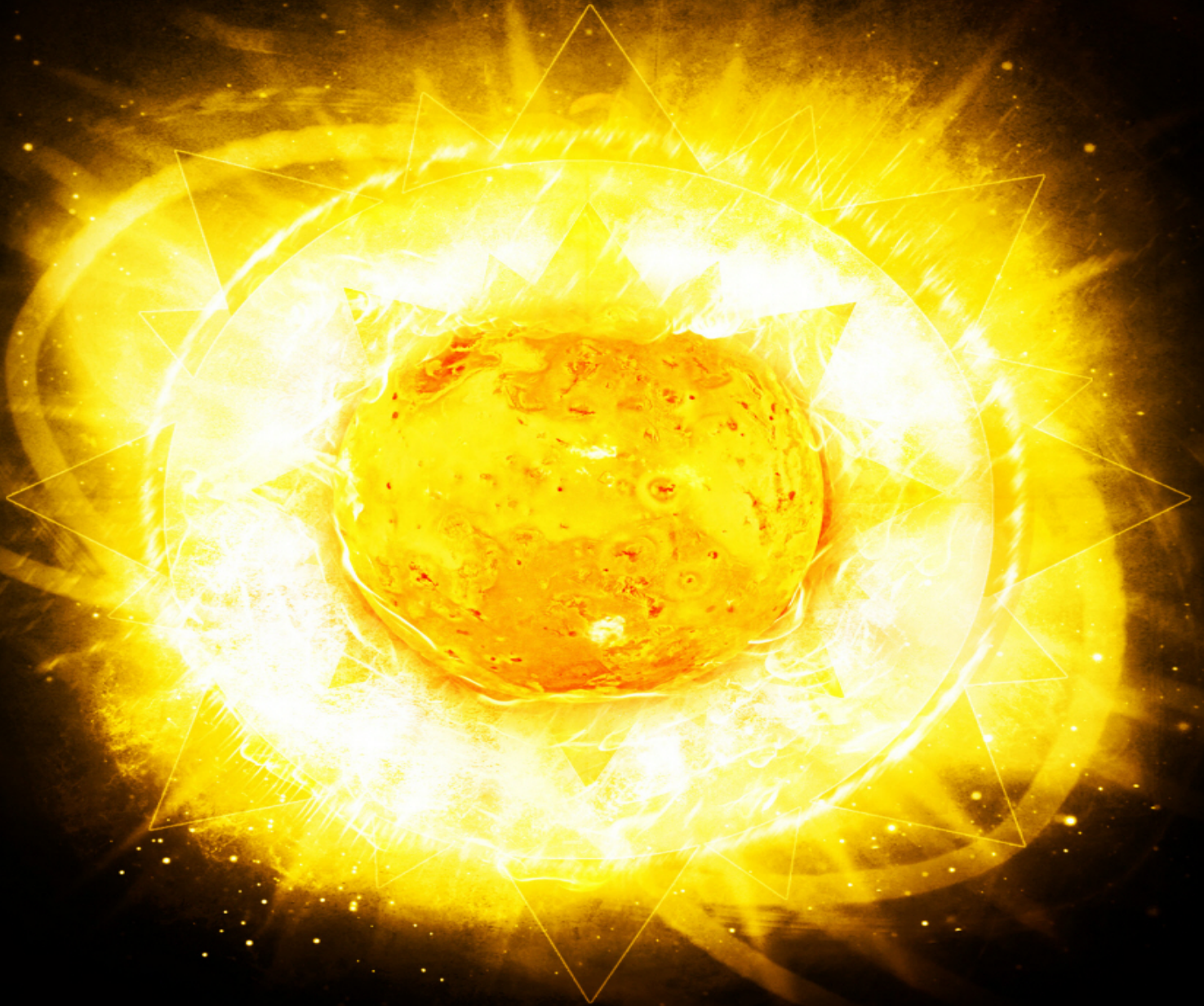


MASTER THE DARKNESS

# LARK ASCENDING



MEAGAN SPOONER

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## ABOUT THE BOOK

*“Magic blasted through me in a wave, electrifying every nerve and muscle”*

The city’s magic is fading fast and its inhabitants fear for their future. Lark returns home determined to overthrow the Insitute and free her people from its tyranny.

But another rebel leader has emerged: Eve, a mysterious renewable who wields a dark power.

Her magic could destroy the city and its people.

Only Lark can save them . . .



# LARK ASCENDING

MEAGAN SPOONER

RHCP DIGITAL

*FOR JOSH:*

*There's no one I'd rather have on my team, fighting for me  
and for my stories.*

*AND FOR ANDREW:*

*Who will always be the voice of my shoulder devil, telling  
me to write the harder, darker, more impossible things.*

## PROLOGUE

Their clockwork sun is rising. In these half-forgotten tunnels beneath the city, the sound is like the roar of a rainstorm, lashing my ears again and again. The swell of magic washes over me like a tide, flooding my senses; I taste copper, and I don't know if it's magic or blood from my bitten tongue. Breaking through their barrier drained me of every ounce of magic I had, making this surge overwhelming. It nearly drives me to my knees in the ankle-deep water. My sloshing footsteps are lost in the din as I stagger forward, bracing myself against the tunnel wall. The stone bricks are slimy to the touch, wet with decades of mildew and mold.

I pull myself upright again, a moan echoing away from me down the tunnel. There's no telling what security sensors they might have—for all I know, the city's forces are on their way already, wondering what foreign danger breached their defenses for the first time in a century. I can't be here when they arrive. I keep moving through willpower alone.

It was Dorian who taught me how to do it. He deciphered the theory of it, spent months locked up in his house, poring over equations and diagrams. Sometimes in the night I'd awaken, consumed with fear and doubt about what lay in store for me. I'd look out my window and see, across the darkened sea of the Iron Wood, a single light—like the solitary lantern in a lighthouse, calling to me, drawing me to him.

I always knew he could teach me how to get inside, but only I could break through the flawless metal dome



enclosing the city. Only I am strong enough to magic iron.

I'm too drained to even conjure a light, so I rely on the dim illumination that filters through the occasional grate in the street overhead. As the cacophony of the sunrise fades, I begin to hear the noise of carriages and foot traffic here and there as the city's citizens shuffle off to begin their days.

With the fading of the sunrise's harsh magic comes the return of my senses. The city itself is an utter mystery to us—no outsider has been inside since before the cataclysm over a century ago. There are no maps, and I can't risk showing my face aboveground until I absolutely have to. We don't know how many people live here, or whether they'd recognize me as a stranger if they saw me. In the Iron Wood, we all know each other. We'd recognize a newcomer in a heartbeat.

So I have to follow the scent of magic. The moment I crossed through their barrier I could feel it, a shining beacon in the hazy unknown. Though there is magic in the air here, most of it resides at the far end of the city, in a complex of buildings. I could see them lit up like stars when I scouted from the rooftop in the predawn hours before I retreated beneath the streets.

If anything can tell me the secret of how this city survived the cataclysm that turned the rest of the countryside into ruins, it'll be there. Dorian thinks they had something to do with the end of the world. And we'll never be safe until we know they can't do it again.

Over the sounds of distant machinery and street traffic, something else catches my ear. A tiny buzzing, almost musical. I pause, listening carefully. The sound is coming from down here—from the tunnels. And it's coming closer.

I pull back against the wall, tucking myself into an alcove. Whatever it is has magic, I can feel it now, bobbing nearer and nearer. They have sentries even down here. Carefully I pull the last shreds of magic I have close around



myself, imagining a hard, iron shell. *Camouflage*. Holding my breath, I wait.

Eventually, a tiny machine flits into view. Its wingspan is no bigger than my pinky finger, and if it hadn't buzzed through a shaft of light from the streets above, causing its copper body to flash, I never would've spotted it. I hold even tighter to my shell, willing the sentry to move on past.

Though it pauses to scan its surroundings—I can feel the sweep of magic slide past me—its senses don't penetrate my camouflage. It hums off into the distance again, leaving me alone with my pounding heart.

I have so little magic that I feel naked, vulnerable. If that sentry had spotted me, I'm not sure I could have destroyed it before it took word of my intrusion back to its masters. Summoning my strength, I step out of my crumbling alcove and slip on through the maze of tunnels.

The knot of magic at the end of the city draws me onward, and eventually I feel it start to shift. It's no longer ahead of me, but all around me. Somewhere above my head are the answers I seek.

The world around me is nearly pitch-black now, no more grates leading to the streets. There are buildings above me, and no more easy escapes. Swallowing my fears, I send flickers of magic ahead of me, feeling the way they caress the stone and bounce back from the metal. I'm forced to form a picture of my surroundings the way a bat does, ghostly images coalescing in my mind.

There—a ladder. I grasp for it, fingers curling around the clammy iron. No hiding underground anymore. I have to cling to the rungs for nearly a minute before I summon the courage to step out of the water and climb up to the hatch above.

The wheel-lock screeches as I open the hatch, but it gives way—there's nothing blocking it from the other side. The trapdoor is heavy, forcing me to lean my shoulder into it awkwardly as I try to shove it up and away while balancing

on the ladder. Finally I manage it, and it falls back with a clang. Light floods my eyes.

I stagger out of the hole in the floor and let the hatch drop closed again, and then catch my breath. I'm in a vast room, larger than any I've ever seen. The ceiling is a huge dome with skylights to let in the artificial sunlight, crisscrossed with tracks for machinery. As I watch, an immense ring with a fiery sun on it ticks over, a simulated passage across their simulated sky. The floor is polished marble—when I look down, the hatch is nearly invisible, masquerading as a beautiful compass rose inlaid with gold at the center of the floor.

Corridors lead in every direction, labeled with signs. Most of them I cannot understand, despite being one of the few in the Iron Wood who can read. *Biothaumatic Laboratory*, reads one sign. *Museum and Archives*, reads another.

Archives. That one, I recognize. I take a step forward.

"Hello." A voice echoes out from behind me, freezing my blood and making me whirl.

A woman stands there. She's older than I am, but not by much. She has short black hair and a round face with keen, narrow eyes. She's a little plump, wearing a long red coat that reaches to her knees. Around her neck she wears a gold necklace adorned with an ornamental version of a drawing tool I've only ever seen in Dorian's office, used when he studies his maps and diagrams. *A compass*, my mind supplies.

She doesn't seem surprised to see me—she seems only interested, curious. Even pleased.

My thoughts tangle, trying desperately to seek out some excuse, some reason for being here. My pant legs are sodden from my trip through the tunnels—in the silence I can hear them dripping on the immaculate floor. The droplets strike out a rhythm against the floor like the

ticking of a clock, measuring the time since she spoke, the time I've failed to reply. *Too late. Too late.*

The woman's head tilts to the side as she studies me the way Dorian would study one of his maps. "Welcome to the Institute," she says. "What's your name?"

I open my mouth, my dry throat working soundlessly. Finally, painfully, I whisper, "Eve."

She smiles, but the expression leaves me cold, makes me wish I'd stayed in the damp, musty tunnels underground. Her smile makes something at the base of my skull ache—her smile lifts the hairs on the back of my neck.

"Hello, Eve," she says. "My name is Gloriette. I think we're going to become the best of friends."

# PART I

## CHAPTER 1

My hands ached, my lower back screaming a protest. I longed to move, but even so much as a tiny shift to relieve my sore muscles might give away my position. I had the advantage up here, in this tree—but moving would shake the branches, and the tiniest shiver of leaves would be all Oren needed to find me.

In a way, I was grateful for my discomfort. The pain grounded me, drove away the fragments of my dream that kept coming back, no matter how often I tried to dismiss them. The dreams came more often now, the closer I came to my home, to the city where I was born. They felt like memories, but of events that never happened. At least, not exactly. I'd been in those tunnels under the city, but I'd been trying to break into the school, not the Institute. I'd been caught by Gloriette, but not in the rotunda. Her smile had made my skin crawl too, but she was so young in this memory, so much younger than I remembered.

Unless—unless it had happened that way. Unless my memory was wrong, warped somehow by everything that had happened to me. Perhaps I was the one becoming twisted.

But this—this branch, its rough bark digging into my palms, carving deep impressions in the skin there—this was real. I tightened my grip.

A small, tinny sound prompted me to lift my head, slow and cautious. The buzzing grew louder, more familiar, and in spite of my aching body, I smiled.

"Anything?" I whispered as Nix winged in and lighted on my shoulder.

*"He's moved off in the wrong direction,"* the pixie said smugly. "He lost your trail back by the river when you walked in the streambed."

My heart surged with relief and no small amount of satisfaction. I'd outwitted *Oren*, the best tracker and hunter I'd ever met.

If Oren was headed for the wrong end of the copse we were in, that meant I could move. I straightened with a badly stifled moan for my cramped limbs. My jerky movements made the branch I was clinging to leap and shudder, and I was glad for Nix's scouting. I could sense the dark pit of shadow that was Oren when he was nearby, but once he got out of my immediate range, I had no way of tracking him.

Carefully I started climbing down the tree. I could double back to where he'd already searched for me—it'd take him hours to come back around again, and he didn't have that kind of time to waste. The second to last branch was about six feet off the ground, and I let myself down to dangle there.

Before I could drop to the leaf litter, a face melted out of the foliage—fierce blue eyes, and white teeth bared in a grin.

"Gotcha," said Oren.

I shrieked and let go of the branch, landing heavily and rolling when I hit the ground. Dazed, but heart pounding, I started to scramble to my feet. A hand closed around my ankle.

"Oh, no you don't!" Oren gasped, dragging me back. "I found you—don't try to get out of this one!"

"Nix!" I screamed as the pixie danced around just beyond the reach of my grasp. "You little traitor!"

*"You're too trusting of your allies!"* Nix called in a sing-song voice. It gave a little shiver of its wings—*laughing* at me.

"Do you yield?" Oren was laughing too, in that quiet, breathless way he had.

I made one last attempt to break free, but his grip was too tight. I went limp. "Fine," I muttered. "You win."

"Don't sulk," Oren said, kneeling over me. "You came close that time."

"I hope you know that I *could* get out of this," I told him. "But you could get seriously hurt in the process."

"Ah," said Oren gravely. "Well, thank you for deigning to be captured, in that case."

"Shut up."

His grip relaxed, though he gave no sign of moving to let me up. "I was watching you back there," he said idly. "I saw your face go blank—those dreams again?"

That he'd been there, watching me while I thought I was completely alone—his skill at camouflage, at using the forest as a tool, it never stopped amazing me. In the city Lethe, he'd been like a caged animal. Here he was free. Here he was home.

I nodded. "Or whatever they are. I can't get a moment's peace—it's all the time now, when I sleep, and even when I'm awake, bits and pieces come back to me constantly."

"Nerves," Oren suggested quietly. "Going back to your city, facing down the people who did this to you."

"Maybe." I gazed past him, up at the shards of blue sky scattered through the leafy treetops. Spring came as we traveled south from Lethe, leaving the last of the wintry frost behind. We'd needed only a few weeks to reach the outskirts of my home city, but here, in the south, the spring came quickly. The trees were alive with tender leaves and blossoms that shattered at a touch.

"*Lark is ready*," Nix said confidently. "*Lark can do it*."

"This is why we're training." Oren reached out but stopped a few inches short of touching my cheek. He was so careful to avoid that touch, knowing the currents it sent through me, the reminder that his shadow was always



there, draining my magic. The reminder of what he was. “Even in the city without a tree in sight, this is how you beat them. How you stay hidden, stay quicker than they are.”

His eyes were so earnest that I found my smile and nodded. How could I tell him that training my instincts and my reflexes wasn’t going to make the difference in fighting the people who’d turned me into a monster? It was a different kind of strength I’d have to draw on there.

But the training helped in other ways—vented my nervous energy, gave me an outlet for my fears, distracted me from what was coming. Helped me trust my arm again, which I needed to get used to being healed, despite the way it ached still during the cold spring nights.

Oren leaned down, touching his lips to my hair. Even that touch, though he avoided brushing my skin, was enough to set my nerves shrieking. Something inside me responded to the monster in him, always. Though I longed to tilt my face back and let him kiss my lips, the rest of me shuddered away.

Then he lifted his head and pulled away, but not before I saw the darkened eyes, the brows drawn in, the not-so-hidden grief in his expression. My heart ached, and I concentrated instead on the magic, reaching out to find Nix as it flitted off through the forest.

Then I froze. Nix wasn’t the only thing out there with magic.

“Oren,” I whispered. He sensed the urgency in my voice, his body going instantly rigid. “There’s someone out there.”

“Shadow?”

“No—human. Not a Renewable, but there’s something. I can’t tell—there’s something strange about him. His magic is shielded somehow; I can’t tell how far away he is. I think he’s coming closer.”

“We’ll hide. Quick, back up the tree.”

I wanted to groan a protest, but I knew it was the smartest course of action. We'd had few encounters with shadows on our way back due to our vigilance. They traveled in small packs, but when one pack found something worth chasing, their howls drew the others. Whatever was out there, if it found us and caused a ruckus, it could bring every shadow for miles sprinting straight for us.

Oren sprang to his feet and reached for my hand. But before I could take it, something leaped out of the undergrowth and swung at Oren's head. The impact knocked the breath out of me in sympathy—a huge branch had sent him sprawling with a grunt of pain.

"Oren!"

I kicked out, knocking whoever it was back into the brush. I sprinted for Oren's side, feeling for injuries with both hands. The shadow in him stirred at my touch, drawing greedily on the meager reserves of magic I held. Oren gave a soft, half-conscious groan when my fingers encountered wet, sticky blood in his hair. Something rustled behind me and I whirled, gathering my magic, ready if the thing in the brambles made a second attempt on him.

The bushes parted and a man ran out, still brandishing his branch. I readied a blast of magic, lifting my eyes to his face—

—and stopped.

I knew this man. His clothes were ragged and torn, revealing scratches on the skin underneath. The brown eyes were wild and desperate, and a dark, thick stubble had spread across his jaw and throat. But in the heat of the moment, I knew him.

"*Kris?*" I gasped.

## CHAPTER 2

“Is it dead?” Kris rasped. He sounded as if he hadn’t spoken for weeks. “Lark, get away from it—it could still hurt you—”

“Kris, what the—what are you *doing* here? This is Oren. This is—” My thoughts were so jumbled I could barely spit them out in the form of words. Abruptly I realized that Kris and Oren had never met, that the name would mean nothing to him.

“I thought it was a shadow,” mumbled Kris, the branch dipping until it rested on the ground. “It had you pinned, I thought—he looks like a shadow.”

Oren was stirring feebly, to my relief. I looked down at him, helping him sit up when he reached for my hand. He was as dirty as I was from weeks of travel, as fierce as ever, as though he hadn’t spent all that time learning to control his ferocity in Lethe. If I didn’t know him, and didn’t know better, I might think he was a monster too.

And, of course, he was. But so was I.

“Kris.” I couldn’t stop saying his name. “What are you doing out here?” Kris opened his mouth, but I interrupted. “Never mind—not now. Help me get Oren up. There’s a stream a ways back, where we broke camp—let’s get back there. You can tell me what’s going on after we make sure you didn’t just kill him.”

• • •

Though Kris tried to help me as I set camp back up again, he was absolutely useless. Eventually I made him sit still while I built up the fire—sitting on the *opposite* side from

Oren, who was propped up against a dead log. Though Oren watched Kris in stony silence, holding a cold cloth, wet from the stream, against his head, Kris just huddled, shivering as though it was the dead of winter, watching me.

My mind raced with questions, making my fingers clumsy. But they still knew the trick of this, and I held my tongue until the fire could sustain itself. I put a metal bowl in next to the crackling wood, filling it with water to clean the gash on Oren's head once it was hot. I rinsed Oren's cloth in the stream, watching the blood dance through the water, then brought it back freshly sopping and cold. He took it, still silent, still watching Kris through narrowed eyes. I could feel his unasked questions behind that stare, but he was waiting.

Waiting for me.

I braced myself and turned to face Kris. He was so changed from the boy I remembered—gentle, handsome, charming. He looked older, but more than that, he looked frightened.

He was still staring at me, through me. When I looked at him he didn't even react—it wasn't until I nudged his leg with my foot that he started, blinking and refocusing on my face. I handed him the canteen and he grabbed at it, gulping down half the water inside before wiping his mouth with a rasp of his sleeve against the stubble on his face.

"Well?" I prompted him. I kept my voice gentle. This was the boy who'd betrayed me, who'd used me to lead the architects to the Iron Wood—but he'd also tried to save my life. And he looked as though he'd been through every trial I had, and worse.

He swallowed. "I don't know where to start. God, Lark, I've—" His hand moved, as if he'd started to reach out to me before his mind caught up with the impulse.

I glanced at Oren, who hadn't moved. "What are you doing out here? Why aren't you in the Institute with the other architects?"

"There is no more Institute." Kris hugged the canteen to his chest as though it were all that stood between him and some abyss yawning before him.

My breath caught. "What do you mean?"

"The city's split in two—the Institute no longer controls it. Half the population is with the architects, behind the barricades. The other half is in open rebellion. It's all fallen apart, Lark."

I stared at him, trying to imagine my precise, orderly city fallen to pieces. "I don't understand—what happened?"

"The attack on the Iron Wood took all our reserves. We expected to come back with all the power we'd ever need. We didn't expect—" He blinked at me, swallowing.

I knew what he meant. They hadn't expected *me*.

"When we got back we had nothing," Kris went on. "The Wall began to falter. People are panicking—word got out that the Institute was hiding a captive Renewable, accusations were flying everywhere. People found out about you, that you were a Renewable and ran away. At least, that's what they were told. I—" He closed his eyes. "I left the Institute to fight with the rebels. I told them what really happened, what the Institute did to you. They're on your side; they fight in your name. I couldn't stand what Gloriette was doing, the lengths she was willing to go."

I reached out to lay a hand on Kris's arm, squeezing it. "But how did you end up out here?" I asked, still trying to absorb all that had happened since I'd defeated the army of machines as they marched on the Iron Wood.

"I was going for help. I volunteered to go—I'd been out here before, I knew how to use the storage crystals to fight the void."

"But where—"

"The Iron Wood." Kris stared at the fire. His face was thin, exhausted. "I thought that—well, my enemy's enemy is my friend. The Renewables there have every reason to hate the Institute, and maybe they'd help the resistance if

they knew what was happening. I took the last stores of magic we had and went out, but they're gone. The Iron Wood is empty. Not a single Renewable, no trace."

I glanced again at Oren, who met my gaze this time. We knew where the Renewables had gone—they'd gone to join my brother Basil, to seek refuge in Lethe from the architects of my city, in exchange for helping to sustain Lethe with their magic.

"But that doesn't matter." Kris lifted his gaze, speaking in a whisper. "I've found something better."

A sick dread twisted in my stomach. I knew where he was heading with this. "What do you mean?"

His arm shifted until he could wrap his fingers around my hand, cradling it between both of his. His touch was warm and solid, no trace of darkness in it. "I found you."

• • •

Later, when Kris had fallen into a deep, exhausted sleep, Oren finally moved from where he'd been sitting. Night was coming fast, and the dusk brought with it the scent of night-blooming flowers. The temperature was dropping, a sobering reminder that winter was not far gone, and a late frost could still rise up without warning.

Nix had returned earlier, confused to find us gone from where it had left us before in the clearing. The little machine had been thrilled to discover his creator there, sharing none of my confusion and suspicion. Nix was now dozing beside Kris's head, an oddly moving double portrait.

I lifted a finger to my lips, warning Oren not to disturb them.

"Do you trust this man?" Oren spoke quietly, crossing over to my side of the fire and staring down at Kris where he slept.

I looked up at him from where I sat, arms wrapped around my knees. "No," I said with a sigh. "But I do believe him about this."

Oren sat down next to me and wrapped his arm around my shoulders. Despite the fire crackling in front of us and the way our inner shadows stirred, I was grateful for his warmth. "He seems to care a great deal about you."

My throat tightened a little. "We have a complicated relationship," I replied, trying to keep my voice light, dry. "He's the one responsible for tricking me into fleeing my city, finding the Iron Wood. He's the reason for all of this."

Oren didn't reply immediately. I knew he wasn't thrilled at the idea of someone joining our little twosome, especially not someone I knew. But I couldn't leave Kris, not in the shape he was in. Finally, Oren shrugged, shoulder shifting against mine. "Then I suppose I owe this man a debt of gratitude for sending you to me."

I laughed, turning my head to stifle it against Oren's shirt. "Is your head okay?"

"I've had worse."

"That's not an answer."

Oren just shrugged again. I detected a note of irritation in the movement, and abruptly I realized that it wasn't all jealousy prompting Oren's surlier-than-usual attitude. Oren was embarrassed that Kris—desperate, half-starved, city-boy Kris—had gotten the jump on him and knocked him flat with only a dead tree branch for a weapon.

"What will you do now?" Oren asked when I didn't speak again.

I knew what he meant, and hesitated. Lifting my eyes, I gazed through the trees. We'd gotten our first glimpse of the Wall this morning when we scaled a crumbling ruin for a vantage point. If we'd kept going today, we would've reached the edge of it by nightfall. There was nothing to see now, but even so, I imagined I could sense it there, waiting for me.

"This doesn't change anything," I said finally. "I still intend to go back. Maybe even more, now. All those people. If the Wall fails for good, they'll be easy targets for the



shadows. And those who don't die immediately will falter in the void and become shadows themselves eventually."

"And you can stop it?"

"Maybe not. But I can try. And you heard what Kris said—it's chaos. They need someone to lead them." As soon as the words were out, I grimaced. "Or maybe I shouldn't go after all."

Oren caught the expression and leaned away so he could see my face better. "You *are* a leader, Lark. I told you once I'd follow you anywhere, and I meant it. And it's not just because I need you to stay human."

"You're biased," I told him, flashing him a smile that was usually guaranteed to distract him.

"I mean it." His voice was low, serious. "You saved me. You saved the Iron Wood. You saved your brother, you saved the resistance fighters there, you saved all of Lethe. Why is it so hard to accept the truth of it?"

I pulled my gaze away, sick. "I couldn't save Tansy."

Oren wrapped his arms around me. "You can't always save everyone. But you try, and that's what makes you what you are."

"A monster?"

"A hero."

I laughed, but it was an uneasy sound. I was powerful, that much was undeniable. And Kris had said they fought in my name, after learning the truth about what had happened to me at the Institute. Maybe they didn't need me to be a hero. Maybe they just needed *me*, someone to rally behind.

"Look at the bright side," I said, heaving a sigh and leaning my head on Oren's shoulder. "Originally, it was just going to be you, me, and Nix against the entire city. Now we've at least got half the city with us against the Institute."

"I have enough trouble working with the bug," muttered Oren. "I don't think I'm ready for half a city's worth of

questionable allies.”

## CHAPTER 3

The next day, we reached the edge of the Wall by the time the sun began to dip below the treeline. Though Kris could keep up, he wasn't the quietest of traveling companions, and more than once I had to stop Oren from unleashing a lecture like those he used to give me when we first started traveling together.

A night of uninterrupted sleep and food and water had done wonders for Kris. His gaze was still haunted, still changed, but his shivering had ceased, and when I handed him his share of our evening meal he smiled at me. In it I could see the ghost of the boy who'd smiled at me my first night in the Institute, the one who'd teased me about devouring all the watermelon and made me blush. Relief, tangible and warm, swept through me. The old Kris was still in there.

Our camp was in a part of the city that had, until recently, been inside the Wall. There were no trees growing up out of the roofs, no vines overtaking the crumbling mortar. Instead it was just silent, eerie, a sobering reminder of what would be should the Wall fail entirely.

As Oren set up camp in the ground floor of what used to be an apartment building, I went outside. Nix flitted along beside me, leaving Kris behind to get in Oren's way. I stifled the brief flare of unease at leaving the two alone together and slipped down an alleyway.

The Wall spread before me, a vast iron expanse that, even now, stole my breath away. On the inside, the Wall was crackling energy—pure magic. It took no special skill to leave the city, but returning was supposed to be impossible.

Even with magic, the outside of the Wall was as impenetrable as iron. Only those too broken to fit within the perfectly oiled clockwork of the city ever left. Adjustment, it was called. As if a human life was nothing more than a bent cog: disposable.

Even now, part of me wanted to flee. Inside were the remains of the Institute and the people who'd created the monstrous shadow in my heart. Inside was Gloriette, whose voice in my memory made my skin crawl and my mind shrink with terror. Inside was a group of people depending on me to lead them, counting on me, as though I had any right to lead anyone.

I lifted both hands, pressing my palms to the vast surface. I expected a tingle of power, some sign that there was anything on the other side of this iron barrier, but I felt nothing except the cool, slick metal under my hands.

The curve of the metal distorted my reflection grotesquely, and I was struck by a vivid wave of déjà vu. It wasn't so very long ago that I had stood here, heart pounding, taking my first steps beyond the Wall after leaving the city. Less than a year had passed since then, and yet my own reflection was unrecognizable to me.

A tinny clang jolted me out of my thoughts, and I lifted my head to see Nix buzzing against the Wall. Its spindly legs scrabbled against the metal, trying to find purchase against the slope. Eventually it landed on my shoulder, mechanisms whirring frantically with the effort it had expended.

*"What an unpleasant blight on the landscape."*

"Aesthetics, Nix?" I asked, tilting my head back to see the Wall stretching up toward the sky and away. "Did Kris program that into you?"

*"I am perfectly capable of determining the aesthetic value of an object on my own, based on a number of parameters including relative size and proportion, balance of color, approximate field of—"*

"It doesn't have to be pretty," I murmured. "It just has to keep everyone safe."

*"How will you get inside?"*

"My brother gave me a key."

Nix slid forward onto my collarbone and hooked one of its needlelike legs into the chain around my neck. Like someone hauling a rope through a pulley, it drew the chain up until the little vial at the end of it emerged from under my jacket.

*"It does not look much like a key."*

I curled my fingers around the vial Basil had given me. "I know. Maybe it amplifies magic. Maybe it makes iron more susceptible to it—I don't know. Maybe it doesn't even work anymore. Basil was supposed to come straight back when the Institute sent him out. That was years ago."

*"And if it doesn't work?"*

"Then I'll force my way in," I said grimly. "I can magic iron. It's not pleasant, but I can do it."

I leaned forward, pressing my cheek against the cold iron. Experimentally, I let a little tendril of magic snake out, ignoring the way it tried to recoil from the iron. In his neverending lessons during my time in Lethe, Wesley had taught me that brute force was almost never the solution when it came to doing something with magic. But I was never very good at finesse, and when it came to magicking iron, nothing but force was going to get me inside.

With my senses trained so carefully, I felt rather than heard Kris approach from behind me. He said nothing, but my concentration was already shattered. Instead I let my magic seek him out, learning the shape of him by feel this time. There was something different about him, something I couldn't quite put my finger on. When I'd left my home city, I had so little control over my abilities that I never could have explored someone's soul this way. But compared to the citizens of Lethe, there was something about him that made me uneasy.

Before I could push any further, the taste of copper flooded my mouth, my every hair standing on end. A ripple ran through the metal surface where my cheek rested. It was barely more than a flicker, but it was all the warning I got before the world exploded.

Magic blasted through me in a wave, electrifying every nerve and muscle. For an instant, I could see buildings and streets stretching away in front of me, the world inside the Wall. I could hear screaming as if from a long way away as pain seared through my body. I was flung backward away from the Wall, striking the ground hard.

For a moment I wondered if Kris had somehow gotten his hands on a weapon. But the charge had come from the Wall itself—Kris was trying to help me.

He'd thrown himself down on his knees and was sliding a hand under my shoulders and picking me up, cradling me on his lap. His mouth was moving, asking me questions, but I couldn't hear him over the ringing in my ears. It felt as though every hair were standing on end, like fire had coursed through my body and left only singed nerve endings behind.

Through a thick, muffling haze, I heard shouting, running footsteps from our campsite. Kris was shoved aside so hard he fell over, and Oren's face appeared above mine.

I dragged myself half upright and pulled away from them both. "I'm okay," I croaked, my voice wavering. "Calm down." Nix flew at me and huddled in the hollow of my throat.

"What the hell was that?" Oren spat the question at Kris, who was picking himself up off the ground and staring back at Oren with naked contempt.

"The Wall's unstable, I told you." Kris's eyes slid back to mine. "I had no idea the anomalies were affecting the outside too, or I would've warned you."

"Anomalies?"

Kris nodded. "Ripples that run through the Wall. They were our first warning that something was wrong with it, that the Renewable was finally failing. At first they only happened once every couple of weeks, but they've been coming more often now."

"That can't be good." I closed my eyes, fighting the adrenaline coursing through my body. "We've got to get inside, and fast. We'll camp here tonight, and in the morning—"

Oren held up a hand, his head lifted. I knew that tense, distant look on his face well, and fell silent, waiting, heart pounding.

Kris glanced between us, brow furrowed. "In the morning, what? What's going—"

"Hush!" I hissed. To his credit, he listened, going still.

I couldn't hear whatever it was that Oren had sensed, but his senses were sharper than mine. There was no in-between state with him; either he was the shadow or he was human, but even as a human he had better senses than anyone I'd ever met. They were all that stood between him and messy death, no matter what form he was in.

Finally, Oren's whisper knifed through the quiet. "Shadows. Five, maybe six. Too many to fight."

"Coming here?" I staggered to my feet, trying desperately to ignore the way my muscles were spasming in the aftermath of the blast.

Oren's eyes flicked toward my face. "They must've heard your scream."

"Can you get us inside now, tonight?" Kris's voice was low, nervous. I could almost feel his fear; my own wasn't much easier to deal with.

I shook my head, shivering. "I can barely stand."

"We've got to run." Oren made for the shelter and packed up our supplies as quickly and as silently as possible.

Kris, for once, made himself useful, damping the fire and drowning the embers with armfuls of dirt. I wondered if



he'd encountered any shadow people on his way to and from the Iron Wood. His face was white, though; if he hadn't encountered them himself, then he had certainly heard stories.

Oren tossed me my pack and then slung his over his shoulders. Kris had his own supplies, though his bag was tellingly light. He hadn't counted on finding the Iron Wood empty, and he'd had nowhere to restock before trying to make it back to the city.

We kept to the circumference of the Wall, trusting that the density of the ruins there would keep the shadows at bay. They preferred the wilderness for hunting, largely giving the remains of the city a wide berth, the same way they did the Iron Wood. The afternoon sunlight dazzled my eyes, playing tricks on me, making me imagine I saw movement at every step. In broad daylight there was nowhere to hide except in the buildings, and I'd been trapped in a building with a family of shadows before. It wasn't an experience I wanted to repeat if I could possibly avoid it.

I could sense them now, around the edges of my range. Dark pits of nothingness yawning hungrily, only minutes behind us. I could feel eight distinct shadows—either Oren had estimated wrong, or others had joined in the chase.

Somewhere behind us, a desperate, lonely howl rose over the sound of our harsh breathing and ragged footsteps.

"We'll have to find a place to hole up, barricade them out," Oren blurted. "Lark?"

I cast my power out in a net, trying to get a feel for the shape of the city before me. "There—a basement in the last building on the right in the next block. It's clear of debris."

Oren put on a fresh burst of speed, leaving me and Kris in his wake. If fear and adrenaline weren't keeping me focused, I could have stopped just to watch him run—long, even strides that ate up the ground at an astonishing rate. He reached the building and slammed into the door—it