

DEATH LIES IN THE SHADOWS

# SHADOWLARK



MEAGAN SPOONER

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## About the Book

*‘They only come at night, when the Star fades’*

Lark Ainsley escapes the Iron Wood to search for her brother, only to find herself captured and imprisoned in an underground metropolis.

Powerful magic protects the city of Lethe, providing sanctuary from the Empty Ones, monsters who hunger for human flesh.

But this magic comes at a terrible price, and the city lives in fear of their leader Prometheus and his gang of Eagles.

Danger lies in the shadows, and Lark must find the light . . .

# SHADOWLARK

MEAGAN SPOONER

**RHCP DIGITAL**

*FOR JEANNE CAVELOS: YOU TOLD ME  
I COULD DO THIS - AND I LISTENED.*

*AND FOR MY FRIENDS FROM  
ODYSSEY, WHO TAUGHT ME HOW  
MUCH I STILL HAVE YET TO LEARN.*

# PART I

# CHAPTER 1

The clockwork dawn is loudest in the old sewers. The sound of the machines pushing the sun across its track in the sky echoes through the tunnels, shaking the ground beneath my feet. Mortar crumbles from the ceiling and falls like snowflakes, surrounding me in a column of white.

“Don’t worry,” I say, reaching out for Tansy’s hand. “This happens every day. It’s safe.”

She shrinks back from me, standing just beyond arm’s reach, twisting her hands together. “Where do we go?”

I turn in place, peering through the flakes of mortar. For a moment I’m disoriented, trying to make sense of the route I’ve known since childhood. There: a tunnel gapes black through the haze. “This way.”

Tansy can read the trees and the sky and the breeze, but this is my domain. This is the world I know. My path is certain—and where I falter, my brother’s ghost leads the way. It’s as though Basil’s just ahead, waiting for me to catch up.

I crawl into the sewer pipe and hear Tansy follow after. Her breathing grows sharp and heavy behind me, the air thick with magic and fear. She’s not used to confined spaces. In the clammy dampness of the sewers, her power shines in my second sight like a beacon, golden and warm despite the tunnel’s cold.

When we emerge into a junction, Tansy stumbles into the muck on her hands and knees. I reach out to help her to her feet, but she backs away, scrambling up on her own.

“Do you hear that?” she gasps.



I close my eyes, concentrating. There's wind blowing somewhere, whistling through the tunnels, and in the distance I can hear the rustling of leaves. But beyond that there's something out of place, a sound that doesn't belong. Pixies? No. Splashing, like footsteps. Kids, then. Rivals, trying to beat us to our destination. Other students come to break into the school.

"Come on, let's move faster." I can feel Basil's ghost moving further away, slipping out of my senses. "Hurry, and we can beat them there."

"Wait, Lark." She takes a step toward me, then stops, turning her head, trying to pinpoint the source of the sound. "Listen. They're dangerous."

I close my eyes again, and this time I can hear their snarling. My foot slips in the muck, splashing loudly, and the snarls change to howls. They've heard us. In my mind, I can see their hungry white eyes, their sickly grey skin, their ravenous mouths.

Tansy reaches for her bow, but she's not wearing it. Her hand closes on empty space. "What if we run into them in the tunnels? There's no room to fight in there."

"Fight?" My stomach twists, sickening. "You can't fight them, they're just children. They're just like me."

"That's your problem," Tansy protests. "You're too soft. Too trusting. They'll take advantage of that." She takes a deep breath, trying to calm herself. "Fine. If you won't fight, then we need to run. What about this way?" She sticks her head into a pipe leading east.

I know that route. I used it when I was younger. But something halts me, the hairs lifting on the back of my neck. Basil didn't go that way. I can't sense him anymore—and that alone is enough to trigger the alarm bells in my mind. Basil is everywhere down here. It's the only place I know he still exists, the only place where I have more than just a folded paper bird to remember him by.

"No," I whisper. "No. Not that way."

"Lark, we have to go! Now, or they'll find us!"

"That way's wrong, it's too small. I'm too old now to pass that way." Around us the snow is hissing into the water, melting against our skin. Tansy's hair is a halo of white.

"I don't want to die here, underground, so far from the sky." She starts trying to force herself into the pipe, stopped first by her shoulders and then, when she tries to go feet-first, by her hips.

I move away from her, eyes scanning the junction. It looks familiar. I've been here before, although it's different now. Vines have grown through the cracks in the bricks, swarming up the walls, reclaiming these sewers for nature. In the spring it will all be moss and flowers and earth, like there was never a city here at all.

A snowflake lands on my cheek, and I look up. Beyond the swirling white sky I can see a hatch.

"We have to go up."

"What? Are you insane?"

"We're underneath the Institute now. We can go there instead of the school. They'll have the Harvest list there, too—we just have to get into the Administrator's office."

Tansy pries herself back out of the pipe and comes toward me, peering up through the snow. "We'll never make it. There's no ladder. I have no rope. We aren't wearing climbing gear . . ." Her voice fades into the background, still listing the things we'd need to climb up into the white sky.

In the distance, far above us, I can hear a bird singing. My brother speaks to me, as he often does down here in the old sewers, down here where I'm closest to him. I ask him, *How did you do that?*

He smiles. *Magic.*

"Tansy." She stops abruptly, mid-word, turning toward me. I reach out. "Take my hand."

She shrinks away, fearful. "I can't."

“You have to trust me.” I take a deep breath. “I promise, I’ll keep you safe.”

The howls have grown to the point where I can no longer hear the birdsong, but I know it’s still there.

Tansy hesitates a moment longer and then reaches out, her palm meeting mine with a jolt that sends the snow swirling away from us, thrashing against the walls of the sewers.

We rise, and the snow rises with us, up into the sky. The hatch bangs open and we go soaring through it to land on the other side. The snow streams through after us, and it takes us both pushing with all our weight to close the hatch against the storm behind us. It slams shut, the sound echoing through the vastness of the space.

We’re standing in the rotunda of the Institute, with its domed sky inlaid with gold and precious stones in a mosaic meant to imitate the world beyond. The sun and moon dance across the interior of the dome in tracks much like the one in the Wall outside.

Tansy is silent now, not looking at me, arms wrapped around herself as she crouches on the marble floor. I can’t see the halo of power around her anymore—but there’s no time, and I haul her to her feet. She pushes my hands away, but at least she’s moving again.

Together we hurry across the floor towards a door on the far side marked “Harvest and Resource Administrator” and, below that, a plaque bearing the name “Gloriette.” Even though I know she won’t be inside—she’ll be preparing for the Harvest Day ceremonies where she officiates—my heart still pounds as we approach.

I press my ear to the door, but it’s made of iron, and I can hear nothing on the other side of it. But even if the other students don’t catch up to us, there are pixies everywhere, and we have no time to waste. I twist the handle, take a deep breath, and shove.

We stumble through, and the door bangs shut behind us. We're standing in Dorian's house, exactly as it was the day I left the Iron Wood. His bed is neatly made in the corner, the dresser stands covered in curios, and the map still hangs above it. I squint, trying to make out the city where my brother was headed, but the lines and words blur before my eyes, impossible to read.

A flicker of city magic, twisted and unnatural, touches my senses. Pixies.

"Come on, Tansy—we have to find the list of names for the harvest."

I start rummaging through Dorian's kitchen. My heart has risen into my throat, choking me, making my mouth taste like bile. Even though it will change nothing if I find the list, I have to *know*. Either my name is on it or it isn't, but at least I can find out if all of this has been worth it—if this time, finally, I'll be where I belong.

The discordant clang of city magic rises all at once, and something metallic and heavy bangs against the shutters. I slam shut the cupboard I'm searching and back away, scanning the room for a place to hide.

Tansy leaps forward before I can stop her. "Enough," she cries, breaking her uncharacteristically long silence. "We have to fight."

She throws open the shutters.

I gather my own magic, ready to smash the pixies into oblivion—but it's not the city's spies. It's Nix, and it makes straight toward me, wearing its favorite bee form.

*"They're coming for you."* Its voice is urgent, clipped. *"We have to go, now."*

Who's coming? The other students in the tunnels? The city's pixies? Gloriette and her machines? The Iron Wood scouts? The shadows? It doesn't even matter. "I need to see that list," I hiss.

As I drop to my knees to search under Dorian's bed, Tansy heads for the door. "I'll just go keep watch."

Nix, hovering behind me, watches her go. *"Is that wise?"*

The space under the bed is empty. I sit up, turning to look at the pixie. "Is what wise?"

*"Letting her out of your sight. What makes you think you can trust her?"*

My stomach twists sickeningly. The pixie drops down to perch on Dorian's dresser amidst the curios—on top of a leather folder. Somehow I'd missed it when I first scanned the room.

"Nix," I breathe. "That's it."

I scramble to my feet. My hands are shaking as they reach for the folder, the one that will contain the list of names for this year's harvest. Finally I can know whether I'll be safe. Whether I can stop running.

From the doorway, a flash of light drags my eyes away from the desk. It's Tansy, glowing with magic—and yet she's not Tansy anymore. She's a figure in white, light shining from every pore, pinprick pupils almost lost in white irises. *Follow the birds*, she says, and I look back down at the folder in my hands.

I pry it open. It's empty, save for a single object—my brother's bird, folded out of old, yellowing paper. As I watch, the edges begin to turn black, as if burned by invisible fire. The scorch marks race inward until the entire bird is consumed. It flaps its wings once, its song more a scream than music. I reach out to try to take it, save it, and it gives way to my touch.

In seconds the bird crumbles away to nothing—nothing except the shadow staining my fingertips.

## CHAPTER 2

I jerked awake, a ragged sound tearing out of my throat. The world was dark and white, and for a moment I was back in the sewer tunnel, watching the mortar hiss into the dank water below. Then I blinked, and reality reasserted itself. Snow was falling all around me, frigid ice water rolling down my neck as the flakes melted against my cheeks.

*"Are you all right?"*

Nix. It hovered a few feet away, the whirring of its clockwork mechanisms sluggish and sleepy.

"What?" My voice was hoarse, like I'd been screaming.  
"No. Yes, I'm fine."

*"You were dreaming."*

I grabbed for my blanket to scrub away the water on my face. "So? What do you know about dreams?" It was barely predawn, only the faintest hint of light to the east to tell of morning's approach. What had woken me? The dream? Or something else?

Nix dropped down onto the end of the blanket by my feet.  
*"She's out scouting the city."*

"Who is?"

*"That other one."*

I glanced across the embers of the fire at the empty tangle of snow-covered blankets there. Closing my eyes, I tried to make my mind work through the cold and the exhaustion and the remnants of my dream.

The snow had begun a week after I left the Iron Wood, and Tansy had caught up with me only a few days after that. I'd sensed something out there following me, but only

sporadically. The fact that her magic only worked in the rain and humidity meant that here, in this dry, frigid air, most of it was buried deep.

I thought I knew who—or what—was following me. I'd stopped and waited, knowing that if it was him, he'd catch up to me. Better to meet him on my terms, find out if he was human or shadow—if he was the boy who'd kissed me or the animal who would've tried to kill me but for the bars of his cage.

I wasn't ready for the stab of disappointment that jolted through me when I saw Tansy's face emerging from the gloom.

"The truth," she'd said, "is that I couldn't stop thinking what trouble you could get into. No magic, no weapons. Alone except for that thing." She jerked her chin at Nix, who crouched sullenly on the opposite side of the fire, watching Tansy in unblinking, frosty silence.

She had followed me at a distance, respecting my desire to travel alone, but after the snow started she was worried I didn't know how to handle myself in the cold, and came in to check on me.

I knew she was worried about him. I wasn't the only one certain I'd be followed as I headed north, away from the safety of the Iron Wood. "He would've fooled anyone," she said, mistaking my silence for shame when she brought it up. "And you didn't know that They turn human when exposed to magic. It's not your fault. If he ever shows his face again, he'll pay."

I thought of the boy in the threadbare shirt, whose pale blue eyes could be so fierce and so soft. I thought of him swimming in the summer lake, and the utter contentment on his face after he'd finished eating dinner in the clearing with the bees. I thought of that last piercing look before we parted, and I held my tongue.

We kept following the ruins of the highway marked on the map in Dorian's house, and we came upon a ridge

overlooking the city the next day. A once-vast city that now lay entirely in ruins.

Tansy wanted to head into the remnants of the city immediately, but I decided we'd make camp on the ridge and wait. If there was anyone living there, we'd be able to see the signs of it—smoke rising from chimneys, people moving around the streets. I was sick of flying headlong into situations I knew nothing about. We agreed to stay a couple of days—which, I realized, sleep-muddled mind slow to comprehend, had passed. Unless Tansy had found anything, we'd be heading down into the city today.

I shivered, though I could not be sure if it was because I was cold or because I was frightened. I shoved a hand deep into my pocket until my fingers found the blunt, creased contours of my brother's bird.

I disentangled myself from my blanket and shoved on my boots. Wrapping my heavy coat around my shoulders, I stepped out past our muddy campsite in the shelter of a ruined restaurant and into the freshly fallen snow. I could see the remnants of Tansy's tracks, half-covered, leading away toward the city. She was always going off on her own, impatient—old habits died hard, she said, and she was used to scouting.

I took a deep breath, trying to shake the uneasiness that lingered in the wake of my dream. There was no reason not to trust Tansy's motives for following me. It was only my subconscious reacting to one too many betrayals, looking for the next blow before it landed.

Something was wrong. My instincts caught on before I did, and I turned in a slow circle, keeping myself from shivering in the cold with a monumental effort. There was something in the air, still though it was. My nose picked up leather. Wind. And, impossible over the snow, the green tang of grass.

I knew that scent.

No. NO.



The snow had almost completely covered the tracks we'd made last night. Searching the ground outside our shelter, I found half-filled hollows to indicate Tansy's footprints and mine, the area I'd trampled looking for firewood, a somewhat more recent path to some trees where Tansy must have relieved herself in the middle of the night. I tried to calm my breathing—it sounded harsh and alarm-loud in the still dawn air.

It was my imagination. I'd thought of him, and my mind was producing whatever evidence it could to make it seem like he was here. He'd have to be a shadow again by now—if he'd found us he would have attacked.

As I turned back toward the shelter and the warmth of my blanket, something caught my eye. I would've missed it except that the light to the east was growing, and the snow was beginning to shine as well with an eerie, violet-orange glow.

Footprints.

Not mine or Tansy's—too large. And too widely spaced. My heart in my throat, I followed them as silently as I could. They led to the ground floor of the structure, to the part of the floor that served as roof to our cellar campsite. There the tracks vanished into noise, as though someone had paced back and forth, churning up the snow. The tracks were fresh—fresher than Tansy's leaving to scout the city.

Though I searched, I could not find tracks leading away—and yet there was no one there and no place to hide.

By the time Tansy returned I had erased the tracks, tramping through the snow and disturbing it to the point where it was impossible to tell anyone but me had passed there. She found me kicking and kicking at the snow, my breath steaming the air, soaked to the knee.

Firewood, I told her, showing her a few branches I'd picked up just before she crested our ridge. To make a hot breakfast. To warm us before we set out for the day.

But despite the hot mash of water and grains, and the roar of the flames, and Nix's fire-heated metal body nestled in the hollow of my neck, I couldn't stop shivering.

I had no proof it was him, and yet I knew. It was as though I could feel him out there, somewhere, as though our time spent sharing the same magic, the same sustaining power, had linked us.

Oren. The boy who taught me how to live out here, who saved my life, whose life I saved. The boy who told me he'd follow me anywhere no matter how he tried to stop himself.

The boy I'd learned was a monster.

And I hadn't forgotten what I'd promised him before he left.

*If I find you—and if I'm not me—promise me that you'll kill me, Lark.*

• • •

I'd thought my home city was big. When I lived there, it was the only city in the world, as far as most inside the Wall knew. It held the last remnants of humanity. The Wall was the edge of the world.

But it was nothing compared to the sprawling monster that filled the valley. The snow had stopped, and from the ridge we could see all the way to the sea, little more than a grey expanse in the distance. My mind half-dismissed the sight of it, unable to digest how big the ocean must be in comparison—instead it focused on the city, something it could almost comprehend.

The city lay in ruins. Even from a distance we could see that the buildings were crumbling, asymmetrical, falling apart. The tallest structures were metal skeletons of buildings that must have once been so tall they would've dwarfed the Institute in my city. Where my city was laid out artistically, aesthetically, with broad streets and well-designed blocks, this city was crowded and sprawling and

slapdash, like it had just grown together over the years, and people had just kept adding taller and taller buildings to make more room. I couldn't even imagine how many people must've lived in it before the wars. The tallest spire at the center of the city had something gleaming, reflective, at its top—blinding to look at even from this distance.

As we drew nearer, though, we could see just how dilapidated the buildings were. I fought down a surge of disappointment. Maybe I'd expected a Wall keeping it safe, like the Wall around my own city. Without that shielding against the magicless void in this wasteland, how was anyone but a Renewable meant to survive? Surely the city had to be abandoned—and to judge from the state of the ruins, it would've had to have been abandoned for decades, if not more.

Which meant that there were no experiments going on to do with restoring magic to the wasteland—and no experiments concerning curing my brother and me of what the Institute had done to us. Which meant that there was no reason for my brother to still be here.

Tansy kept up a running commentary as we headed down from the ridge toward the crumbling buildings.

"There are definitely people down there," she continued. "But not many, and they keep themselves hidden pretty well. There's nothing that I can see that stops the shadows from coming in—no Wall like in your city, no scouts like in mine. So maybe the people just stay inside as much as they can."

"We have to find someone willing to talk to us." I scanned the long street ahead of us, littered with debris and heaps of garbage made unidentifiable by age. "Dorian said Basil was headed here. I can't imagine he stayed—this isn't what he was looking for, that's for certain. This place looks like it fell decades ago."

Tansy readjusted the bow on her shoulder, fingering the string idly. "Maybe, if he talked to anyone here, they might

know where he headed next.”

I didn’t answer. The thought of having to make yet another weeks-long journey, this time through even more snow and bitter cold, with my dwindling supplies, was intolerable. Basil was supposed to be here. He was the only other person who survived what the Institute had done to me—he was the only person who would know how to deal with it. I just had to find him before I lost control with Tansy, and everything would be okay.

Even now, despite the dry air, I could sense her power just a few steps in front of me. And I wanted it. Now that I knew I could absorb the innate magic of other people, I could barely restrain myself. It was like my actions in the Iron Wood had opened a floodgate that I didn’t have the strength to close.

I kept my eyes on the street. Even though I could still feel Tansy’s magic, at least I didn’t have to see it with my second sight, glittering and glinting every now and then, as if shining in invisible sunlight.

Nix alighted on my shoulder, the whirring of its mechanisms oddly comforting in the quiet. Despite my desire to travel alone, I was glad for Nix’s company—and for Tansy’s too. Though when Tansy was near and chattering away, Nix was always silent. I sensed that the machine had something to say, and so I slowed my steps a little, let Tansy get out ahead of me.

Eventually, the pixie ruffled its wings and spoke. *“Smart.”*

“What is?” I kept my voice to a whisper.

*“Letting her walk in front of you. That way if she turns on you, you’ll see it coming.”*

Ice trickled down my spine, and the pixie’s words in my dream came back to me, clear as day. *Is it wise, letting her out of your sight?*

Nix’s mistrust of Tansy had penetrated even my dreams.

“Don’t be absurd,” I replied. “Tansy’s a friend. She’s here to look out for me.”

*"That other one was your friend too. Where is he now?"* I looked down at it on my shoulder, and it gave the strangest imitation of a human shrug.

The machine had no reason to lie. In fact, it had proven more than once that it was incapable of lying. I watched Tansy's ponytail bobbing with each step and gritted my teeth. I didn't want to be someone who could only trust a pile of magical circuitry, and never another human, flesh and blood like me.

*"Anyway, that's not what I wanted to say."*

"Well, maybe I don't particularly want to know what you were going to say."

*"Yes, you do."* Nix was as calm and unemotional as ever.

I stayed silent, counting each of my weary steps in my head.

*"The people living here are watching you."*

## CHAPTER 3

I stopped dead. Tansy was still moving up the street, oblivious to whatever Nix was sensing.

"How do you know they're watching us?" I whispered, arching my back until it popped, turning my head this way and that. If anyone were watching me they'd see a weary traveler stretching—not inspecting the surrounding buildings for watching eyes.

*"Watch the windows."*

I shifted my attention forward, toward the dark hollows in the buildings. I saw nothing—no faces or movement. I was about to say so when something did move. Subtle, quick. Just a shutter closing in a building on the next block.

Tansy had stopped, and I caught up with her in a few strides.

"I'm pretty sure there's—" I began, keeping my voice low.

"I see them," she breathed back. "Can't tell if they're a threat."

I sensed nothing, no matter how I strained. I couldn't tell if it was due to the inconsistency of this new ability to sense the world around me or the fact that iron made up the skeletons of these buildings, potentially muffling anything inside.

Nix spoke up, its voice even quieter than Tansy's. *"They do not appear threatening. In fact, they appear to be more frightened of us."*

A shutter cracked open nearby, no more than an inch. I could see nothing beyond it but darkness compared to the pale winter sunlight outside.

I took a deep breath. “Hello!” I shouted. “We’re not here to cause trouble or harm to anyone. We’re travelers, seeking a man named Basil Ainsley.”

Only silence answered me. We kept walking, eyes drawn to every quick movement at the windows, ears tuned for each light click or thud of a shutter closing or door locking. The temperature was dropping fast, and we knocked cautiously on a few doors, hoping for shelter. But we got no response, and when, in growing desperation, we tried a few handles, they were all shut tight.

We’d gotten about a mile into the downtown part of the city when a noise made us jump back. The clang of one of the ancient garbage cans lining the streets.

The people here were afraid of something—I couldn’t help but think of the most terrifying thing in this wilderness. Shadows. I reached out with everything I had but felt nothing. I tried to make myself move toward the sound but found my feet rooted to the crumbling street.

Tansy slipped her bow from her shoulder in one smooth movement, dropping into a low stance, ready for action. She nocked an arrow to the string and crept toward the sound, slow. I ached to tell her to be careful, but bit my lip, watching.

Just before she reached the cans, a small figure burst out with a frightened yell, darting past Tansy—and straight at me. We collided with a thud, sending me sprawling and my assailant dropping on top of me with a groan of pain.

It was a kid, no more than seven or eight. Dirty in that little-boy way, but in relatively clean clothes. No blood around his mouth. No signs that he was anything other than a little boy. More than anything else, he felt human. He lacked the golden magic glow Tansy and all the Renewables had, but there was no dark void, hungry for magic, as there was with Oren. He felt like nothing—like walking into a room at exactly room temperature.

“Let me go!” he shouted, scrambling backward, eyes darting this way and that. To my astonishment he started to cry as he scuttled sideways into the shadow of a nearby stoop.

Just then a pair of people burst out of the building across the street. A man and a woman, both brandishing weapons. The man, about Tansy’s height and thickly bearded, wielded a knife. Much smaller than Oren’s knife, and clearly designed as a tool, not as a weapon. The woman, whose expression was even more frantic than the man’s, carried a club fashioned from what looked like a piece of a bedpost.

“Get away from my son!” the woman screamed, voice ragged with fear.

Tansy lowered her bow instantly, straightening out of her hunting stance and lifting her hands. I picked myself up off the ground where the boy had knocked me, stumbling backward a few paces.

“We aren’t going to hurt him,” I said hoarsely, trying to get air back into my lungs. “It’s okay.”

As soon as I backed up enough that I wasn’t between them and the boy, the woman ran past the man to kneel in front of the kid, who was still leaking tears, frightened as much by his mother’s fear as anything else. As his mother ran her hands over him, looking for injuries, and mumbled reassurances, the father stepped forward, fingers white-knuckled around the handle of his knife.

“You’d better keep moving,” he said, expression largely hidden by his black facial hair.

Tansy moved over to my side, returning her bow to her shoulder, uncertain how to proceed. I knew how she felt.

“Please,” I tried again. “I’m just looking for a man named Basil Ainsley. Do you know him? Did he pass through maybe a couple of years ago?”

The man’s eyes narrowed, darting to the side as his wife picked up their child, then back to me again. “Why are you



searching for this man?"

My throat was so dry my voice came out like sandpaper. "He's my brother."

The man considered this, watching me suspiciously, then shook his head. "I've never heard of him," he said gruffly. "You may have noticed, we're not looking for company. This place isn't for you, you'd better go."

The woman crossed back behind the man again, carrying the boy. I saw a flash of red and realized he'd skinned his knee when we collided. The blood was dripping down his shin.

I took a step forward, and the man reacted instantly, the point of the knife swinging toward me.

"Wait!" I said, freezing. "I just want to—here." I took off my pack, very slowly, and crouched so I could put it on the ground and go through it. Somewhere in there was a pot of salve from Tansy's mother, an herbalist.

As soon as I opened it I saw Nix, who must have darted inside during the commotion. It looked up at me, flicking its wings silently in recognition—and in warning. I knew why it was hiding; without knowing these people's history, it was impossible to know how they'd react when confronted with a machine, the very symbol of the extravagance and wanton use of magic that led to the wars in the first place.

I took out the bag that held my last few apples and tore a few strips from it, then located the pot and straightened. Both mother and father were watching my every move, wide-eyed, fearful. What had happened to these people that they lived in such fear?

"It's medicine," I said, trying to keep my voice steady and calm. "For his knee, so it heals faster and doesn't get infected."

The mother cradled the boy's head against her, eyes flicking toward the father, who was just noticing the skinned knee for the first time.

"Can I?" I asked, taking a slow step toward them.

The man and woman exchanged glances, as though speaking privately, without words. The woman broke first, taking a step toward me and nodding. "You may."

I couldn't help a little smile at that—she sounded like my own mother, correcting my grammar. Even if she was brokenhearted from losing Basil, even if she largely ignored me in favor of my other brother, Caesar, I missed my mother.

I moved forward, and the woman crouched so that the boy could lean against her while I tended to his knee. He'd stopped crying and was more interested in examining my face and watching what I was doing. Though he grimaced when I mopped up the blood and spread a thin layer of the salve over his scrape, he didn't cry again. I noticed that he had freckles, something no one in my enclosed city had. How strange to see just an ordinary human—not a Renewable, not a shadow—living out here. I wondered how it was possible, but I knew enough that now wasn't the time to ask.

I wrapped the last of the strips around his knee, tying the tightest knot I could. I knew from having two brothers that boys never stayed still long.

"Thank you," his mother murmured as I straightened. "Sean, what do you say?"

"anks," the boy mumbled before squirming out of his mother's grasp and making a beeline for the building his parents had emerged from.

"Okay." The man still had his knife between himself and me. "Get going then."

"Brandon," the woman said, chiding. "Be civil."

He shook his head, still watching me, still suspicious. "Don't trust anyone from the outside. We don't know who they are. *What* they are."

The woman looked up, shading her eyes. I followed her gaze to the bright reflective object on top of the spire. It was dimmer now as the sun made its way down the sky. I

still couldn't make out its shape, but I thought it might be some kind of crystal, refracting the light into a million different beams across the city. The way the woman gazed at it reminded me of the way people in my city checked the time by the sun disc. Maybe it was a kind of clock.

"It'll be just as dangerous for them out here in a few hours," the woman said, speaking as though Tansy and I weren't there. "She helped our Sean. They're not here to hurt us."

The man's eyes went from me to Tansy and back again. His beard moved as he grimaced beneath it, uncertainty twisting his features.

"Fine," he said eventually, defeated. "One night only. And that one leaves her weapon outside." He seemed more suspicious of Tansy than of me, his black eyes narrowing at her.

Tansy opened her mouth as if considering protesting. I didn't blame her—if they'd tried to take Oren's knife from me, I would've felt naked. I felt a little guilty not volunteering the information that I was armed, too, but I knew it was smarter to keep it on me. I nodded at Tansy and she nodded back, slipping off the bow and her quiver of arrows and giving it to the man. He left them on the stoop as he led us through a revolving door, into the building.

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Once inside, the man retreated to a comfortable-looking stuffed chair in the corner to work on something wooden with his knife. Sean plunked himself down to play with what seemed to be a set of polished round rocks, bouncing them off each other at random, and the woman closed the doors behind us.

They'd made a home in what looked like the lobby of some other building. The marble floors were covered with a slapdash assortment of colorful, overlapping rugs, and the

large reception area had been divided into rooms by wooden screens. The revolving door opened directly into what I could only assume was the kitchen and dining area, dominated by a huge fireplace built into the floor and a chimney that descended from the ceiling to hover above it. It must have been a gorgeous piece of art and design back when the building was new, but now it only held a small cooking fire. The flames had an odd green edge to them, and my nose detected the acrid smell of chemicals. When I looked closer I saw that the wood they were burning seemed to be pieces of old furniture. I realized with a jolt that they wouldn't really have access to firewood here in this forest of buildings. They must have been raiding the other ruins—or the rest of the building, which seemed unused—for wood to burn.

The rest of the furniture in the home was an odd mix of ancient-looking pieces, no doubt liberated from the ruins, and rough but solidly made pieces that looked relatively new. Overhead the ceiling was painted with a faded fresco of winged babies and clouds and swirling ribbons, encircled by intricately molded trim.

"I'm Trina," the woman said as I turned in place, inspecting the odd mix of grandeur and hominess. "And you've already met Sean. My husband is Brandon, ignore him. Are you girls hungry?"

I glanced at Tansy, who seemed uneasy, out of place. If even I, who had been raised in a city with buildings like the Institute, felt overwhelmed, she must feel like she'd stepped into another world. And she looked positively naked without her bow at her side.

I smiled at her, trying to look reassuring, and then nodded at Trina. "Extremely," I answered.

Trina laughed and went to the fireplace, lifting the lid of the pot suspended over the flames. The smell of something delicious and savory wafted toward us, and it was all I could do not to drool.

"I'll just add some more water, there'll be plenty for all of us. Come, sit."

"Thank you," I said awkwardly as Tansy and I made for the fireplace, beginning to strip off our outer layers. My nose and my fingertips began to burn and itch as they thawed in the warmth of the room. I kept my pack close so that Nix could stay near me. I could hear nothing and knew it was probably on the verge of hibernation, doing its best to stay silent.

As I looked around the room, something shadowy darted from right to left. All I could see was a blur of feet under the screen. I tensed, staring. While I watched, a pair of black eyes appeared around the edge of one of the screens, gleaming.

Trina noticed my sudden shift and smiled. "Relax. That's just Molly. Don't mind her, she's shy."

There was a faint squeal of protest and a giggle, and the dark eyes vanished again.

Dinner was a stew made of grains and winter vegetables. I was worried about there being meat in it, but Trina assured me that meat was a rare commodity in the city and that they only ate it when they got lucky—and even then, most people didn't have much of a taste for it. Most of their food came from farms outside the city limits, tended by the whole community. When the harvest was good they all ate like kings all winter, and when it was sparse, they all scraped by somehow together.

Afterward Trina made a weak but fragrant tea out of dried flowers, and we sat by the fire, sipping it. Even Molly emerged for this, bare feet tucked up under her skirt and huge round eyes always watching me and Tansy. She looked no more than four or five years old.

"How many of you are there?" I asked, thinking of row upon row of buildings with shutters that closed as we passed.

"Only about two hundred of us now," Trina replied.

"And fewer every week," Brandon added grimly.

Tansy looked up from her tea. "Fewer? Why?"

Brandon leaned back in his chair with a creak. The fabric was worn and faded, and it sagged in the middle where he sat. He shook his head, setting his mug off to one side and retrieving his carving. It seemed to be a rough approximation of a horse, something I'd seen only seen pictures of in my city.

Trina spoke up instead. "It's not a safe place to be, this city. There are . . . things here. Dark things."

Tansy and I exchanged glances, and I knew I had been right. Shadow people. I leaned forward, forgetting my tea. "Maybe Tansy and I can help. Tansy's from a place that's so good at fighting off the shadow people that they're afraid to even go near it. And I—" I thought of the shadow child I'd killed and its cry as it fell. "I've had a little experience."

Tansy leaned forward, eager. "She's being modest. She survived for weeks on her own with a shadow person right on her heels the whole time. Lark's amazing."

I felt my cheeks redden. I hoped they'd read it as modesty, and not as shame.

"Shadow people?" Both Trina and Brandon were looking at us, curious.

"Monsters that eat people," Tansy supplied. "We always just used the word *Them* where I come from, but Lark's word for them is pretty accurate. Isn't that what's attacking your people?"

They exchanged glances, and Trina nodded slowly.

"Maybe. It's hard to know exactly what they are. They only come at night, when the Star fades. And if anyone ever sees them, they don't live to tell the tale. They vanish forever. Gone. Taken."

*Eaten*, I thought, trying not to shudder. "The Star," I repeated. "That's the thing on top of that tower?"

She nodded. "The Star's how we know when they're coming. Once the sun sets and the light from the crystal