

# METAL 2

THE LAST WISH

SCOTT WILSON



Month9Books

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*To all the Annikas out there, hurting.*



# METAL 2

THE LAST WISH



## Chapter 1

### Headquarters of the Twelve Apostles

Despite the fires, the room was cold. Two stone hearths roared with flames on opposite walls of the chamber. Between them lay a giant blood-red table carved in the shape of a twin-tailed scorpion. A gray circle connected its claws, legs, and stingers.

Sunlight poured in through another wall, entirely glass, leaking in chilled air from the freezing outdoors. Its corners and edges had crystallized into snowy spiderwebs, but the rest gave a clear view of the outside. Frosty green fields stretched into snow-capped mountains in the distance. Even the moon was visible in the clear afternoon sky.

And right next to it, just as big, was Earth's artificial moon Metl. A red *X* glowed across its surface like a freshly cut wound.

Twelve wooden thrones stood evenly spaced around the scorpion-table, each one located at a leg, claw, or stinger. Ten of them were empty. Sitting in one of the claw-thrones was a young girl. Her pink hair was done up in puffy pigtails, and she wore a ballet tutu underneath a black cloak. Her legs weren't long enough to reach the floor. She kicked them

playfully, spinning her ballet shoes in circles. Behind her stood two immobile figures covered in black from head to toe. If it wasn't for their occasional breathing, they might as well have been shadows.

At the opposite end of the scorpion-table, the only other occupied chair sat turned away, facing out the window-wall. No sounds or movement came from it. Aside from the occasional crackling of the flames or smacking of the girl's shoes, the room was silent. Until the girl giggled.

"They're here," she said, her high-pitched voice dancing as much as her shoes. But there was no sign that anyone was coming.

A minute passed. Then, faraway echoes of footsteps turned to heavy marching from the staircase outside. Closer and closer they came until they stopped, and a resounding knock banged against the room's massive wooden doors.

"Enter," came a voice from the turned-away throne. It was deep and metallic. Unnatural.

The doors groaned as a Holy Police man and woman in white full-body uniforms pushed them open. The only part of them not covered in white cloth were their faces and the crossbows slung on their backs. One of them had a silhouette of an ant on the front of his uniform, the other a bird on hers.

Three others walked past the Holy Police into the room. Two were draped in black cloaks—one tall with a smiling white mask, the other half the size with a frowning mask. Between them shuffled a fourteen-year-old boy who stood out for how normal he looked. He was tall and wide with red hair and freckles, and his farmer clothes—a cotton shirt,



pants, suspenders, and boots—were stained and stinky. His terrified eyes darted around the room. The girl with pink hair covered her mouth and laughed when she saw him.

The hidden, deep voice from behind the turned-away throne spoke. “How good to see you, Five. Six. It’s been far too long. Holy Police, you may leave us.”

The two white-draped Holy Police put their hands together, bowed, and left the room, pulling the doors closed behind them. The red-haired boy let out a whimper.

The pink-haired girl smiled at the taller masked figure and jerked her head toward the farmer boy. “Did you find a new pet, Five? I was wondering when you were gonna get sick of your old one.” She smiled at the shorter masked figure. Neither Five nor Six responded.

“Be nice, Three,” came the voice again. “You know why they’re here. Sit. Let us discuss.”

Three thrones—two scorpion-leg chairs and the other stinger-chair—moved of their own accord, sliding away from the table, scraping against the floor. The two masked figures made their way to the leg-chairs. Suddenly left alone, the red-haired boy quickly slunk over to the stinger-throne. Once they were all seated, the voice continued.

“Now then, the first item on the agenda. Is it true that Two is dead?”

“Yes,” answered Five. “Father Yohan was killed by Jadice.”

“So the Betrayer has taken yet another member of our family,” the voice said. “And the rumor that she has two ANGEL weapons ... you’ve confirmed this?”

“I saw it with my own eyes.”

The voice paused. “And did something happen to your

eyes that prevented you from punishing her and bringing our ANGEL weapons back?”

Five hesitated. It was impossible to tell what he was feeling through his mask, but when he spoke, his voice was calm.

“Like I said in my report, that was not my main objective. I was trying to—”

“We’ll get to that,” the voice interrupted. “But first, the replacement.”

All heads turned to the red-haired boy. While the others appeared comfortable on their thrones, he was squirming and sweating as though sitting over hot coals.

“Your name is Dominic, correct?” asked the voice. Dominic nodded. “The weapon you have, do you know what it is?”

Dominic turned his palms face up. A white *X* glowed bright on each of them.

“I ... I don’t know exactly what it is,” Dominic said. He looked toward Five. “He helped me use it. He told me it’s called an ANGEL weapon, and that mine can control time on whatever I touch.”

“An adequate explanation,” the voice said, “though not entirely accurate. You don’t actually control time itself. You merely speed up or reverse natural processes.”

“Is that different?” Dominic asked.

“Oh yes,” the voice answered. “A device that could actually turn back time ... if your weapon could do that, then you would not be alive right now.” Silence. “You have already used the ANGEL weapon, I assume?”

“Y-yes,” Dominic said. “But only a bit. And I’m not sure if I did it right.”

“No matter. You shall undergo training. We will need your ANGEL weapon soon, so I expect you to make swift progress.”

“Yes, sir,” Dominic said.

The voice chuckled. “You were a Nobody, correct? Then you’re familiar with the adoption process. Whatever your name used to be, it is now ‘Two.’ Your new family is us, the Apostles, a family of which I am the head. You may call me One. Now, for the next item—”

“Wait,” came a high-pitched voice. It was Six, the shorter, frown-mask figure.

“Yes?” said One with a tinge of annoyance.

“I just ... I mean, why does *he* get to join the Apostles?” she asked. “He’s only been Holy Police for a few days. There are others who work their whole lives trying to get his position. Why does he get it just because he stole an ANGEL weapon?”

Silence again. The only sound was pink-haired Three kicking her feet and giggling.

“Funny that *you’re* the one saying that, Six,” she said.

“No, Six does bring up a good point,” said One. “Rewarding thievery and ignoring the achievements of our extended family are not virtues. However, you know as well as I do what happens when an ANGEL weapon is removed from a living human. And after what happened in Salem, there is no more need for bloodshed.”

“But couldn’t we just heal him?” Six asked. “As long as they’re quick, whoever gets the weapon after him could do that, right?”

“You ask many questions, Six,” One said. “That is

something I cherish about you. And yes, again, you are correct. However, we are a family. And every member of our family has a role to play. I have mine. You have yours. Two will have his.”

“What is he going to do?” Six asked.

“Now is not the time,” One said. “But as head of this family, I promise that all will become clear eventually. Is that acceptable to you, Six?”

Six waited, then nodded. “Yes. Thank you.”

“Now then,” One announced. “A final word about your new family, Two. Here, we only have one rule: we all must have the same goal. One goal, one family. And you must never, ever betray our family.”

“Of ... of course,” Two said. “But, what *is* our goal?”

One paused, then spoke. “To capture Caden Aire, before he destroys the world.”

Two looked nervous no more. At hearing Caden’s name, he stopped shaking. His eyes tightened to slits. His hands balled into fists. He was no longer a boy sitting on a throne, but a tyrant.

“Caden,” he seethed. “I hate him. He’s the reason my brother ... my brother is gone. I’ll do anything to help you get him.”

One chuckled. “Six, perhaps now you’re beginning to understand why I’ve allowed this boy to join our family.”

Six stared silently through her frowning mask. The fires snapped and crackled off to the sides.

“Onto the last order of business then,” One said. “Caden Aire himself. It seems that our suspicions have been confirmed. Partially, anyway. Caden is alive, he is in Salem,

and he has the ANGEL weapon that destroyed the world once before. It's only a matter of time before he does it again. But there was also a surprise. Caden is just a teenage boy. How is this possible?"

"I spoke to Father Yohan before he was killed," Five said. "He told me that the boy in Salem is Caden's son. He is Caden Junior, I suppose. The whereabouts of Caden Senior are still unknown."

"Then his father is of no concern to us right now," One said. "All that matters is the ANGEL weapon. If Caden Senior has been hiding it inside his son for all these years, then the boy is our target ... isn't that right, Five?"

Five's smiling mask snapped to One. "What do you mean?"

"I just find it a little odd how you not only failed to bring back the Betrayer's ANGEL weapons, but also failed to capture Caden. You are *Five*, aren't you? You should have easily handled lowly Twelve by herself, not to mention a mere boy. And yet you come back empty handed. Did I misjudge you by giving you such a high position in our family?"

Five took a moment, seemingly to gain his composure. "All I can do is apologize," he said coolly. "I did not expect the Betrayer to have two ANGEL weapons, and I underestimated the boy. Next time I will not make the same mistakes."

"And then there is the other question," One continued. "What exactly were you doing in Salem in the first place? That's pretty far from your assigned post, isn't it?"

This time, Six spoke up for Five.

"Please don't blame him," she said. "It's my fault. I've always begged Five to take me to Salem to see ... everything. Father

Yohan. The Ant church. The research areas. I knew it would take forever to get official permission to leave, so I just ... I told him we should go, just for a day or two. I didn't think anything bad would happen."

"So you decided to take a little trip?" One asked. "And that little trip just happened to coincide with the ANGEL weapon we've been searching for appearing in Salem for the first time in thirteen years?"

This time Five took over. "I know it looks suspicious, but it worked out in the end. I was able to track Caden and confirmed that it's him, I stopped the Betrayer from destroying his weapon, and I brought back a new family member who knows all about him. I know what it looks like, but please forgive my and Six's small infraction. And if one of us has to be punished, I take full blame."

Silence again filled the room. Pink-haired Three at the claw-end of the table was, for the first time, sitting still. She was glowering at Five. He paid her no attention.

"You are correct," One said. "It did work out for the best. However, it worries me that if you were willing to perform this transgression behind my back, what other betrayals might be hiding in this room? Perhaps there are things that we should be discussing ... as a family."

Something moved from One's throne. An arm appeared off to the side, revealing the sleeve of a black cloak and a long gray glove ending in an open hand. In the middle of the palm was a glowing, black *X*.

"I w-would never betray our family," Five answered, his voice shaking slightly. "One goal, one family."

The *X* on One's palm glowed a black so deep it looked

like it would engulf the whole room in darkness. But then, in one swift motion, the arm curled back up, hidden behind the throne.

“No matter,” One said. “It won’t be long before we have Caden. Winter is here. If he heads south as he should, then he will soon be in the Guardians’ territory. They will not fail me.”

## Chapter 2

### Failure

Caden's magic show was not going well. Even with his patchwork cape, eye mask, and wide smile to try to entice anyone walking down the snowy town road, most people were much more interested in getting back to their warm homes than watching some boy do tricks. So far there were only three stone Pebbies in Caden's wooden donation box, the same three he'd put in at the start of the show.

Four people were watching: an old woman bundled in thick furs, a boy and his father in wool jackets, and a thirteen-year-old girl, the same age as Caden, wearing a bright-green coat. She didn't really count though; she was Annika, Caden's friend, his fellow fugitive from the Church. Even though it was cold enough for their breath to come out as snowy clouds, Annika's scowl was smoldering. And for good reason: they were taking a huge risk.

Plastered onto the side of a building not even a hundred feet away was a wanted poster with Caden and Annika's names and faces on it, in full color no less. The Church had spared no expense in spreading the word that Caden and Annika were dangerous criminals, made clear by their offer of ten-thousand



Rucks to whoever turned them in, dead or alive. Even Caden, who had only recently learned about stone Pebbies, shiny Quartzers, and paper Rucks, knew that was a lot of money.

But Caden and Annika didn't have any choice. Not if they wanted to eat. So Caden put on his eye mask, Annika shoved her long dark hair up into a puffy bonnet, and they hoped that no one here in Plainville would recognize them.

"And, uh, for my first trick," Caden said, shuffling a deck of faded playing cards, "I'll need a volunteer to pick a card."

"A card trick?" groaned the boy in the audience. He looked up at his father. "Can we go home?"

Everyone watching Caden was shivering, one cold breath away from leaving—Annika included. She crossed her arms and breathed out a puff of steam from her nose like an angry dragon. Caden knew what she was trying to tell him: stop it with the dumb tricks and let me steal our dinner.

But Caden didn't want to steal. The two of them had been on the run for four months now, barely scraping by doing chores on farms for meals and Pebbies. Thankfully, word traveled slowly in rural areas, so they hadn't been recognized yet. But still, they never risked working together or staying the night even if they were invited. Their evenings were spent outdoors, tallying their meager earnings, and curling up against a tree with Caden's horse Deber.

As Caden and Annika traveled the countryside, they'd spotted the overgrown outskirts of towns leftover from the Iltech Apocalypse—usually a house or two covered in bushes, or a giant sign hiding behind trees—but they never had the time or energy to explore them. Most farms were far away from such "tainted" areas, and Caden and Annika were far

too exhausted after working all day to move an inch more than they had to. It's not like they could take time off to go check them out either; even just one wasted day could be the difference between survival and starving to death.

Every night, Deber's body heat and the blankets Annika patched together using cloth scraps from generous farmers' wives kept them warm through autumn, but it wasn't long before they started waking up covered in frost. Even worse, with winter starting, farms weren't looking for help. All the crops had been harvested, and most were just looking to hunker down for the next few months. Caden and Annika didn't want to look suspicious by begging and pleading, so they had no choice but to find some other way to get by.

That's why Caden was now performing magic in the streets of Plainville, their first time in a town since running away from Salem. More people meant more chances of being identified, but after three days of not having anything more to eat than what they could scavenge, Caden's stomach was stronger than his sanity.

However, Caden had an advantage. Hidden away underneath his thick gloves were two glowing red Xs on his palms, the same as the X on Metl in the sky. Those red Xs let him use his ANGEL weapon: telekinesis, the power to move things with his mind. He could easily pick up people, horses, even entire boats using millions of microscopic Planck particles that resided within him.

And now he was using that incredible power for card tricks.

"I promise you'll like this one," Caden said, attempting to appease his audience. He shuffled the cards from one gloved hand to another. He'd gotten them as a gift from a

kind farmer, and Annika had taught him how to perform some tricks, a leftover skill from her days surviving alone on the streets in Salem. It had taken a little practice, but Caden's millions of tiny, invisible fingers made sleight of hand easy. "Here, why don't you pick a card and I'll find it in the deck."

"I've seen that one before," the boy whined. "Can't you do anything else?"

There was one other trick Caden had planned. He glanced toward Annika. She shook her head. He knew she didn't want him to do it, it was too much of a risk, but so was stealing. The last time she'd stolen food in Salem, she'd nearly gotten her hands cut off by a butcher. If they were going to eat tonight, then he had to try something else.

"As a matter of fact, I *do* have another trick," Caden said. He ignored Annika's cringing face as he turned to Deber, his faithful snow-white horse waiting behind him. She was wearing the patchwork blanket that Annika had sewn, and a leather satchel hung from her neck.

"O steed from the magical realm," Caden said to Deber, putting on his haughtiest voice, "I require my wand!"

Deber bounced up and down on her hooves, excited to be part of the act. She lowered her head, bringing the satchel to the ground, and dug her snout inside, rummaging around until she pulled out a stick between her teeth.

"That's not a wand!" the boy said with a sneer. "That's just a stick."

"This is no ordinary stick," Caden said, taking it from Deber and holding it delicately. "This wand is an instrument used to borrow spells from the magical realm and bring them into our own."

“Oh yeah?” the boy scoffed. “What can it do? Magically break in half?”

“I can show you, but first I need a volunteer.” Caden pretended to look over the small group and stopped at Annika. “You, young lady. How about you?”

“No thanks,” Annika said, arms crossed. “I think instead of *borrowing* spells from the magical realm, you should *steal* them instead. It’s a lot less dangerous.”

Caden did his best to stay smiling despite his burning face.

“I don’t see any danger in showing you good people a taste of the magical realm. After all, stealing has a much higher—”

“Enough with the talking and just do it already,” said the boy, stepping forward. “I’ll volunteer.”

Now Caden didn’t know what to do. Annika pursed her lips and gave him an I-told-you-so face.

“All right,” Caden said, forcing a smile. “Here, come stand beside me.”

The boy marched over and stood next to Caden, looking thoroughly unimpressed.

“What is your name, young man?” Caden asked.

“Hawthorn.”

“Hawthorn, have you ever felt any sort of connection with the magical realm?”

The boy’s father spoke up. “Now wait just a minute. You’re not going to use any ... you wouldn’t dare use Iltech on my boy, would you?”

Iltech, anything metallic, mechanic, or electric, was strictly forbidden by the Church of Metlism. All Iltech belonged inside Metl up in the sky as the eternal property of

The Great Gotama. Any Iltech that happened to be on Earth was considered stolen from him, and the thieves would be punished by, at best, imprisonment and having their children sent away to a Home for Nobodies, or at worst, a Holy Police crossbow arrow to the back of their neck.

“This has nothing to do with Iltech, sir,” Caden said. “The magical realm is as natural as trees, rivers, and rocks. All I’m doing is molding it the same way a stonemason crafts tools and cauldrons.”

The father looked satisfied and nodded. Caden took a deep breath and stood back from the boy, pointing his wand at him.

“Hawthorn, let the magical realm flow through you, and let my wand be its guide.”

Off to the side, Annika rolled her eyes, but Caden thought he was doing a pretty good job of making everything sound real. Hawthorn closed his eyes and Caden spoke the magic words. The only problem was he didn’t know any magic words, so he just rattled off a bunch of horse terms he’d learned from being a stable boy.

“Hocks! Equine! Curry comb! Gait! Uh ... bosal! Halter! Gelding! Filly!”

Caden activated his ANGEL weapon. He’d gotten better at using it over the past months. He’d learned to channel the humanity inside of him, his emotions, and to think of something intensely happy or sad to get the weapon working. Caden thought about getting enough tips to sleep in a warm inn tonight. That was more than enough.

Hawthorn rose into the air. His feet dangled above the snowy ground as Caden kept his “magic wand” pointed at him.

The old woman and Hawthorn's father gasped. Annika pretended to play along, covering her open mouth with her palm, but her eyes showed nothing but frustration. Hawthorn looked down, letting out the biggest yell of surprise yet.

"I'm ... I'm floating!" he said. "How are you doing that?"

"Yeah, how *are* you doing that?" his dad asked. He waved his hand underneath his son's feet, checking for invisible platforms.

"A magician never reveals his secrets," Caden said smugly.

The reactions from the crowd attracted more onlookers. The old woman beckoned her friends, and the father called over others to help figure out the trick. Suddenly there were ten people watching Hawthorn, now doing a jig three feet in the air. Caden slowly brought him back to the ground and bowed.

"If you enjoyed today's show," he said, lightly kicking his donation box, "be sure to toss in a few Pebbies, or a Quarter if you're feeling especially generous."

"What exactly is in that magic wand of yours, kid?" demanded a new spectator. Even though it was freezing cold out, this man's shirt and pants had torn-off sleeves and legs, exposing bulging muscles that could smash rocks like peanuts.

"Well, you see ..." Caden said. He looked to Annika. All anger was gone. Her eyes darted in worry. They were outnumbered and surrounded by a crowd that was growing bigger and angrier by the moment.

"You're not using Iltech, are you?" the burly man asked.

"No, of course not," Caden said.

"Then you'd better explain your trick real quick, or we'll have to summon the Holy Police."

The magic show was over. Caden and Annika needed to leave immediately.

“My fellow Ants,” Caden said, trying to appease the crowd, “I can assure you that—”

“Did he just call us Ants?” asked someone.

“Wait a minute!” said the burly man. He grabbed Caden by the arm and ripped off his gloves, revealing the glowing red Xs on his palms.

“You’re that Caden boy!” he said. “The one the Church is after!”

Screams came from the crowd. Everyone took a collective step back.

“What did you do to my boy?” Hawthorn’s father wailed. Hawthorn was crying and his dad was furiously wiping off his son’s clothes. “It’s okay, son! No Iltech got on you! You’ll be fine! You’re clean!”

Caden’s mind raced. He didn’t want to have to use his ANGEL weapon on these people, but he would if he had to.

“The posters say there’s supposed to be two of you,” the burly man growled. “Where’s that girl you’re with?”

“Right here,” said Annika. The crowd parted. She was pointing her remote-control magnetizer at the man’s face. Annika had gotten the magnetizer from Clops, the half-man half-machine arms-dealer in Salem’s Basement, but she hadn’t used it since they’d escaped months ago. Now, the green light at the end was glowing, waiting for Annika to press one of the number buttons and fire a magnetic blast. “Let go of him and stand back, unless you want your head to be as severed as your stupid sleeves.”

There were screams from the crowd as the burly man

released Caden and slowly raised his hands in surrender. Still keeping her magnetizer aimed at him, Annika dashed over to Caden and gripped his arm.

“Let’s get out of here,” she said. She briefly glanced toward Caden, and in that moment of distraction, the burly man reached out and snatched the magnetizer.

“Hey! Give that back!” Annika yelled, flailing for her weapon.

“Your time is up, sinners,” he said, pointing the magnetizer back and forth between Caden and Annika. “Now come with me or else—”

Suddenly the man was knocked to the ground. Annika’s magnetizer hovered back to her hands. Caden stood there, palms out, red Xs glowing bright.

“Let’s go!” he said. Caden leaped on top of Deber, Annika hopped up behind him, and he gave the horse a squeeze with his legs. “Run, girl! Run!”

“Don’t let them get away!” yelled the man from the ground. Deber kicked up dirt and pounded the ground to a full gallop as the man jumped up and sprinted after them. He was almost as fast as Deber, and the rest of the crowd wasn’t far behind.

“Cut them off before they get to the woods!”

“Get the Holy Police!”

“Ring the bellrock!”

Caden ripped off his eye mask. In the distance, he could see the edge of the town where the buildings tapered off into a deep evergreen forest. If they could make it there, they’d be hidden enough to get away.

“Just make Deber fly!” Annika said.



Caden shook his head. “We’d stick out even more in the air. And it’s not like I can keep us up there forever. We’re better off hiding in the woods.”

But getting there wasn’t going to be easy. Up ahead, another group of townspeople was approaching, armed with wooden bats and stone knives. They were going to have to break through. With one hand on Deber’s reins, Caden raised the other, preparing to forcefully part the crowd.

A guttural grunt came from behind. The burly man jumped and latched onto Deber’s blanket cover, growling as he was dragged behind the horse.

“Surrender, sinners!” he yelled.

Annika turned and pointed her magnetizer at the man. “Get off our horse!”

*PSHEW!*

An electric blast erupted out of the magnetizer, colliding with the dirt road and exploding chunks of hot dust in the air. It left behind a smoking crater with the burly man at its center, coughing and yelling and covered in soot.

“You could’ve killed him!” Caden shouted to Annika. She just rolled her eyes.

“Oh, he’s fine. I only set it to level three.”

At seeing the explosion, the crowd ahead of them panicked and fled. They pressed themselves against the buildings along the sides of the road and yelled at Caden and Annika as they galloped past.

“You won’t escape the Holy Police!”

“Give up before it’s too late!”

Their yells faded as Deber ran into the woods. The thick cover of frosted trees muffled the bellrock’s clanging to a

whisper. Deeper and deeper in they galloped, the canopy of leaves and pine needles darkening the afternoon sunlight. Caden weaved Deber through the trees and branches until it became so dense he had to slow her down to a trot, then a walk. Finally safe, Caden let her go at her own pace. She gave a grateful whinny, catching her breath with puffs of white smoke.

Annika sighed and patted Caden on the shoulder. “Told you magic tricks were a bad idea.”

“Yeah, yeah, you were right,” Caden grumbled. “But it was worth a try.”

He tried not to think about the three stone Pebbles he’d left behind in the box. That was all the money they’d had. That meant another cold night sleeping curled up with Deber. Another day of scavenging for food. Another day of failure.

Caden couldn’t shake the feeling that ever since they’d left Salem, every day had been nothing but failures. He’d hoped to find his dad, his creator, within a week, maybe a month at most. After saving the world from Metl, he’d expected his dad to come looking for him, to say how proud he was, and to tell him everything he wanted to know. But now, four months and hundreds of miles later, they were no closer to him than on day one.

Worst of all they had no clue about where to go. Caden was supposed to be following “electric signals,” little tugs inside of him that—thanks to his ANGEL weapon—he could feel whenever he was close to living Iltech: electricity. But he hadn’t felt so much as a pinch since they’d set out. It seemed like the rest of the world outside Salem was as electric as dirt.

Thinking about it now, as they were yet again on the run, Caden wondered if it was all worth it. Yes, he had saved the world from Metl crashing into the Earth ... *somehow* ... but he still wasn't sure how he'd done it. At the last minute, a voice from Metl had told him "you are not ready yet," and then it retreated back into the sky. Caden didn't know what the voice had meant. He'd seen the terrible things he was capable of when his ANGEL weapon took over his body, when he went into DEVIL mode. He'd taken down an entire boat of adult men with a hand wave, and he'd defeated Jadice, an ex-Apostle with two ANGEL weapons, all without breaking a sweat.

Not only that, but there were the horrors Caden had caused simply by existing. The hundreds that Jadice had killed in Salem and the Basement while trying to take him down. The Nobodies' parents that the Church was running experiments on to try and build their own version of the weapon he had inside him. If Metl was telling Caden that he needed to cause more destruction before he'd be "ready," then he wanted nothing to do with it.

Annika had promised Caden that she would destroy him once he saved the world from Metl, but she hadn't been able to go through with it. Caden was glad at first, but was it the right decision? Was his purpose fulfilled? Would the world be better off without him?

As Caden steered Deber through the trees, he reached into the overalls pocket underneath his jacket and pulled out his greatest treasure: a photo of his dad. He was young and looked just like Caden—blond hair, wiry body, but with blue eyes instead of Caden's gray ones. It was hard to tell now

because the photo was wrinkled and discolored, but Caden had memorized every inch of it long ago, especially the back. Caden flipped it over and read the familiar line that had given him strength for years.

*"I'll always love you."*

"Hey," came Annika's voice. "You doing all right?"

"Yeah," Caden said. "It's just ... everyone else in the world is looking for me, so shouldn't my dad be too? I mean, if he's really out there, then shouldn't he have already found me?"

Annika shook her head. "Don't you go getting discouraged on me, Caden Aire. Remember, you have the easy goal. You just need to find your dad and then be best pals or whatever. I need to find my father, and kill him."

"I know," Caden said. Annika's adoptive father Wilhelm had been responsible for turning her and her adoptive mother in to the Holy Police when her family was caught using Iltech, leading to the death of her mom. Annika's mission was to make him pay. "It's just ... I'm wondering if I'm doing the right thing, you know?"

"You are," Annika said. "We need to find your dad and figure out what happened with you and Metl. And as long as you have me helping you, I won't accept anything less than a happy reunion."

Caden thanked Annika and tucked the photo away. He was grateful to have her with him. He would be so lost and lonely if he were alone with Deber every day. But at the same time, he'd give anything for a clue, just the smallest electrical tug.

That's when Caden felt it. A pull inside his stomach.

“Annika!” he whispered. “I felt something!”

“Great!” she said. “Follow it. But be careful.”

Caden’s heart was pounding so hard he could hear it pulsing in his ears. Their first clue in months! Trying to stay calm, he steered Deber forward. There was a bright clearing in the woods ahead, like a sunbeam shining through a hole into a dark room. Was there something there? Could it be his father waiting for him? Caden squeezed Deber to take a step into the sunlit patch.

“Put your hands up!” boomed a powerful voice.

They were surrounded. Seven figures in the bushes around the clearing aimed crossbows at Caden and Annika.

## Chapter 3

Holly Gibbons

Deber let out a cry and Caden had to squeeze her tight and pull on her reins to keep her from bucking. She spun them around, turning the armed sentries into blurs. All Caden could see through his panic was that they were wearing bright green uniforms and were perfectly still, waiting for the right time to strike.

One of the figures stepped forward through the brush. She was different from the others, around the same age as Caden and wearing a gray full-body suit. Her skin was pale, and her light brown hair hung both by the sides of her face and tied up behind her in a ponytail. She peered through bone-frame glasses as she aimed a crossbow at Caden and Annika.

“What is your purpose?” she demanded.

“Let us go!” Caden said. He didn’t know who these people were, if they were Holy Police or whatever, but he had to try talking them down. He could survive a crossbow arrow thanks to his robotic healing, but Annika and Deber definitely couldn’t.

The girl didn’t move her finger from the crossbow trigger.

“Are you Reactors?”

“No, we’re not!” Caden said, not even sure what “Reactors” were.

The girl didn’t look happy with that response. “Then who are you? Get off your horse and surrender immediately!”

“Hey, Caden,” Annika whispered. “Take a closer look at those people in the woods.”

Caden glanced at the six others surrounding them. Immediately he saw what Annika meant—all of them were stiff as boards ... because they *were* boards. They were flat pieces of wood cut and painted to look realistic, dotted with holes and punctures as if they’d been used for archery practice. Even their crossbows were just useless toys. Bushes and trees from the forest had covered them up enough to make their fakeness hard to spot, but now that Caden had seen through it, he just chuckled.

“And why would we surrender to an army of wooden soldiers?” he asked.

The girl looked up from her crossbow with a fearful squeak. She accidentally pulled the trigger, letting loose an arrow that seared right past Annika’s head. The girl clasped a hand over her mouth as if horrified with what she’d done, dropped the crossbow to the ground, and ran into the woods.

“Go after her!” Annika yelled. “No one shoots an arrow at me and gets away with it!”

Caden gave Deber a kick and took off. Thankfully the girl wasn’t a fast runner. They caught up with her as she fumbled through the forest, squealing in fear when she turned back to see them. Caden thrust out his palm, tripped her to the frosty ground, and pinned her there with his power. As she lay on

her back unable to move, Caden circled Deber around her, then stopped and stared down.

“Who are you?” he demanded. The girl tossed her head from side to side as she struggled against her invisible chains.

“Let me go!” she cried.

“Are you Holy Police?” Caden asked. “If there’s anyone else in these woods looking for us, then tell us where they are!”

The girl stopped struggling, looked up, and stared at the glowing red Xs on Caden’s palms. Her eyes snapped to his face and suddenly her terror faded away. Caden was taken aback by what he saw: she was smiling.

“Gotama’s Sparrow,” she whispered. “You’re King Caden. The boy who saved the world from Met!”

Caden and Annika exchanged glances. This was not the reaction they were expecting.

“And you must be Annika Crane,” the girl said looking to Annika, her smile as bright as sunlight off snow. “You’ve helped King Caden a lot, haven’t you?”

Annika snorted. “Oh yes, I’ve helped *his majesty* plenty.”

Caden ignored the snide remark and tried to stay serious, though it was hard after being called “king.”

“You’re not afraid of us?” he asked.

“Of course not!” the girl said. “The Church has spread a lot of lies about you, but some of us know the truth.”

“What do you mean ‘some of us?’” Caden asked, still not sure how he felt. “Who are you?”

The girl was grinning so hard she had trouble getting words out. “Oh! I’m, uh, Holly. Holly Gibbons. Are you ... are you here to save my town?”

Before Caden could even ask what she meant, the sound



of thundering hooves came pounding through the woods. Holly's smile crumbled into fear.

"Oh no!" she whimpered. "It's the Holy Police."

Annika grabbed Caden's shoulder. "Let's get out of here. Now."

"No, please don't!" Holly squeaked. "If you run, they'll get you." She jerked her head to a nearby bush thick with pine needles and surrounded by trees. "You can hide in there. Let me go and I'll deal with them, I promise!"

The sound of the hooves was getting louder. Caden didn't have long to decide. If they were going to run for it, then they had to go now.

"Please," Holly begged. "King Caden, hide and you'll be safe."

Maybe it was the electrical tug he didn't want to leave behind. Maybe it was simply being called "King Caden." Maybe it was the fear of Annika and Deber getting shot by arrows. But whatever it was, it made Caden put out his palm and release the particles holding Holly on the ground. She sprang to her feet, adjusted her glasses, and ran up to Deber.

"Quick!" she said. "Leave the horse with me and hide!"

Caden grabbed Annika's arm, slid them both to the ground, and dragged her into the snow-dusted bush. Sharp branches scratched against Caden's skin and sticky needles clung to his hair as they crouched inside. Behind them, Deber let out fearful wails and kicked wildly. Once they were deep within the shadows of the bush, Annika yanked her hand away from Caden.

"What the steel do you think you're doing?" she seethed. "This is a trap!"

Caden shushed her with a finger over his lips. Annika groaned and dug her fingers into the cold dirt.

“First the magic trick and now this. Where did I go wrong?”

Caden could barely see through the gaps in the pine bush. Deber was flailing as Holly grabbed her reins and tried to get her under control. But as soon as the Holy Police galloped in, Deber went silent.

Five Holy Police brought their horses to a stop, surrounding Deber and Holly. Through the bush, Caden could see their full-white uniforms and the deadly crossbows slung behind their backs. Curiously, instead of a black ant silhouette emblazoned on the front of their uniforms like the Holy Police in Salem, these Police had a silhouette of a bird.

“Is *this* what Plainville was ringing their bellrock for?” one of the Police asked with a snort. “A runaway horse?”

The Holy Police circled Deber. She stared down at the ground, knowing better than to act up around a team of horses twice her size.

“Yeah, I caught her running through the target practice area,” Holly said. She sounded confident around the Holy Police, not scared at all. “We should get her back home.”

One of the Police grunted. “*We?* You’re not Holy Police yet, girl.”

“You take that horse back, Holly,” another said. “Plainville has wasted enough of our time. Show them the kind of help they can expect when they ring bellrocks over a runaway horse.”

“And where is your crossbow?” asked another. She sounded like a woman but it was impossible to tell. “Don’t tell me you lost it.”

“I ... I didn't lose it,” Holly said. “I just dropped it.”

The Holy Police shook her head and clicked her tongue. “Have you learned nothing from your training, Holly? The crossbow is as much a part of a true Holy Police as their arm, their head, or their heart. Lose it, and you've taken a mortal wound.”

“I'm sorry.” Holly bowed to the ground, her voice exhausted like she'd made the same apology hundreds of times. “I'll try harder.”

“See that you do. Now be quick. You especially don't want to be late for tonight.”

The Police cracked their reins, clapped their boots, and galloped away, leaving Holly and Deber behind. The sound of their rumbling hooves grew quieter in the distance, until it finally disappeared. Holly let go of Deber and fell to her knees in front of the bush.

“King Caden, Annika Crane,” she whispered. “You can come out now.”

Caden and Annika climbed out of the shrub. Snow, dirt, and pine needles clung to them all over. Holly looked pained as she watched them brush themselves off.

“I'm so sorry, King Caden,” she said. “But they shouldn't bother you anymore.”

Annika shot Holly a dirty look. “You. You've got some explaining to do. Why are you with the Holy Police?”

Holly's face scrunched up as if she were on the verge of tears. “I'm not. I'm just in training. It's what my parents want me to do.”

“Uh huh,” Annika said, not sounding convinced. “And is that why you shot an arrow at me?”

"I'm so sorry about that," Holly said. "I was in the middle of crossbow practice when the bellrock started ringing. The Holy Police I was with told me to stay here while she went back to town for the others. But then I heard you coming and I ... I didn't know what to do. I've only shot it a few times, and I've always missed, and ... can you forgive me?"

"Yeah, I think so," Annika said, no hint of forgiveness in her voice. "If you give me the crossbow and let me have a shot, we can call it even."

"Annika," Caden said, stepping between them. "She could've turned us in, but she didn't. We're on the same side."

Annika crossed her arms. "All I know is what happened the last time I thought one of the Holy Police was on my side."

Caden understood Annika's pain. Her adoptive father had been Holy Police. She still had the scar in her arm from his crossbow arrow to prove it. But this girl was clearly not one of them. Caden tried to change the subject.

"Holly, when I first stepped into the clearing in the woods, I felt Iltech nearby. Do you have any on you?"

"I would never!" Holly squeaked, terror in her eyes. "The only Iltech nearby is in the Hole."

"The Hole?" Caden asked.

Holly rocked her head uncomfortably. "Yeah, it's the name of the Iltech mine in New Darien. We dig up lots of Iltech there every day."

Iltech mine? A smile spread across Caden's face. That had to be where the electrical signals were coming from. Finally, for the first time in months, they had a clue for where to go!

"You don't ..." Holly asked sheepishly. "You don't know

about New Darien, do you? Or the Sparrows?”

“No,” Caden said. “Should I?”

Holly bit her lip and fidgeted with her fingers. “I ... I guess not. I just thought that, maybe, you’d come to save my town, just like you’d saved the world.”

Annika narrowed her eyes in suspicion. “And what exactly does your sparrow-nest town need saving from?”

Holly looked back and forth between Annika and Caden as if the wheels and axles in her brain were turning hard enough to crush stone.

“It’s better if you don’t know,” she said finally. “If you didn’t come here to save my town, then that means you should stay away. It’s too dangerous.”

“Holly, please.” Caden put his hands together, pleading. “I don’t know anything about your town, but if I’m sensing electric signals from it, then that means my dad might be there. And if he is, I’m sure he can help you. So please, can you take us there?”

Behind her glasses, Holly’s eyes glistened. Her lips curled into a small smile of hope.

“Okay, King Caden,” she said. “But ... please stay here. I’ll go get my crossbow, then meet you back here and lead you in safely.”

“No problem,” Caden said. “We’re not going anywhere.”

Holly ran into the woods the way they’d come. As soon as she was out of sight, Annika shook her head.

“‘King Caden’ ... oh please!”

“What?” Caden asked, his face tingling with embarrassment.

“You know what,” Annika said. “I don’t like that girl. I

don't like her one bit."

"Well, to be fair, you don't like anyone."

"Yeah, and for good reason! Most people are trying to kill us."

"I don't know if you noticed, Annika, but she just saved our lives. Kind of the opposite of killing us. If she hadn't helped us hide, then you and Deber would be full of arrows right now."

"That doesn't mean we can trust her. It could still be a trap."

"I don't think so. I think she's nice."

"Yeah, sure." Annika rolled her eyes. "And I'm sure her calling you 'King Caden' has absolutely nothing to do with that."

"It doesn't," Caden said, pretty sure he was telling the truth. "Besides, if she can lead us to the signals, then we need to follow her."

Annika lowered her gaze. "Her knowing about electric signals doesn't mean she's on our side. Remember Jadice? She was nothing but electric signals."

"Not everyone is Jadice, Annika. You have to learn that sometime."

"Oh, *I* have to learn something? This coming from the boy who thought performing magic tricks was a good idea?"

The sound of shoes crunching through snow brought Holly back, cradling the crossbow in her arms. She looked Caden and Annika up and down worriedly.

"Can you two disguise yourselves a bit more?" she asked. "Just to be safe?"

"Of course," Caden said. He gave Annika a pat on the

back. She was still steaming from their argument. “We’re used to it.”

Annika didn’t put up any more of a fight as they dressed themselves in spare clothes. Caden put on an extra winter hat and gloves, and Annika wrapped her hair back up into an old faded bonnet. They rode on Deber behind Holly who led on foot. Every now and then she would look back, beam at Caden, then focus again on the forest in front of them.

Having spent his entire life being ostracized by others, Caden had no idea how to react to all of this positive attention. So he did what he did best: show off his social ineptitude by asking a really stupid question.

“Do you wear glasses all the time?” he asked Holly. Back at the Home in Salem, Mother Mildred had worn glasses to read, but Caden had never seen anyone walk around with them on before.

“Uh, yeah, I guess so,” Holly said. “I mean, I can’t see much without them.”

“Really?” Caden asked. “Do your parents wear glasses too?”

“Um ... kind of.”

“Wait. Do you eat with them on? And what about when you go to the bath—”

Annika dug her fist into Caden’s side, letting him know he’d gone too far. Before he could say anything else embarrassing, she spoke up.

“Why did those Holy Police have birds on their uniforms?” she asked Holly. “I’ve only ever seen them with ants before.”

“Oh, that’s right,” Holly said. “You’ve probably never seen

Sparrows before. You're from Salem, so you're Ants, right?"

Caden gave a noncommittal grunt and Annika narrowed her eyes.

"I don't believe in any animals. I only worship one god. Revenge." No one said anything as Annika's words heated the air. When it fizzled away, she continued. "So who are the Sparrows? Are they different from Ants?"

"Kind of," Holly said. "Sparrows and Ants are both Metlists, just different sects. They're pretty similar. We both believe in Gotama, the afterlife in Metl in the sky, and the Six Virtues. But there's one big difference: we Sparrows believe that Gotama was a real person."

Caden wanted to ask about Gotama being real, but Annika was faster.

"Wait a minute," she said. "How do you get Six Virtues from a sparrow? I mean an ant has six legs, but that doesn't make any sense for birds."

Holly stuck her head up and rattled off her answer as if she'd recited it a thousand times:

*"Worship with our beak, always pointed to the sky.  
Work and rule with our two wings, for that is how we fly.  
Create and serve with our two feet, to keep us humbly grounded  
And love with our bright tail, staying balanced and well-  
rounded."*

There was a moment of awkward silence as they kept walking. Holly turned back to them, shifting her eyes to the ground.

"Sorry, it's just habit. It's good for you to know though. We're almost there, and if anyone asks, you're Sparrows from another town come to visit, okay?"



Caden nodded. He'd never learned anything about Sparrows back at the Home, but then again there were lots of things he'd never learned about. Apostles. ANGEL weapons. The Church's experiments on parents. He focused on following the electric signals, eager to stay on track to his dad.

The forest started thinning. Caden could hear faint human voices from far away. Then, with just a few more trots on Deber, they came out of the woods on the other side.

Caden couldn't believe his eyes.

As far as he could see, the earth was nothing but one giant canyon. It was miles long in every direction and at least one hundred feet deep, as if it were the gaping mouth of a monster that lived underground. But this was no natural hole; it was man-made like Salem's Basement, only hundreds of times bigger. Inside the hole were tunnel entrances, wooden ladders, platforms, and ropes carrying tools, people, and of course, Iltech.

Along the edge of the canyon, wooden carts brimmed with Iltech. There were shattered computers and TVs, plastic boxes and poles, cracked mirrors and light bulbs, though most was unrecognizable scrap: dull gray sheets of metal, rusted brown and orange pipes, and tangled messes of multicolored wires winding and bending in every direction.

But it all paled in comparison to the robot.

Standing outside the canyon was a giant, human-shaped Iltech beast, even taller than the statue-church in Salem. It towered up to the sky, silently and motionlessly watching over everything beneath it. The entire thing was made out of a mishmash of Iltech, as if someone had taken cart after cart

of random metal and molded it together. Caden had no idea how it was all staying together, but that didn't stop his jaw from falling right open.

"Welcome to the New Darien Iltech mines, also known as, the Hole," Holly said. Then, under her breath, she added, "The most miserable place on Earth."

"What do you mean?" Caden said. "It's beautiful."

"Not when you're forced to work in it every day."

"Is that robot real?" Caden asked, unable to take his eyes away from it.

"Its name is Erelim, and it's real," Holly said. "But it hasn't moved in a long time."

"Wait," Annika said, staring in awe at the view herself. "This doesn't make sense. Iltech is illegal. Why are you mining it?"

"It's our purpose as Sparrows," Holly explained. "A thousand years ago, Gotama came down from Metl, inside of Erelim the giant robot, and walked on Earth as a human. He lived here in New Darien and taught people how to live properly, without Iltech. He traveled all over the world, but some people didn't like what he preached. So when he flew back to Metl inside of Erelim, they used Iltech to transform their bodies into giant sparrows and chased after him. They pecked at Erelim so hard that the robot fell to Earth and exploded into a million pieces.

"The sparrow-humans thought they'd beaten Gotama, but he was still there, in the sky, ascending to Metl unscathed. He was furious at the human-sparrows for twisting their natural forms, and for destroying his holy vessel Erelim. He cast them down from the sky and ordered them to appreciate

his natural creations for what they were, not to try to improve upon them. Through the Six Virtues he showed them that even each tiny part of the sparrow has a purpose, and he instructed humanity to follow them to make the most of his gifts on Earth.

“He left us Sparrows with a special mission: to rebuild Erelim. It was our fault the holy vessel had been destroyed, so it was up to us to rebuild it. That’s why we’ve been digging here ever since, to put Erelim back together, to restore New Darien to its former glory as Gotama’s home on Earth, and to enshrine any other holy relics that we find.”

Caden didn’t know what to believe. Seeing the Hole, and the massive robot Erelim, it almost made him believe Holly’s stories. He had to remind himself that none of it was true. Gotama wasn’t real. Sparrow-humans never existed. The Iltech Apocalypse happened two-hundred years ago, not a thousand. He had to stay focused.

Caden concentrated on the electric signals. The same tingling sensation right behind his belly button was still there, but it hadn’t grown any more intense since he’d felt it in the forest. If what he was sensing came from the Hole or Erelim, then the feeling should be off the charts by now.

“I don’t think this is what I was sensing,” Caden said. “All the Iltech here ... it’s dead. I can only sense living Iltech, stuff with electricity. Is there anywhere else people actually use Iltech, not just mine it?”

Holly hesitated before she spoke. “Well, yes. But ... it’s too dangerous. It was bad enough bringing you here.”

“If it can help me find my dad,” Caden said, “then I don’t care. I’ll go anywhere. Please, Holly.”

Holly's tense expression briefly melted into a smile. She whispered, "I'll do my best to help, King Caden."

A soft bellrock rang out. Hundreds of people who had been hidden in the Hole came pouring out from tunnels, scaffolds, and deep down from the nooks and crannies of the earth. They all wore the same full-body gray uniform as Holly, with stone shovels and pickaxes slung over their shoulders. Most were so tired and droopy as they walked past Caden, Annika, and Holly that they didn't even notice them.

"Holly!" came a voice. "You brought some friends today, I see."

Up walked an old man who was definitely not tired and droopy. He had a bright smile, scraggly white beard, and the same gray outfit as everyone else.

"Hey, Grandpa," Holly said quickly.

"Who are your little friends?" he asked. "They don't look like the usual Sparrow pilgrims."

"Oh. This is, uh ... Carl and Anita," Holly said quickly. "They're just passing through."

"I see," he said. "Well then, how do you do, Carl and Anita? The name's Amaryllis Flint, but you can call me Amar. You've picked the perfect day to come to New Darien."

"Why's that?" Caden asked. Holly's grandfather looked shocked.

"What? You haven't told them, Holly? Why, today's the day that someone gets their Wish."



## Chapter 4

### The Guardians

“A wish?” Caden asked Amar. “What do you mean?”  
“Grandpa ...” Holly groaned. “I don’t think Carl and Anita want to hear about it. They were just about to leave, actually.”

“No, it’s fine,” Caden said. “What do you mean a wish?”

Holly was gritting her teeth, looking more uncomfortable by the second as Amar explained.

“It’s called a Working Wish, a New Darien Sparrow tradition that goes back for centuries. It’s a reward that we get for working in the Hole for fifty years. You start at age sixteen, then at sixty-six you get to retire, ask the Church for anything you want, and then they have to give it to you.”

“Anything you want?” Caden asked, his mind already running away with possibilities.

“Well, it has to be something that can actually be granted, of course. I don’t think Wishing to live forever or bring back the dead has much a chance of happening. Although we’ve had some pretty big Wishes before. I remember once someone Wished for a million Rucks, and they got it! That just about set everyone’s heads spinning for a week straight.”

Annika snorted a laugh. “Seems kind of strange for *Sparrows* to be doing so much digging in an underground hole. Shouldn’t you be flying around in the sky instead?”

Amar’s smiling face flashed dark for a moment and he spoke in a low voice. “You’re not the only one who thinks that.” Then he snapped back to his wrinkly grin and let out a laugh. “But hey! I’ve had enough Hole-ing around for today. Why don’t you two come to town and watch the Wish ceremony?”

“No!” Holly shouted. A group of Sparrows passing by glanced over. Holly covered her mouth in embarrassment and Amar looked at her confused.

“Is something wrong, Holly?” he asked.

“I just ... I don’t think it’s a good idea for them to come. You heard Plainville’s bellrock, right? The Holy Police are going to be suspicious of any new faces.”

“If Carl and Anita have nothing to hide, then I don’t see the problem. It’s not like they’re wanted criminals or anything. Right?”

Annika gave a nervous laugh and elbowed Caden.

“Oh. Yeah. Of course not,” he said. Amar nodded. Holly was twitching with terror.

“Fine,” she whimpered. “But please, at least change into miner outfits and leave your horse here.”

Amar raised an eyebrow. “And why would they do that?”

“For the, uh, full New Darien experience,” Holly said quickly. “Come on. Follow me.”

There were a dozen wooden sheds sprinkled around the perimeter of the Hole, serving as places to store tools and extra uniforms. Holly practically pushed Caden and Annika into

one of them, and when she was done dressing them up, they were indistinguishable from the hundreds of other Sparrows. Both of them were wearing full-body gray uniforms, Caden's Xs hidden underneath his gloves, and Annika's magnetizer stored away under her clothes. Holly smeared dirt and ash on their faces, to help them blend in even more.

She led Caden and Deber to the Hole's stable, where the workhorses were boarded. Holly brought Deber into an empty stall and gave her some hay. Deber looked happier than Caden had seen in her months. She lapped up the fresh, dry food and snorted a hello whinny to the other horses. With a pat on her side, Caden promised her they'd be back soon. Hopefully after he'd had something to eat too.

Caden, Annika, Holly, and Amar merged back with the crowd walking toward town. With every step, Caden felt the electrical tug inside him grow stronger, and his excitement grew along with it. They were heading in the right direction.

At first New Darien wasn't that different from Salem. Wooden houses with brick chimneys spewing smoke rested along the dirt roads. But as they got farther in, the *real* New Darien came into view.

The houses were like nothing Caden had ever seen. They were three-story mansions painted chestnut brown, ocean blue, or cloud white. Their sharp peaks jutted out of the tops and sides, with glass windows framed by shutters. Some of the houses were made of brick, each individual block impossibly flush with its neighbors. Others had smooth siding made of material that Caden didn't recognize. Each house was spaced out far from the other, with yards big enough for small farms. Some had columns flanking the front doors, or rounded



balconies popping off the sides, or even ornate gardens of winter flowers and bushes in their yards.

More than human homes, they looked like houses for aliens.

But even stranger were the roads connecting them. The dirt roads turned into some sort of hard, black tar. Cracks and holes with weeds growing out were sprinkled here and there, but Caden managed to avoid them by keeping his gaze firmly planted on the awe-inspiring ground.

“What is this stuff?” he asked.

“Oh, never seen asphalt before?” Amar asked. “It’s everywhere here.”

“How did you make it?”

“We didn’t. Everything you see here in downtown New Darien, the roads, the houses, they’re all artifacts from when the Great Gotama lived here. We Sparrows restored them to live in ourselves, after removing the Iltech, of course.”

Annika eyed him suspiciously. “That seems like just as much work as building new houses from scratch.”

“You’re right,” he said. “But it’s our duty as Sparrows to restore the holy town that Gotama lived in when he was alive.” Then he added with a wink, “We’re Sparrows after all, we make our nests out of what we find.”

Caden couldn’t stop staring. These houses were exactly what he’d been wanting to explore for the past months but never had a chance to. Seeing them up close now, not overgrown with trees and bushes, was incredible, but it was hard to believe that people in the past had actually lived in them. They were so big that multiple families must’ve lived together back then. Or maybe they filled the space with lots

of Iltech, like the Basement in Salem.

“Can we go inside one of them?” Caden asked.

“Of course,” Amar said. “We’ll be going inside that one over there. It’s my house.”

He pointed to a nearby mansion. It looked like the others: three stories tall, as long as four barns put together, and with so many windows and angled roofs it looked like a multi-eyed monster.

“You really live in there?” Caden asked. “Are you rich?”

Amar laughed. “Far from it, kid.”

“Then how did you buy it?”

“I didn’t. I inherited it. My grandfather lived there, and his grandfather lived there too, all the way back to whichever grandfather it was who originally cleaned this place free of Iltech.”

Caden was so excited he had to control himself not to walk ahead of everyone else. But as they passed closer by the houses, he noticed that they weren’t as pristine as he’d thought. Roof tiles were missing, paint was peeling, and mold that infested the foundations was creeping up the sides. The only reason the yards weren’t overgrown was because most of the grass had browned and drooped to the ground, weak enough to collapse under the slightest frost. Caden had been so shocked by the enormous buildings at first that he hadn’t noticed they were in disrepair.

Amar’s house was no better. The old man led Caden and Annika up a trail through the light snow covering his front yard. The mansion’s siding was sun-bleached white all over, with only small remnants of dark brown paint cowering in the shadows, barely clinging to life.

“It needs a little more love than it gets,” Amar said, “but it’s home. Got some paint and glue ready to fix it up a bit when I finally get some free time.”

He led them up the concrete steps to the front door. Holly, however, was still standing in the street.

“Are you coming, Holly?” Caden asked. Her head shot up when Caden spoke.

“Uh, no. I have to, um, go give this back,” she said, bobbing her crossbow. “I’ll meet you later for the Wish ceremony. Bye.”

Holly sprinted down the road, seemingly eager to get away as quickly as possible. Annika leaned in to whisper to Caden.

“I’m telling you, there’s something weird going on here.”

“I have to follow the signals,” Caden said. “It’ll be fine.”

“Don’t worry about Holly,” Amar said. “It’s best for her not to come in. You two just go inside and get warm until the ceremony starts.”

He opened the front door, revealing the entranceway and what lay beyond. From outside, the house was impressive, but inside was doubly so. The rooms were enormous and empty, with floors made of perfectly straight, polished wood. A wide staircase led upstairs, complete with a banister that ended in elegant curls, and a door built into its side. From where Caden stood he could see into an area with smooth marble counters. There were stains on the walls and dirty scuffs on the floor, but it still took Caden’s breath away. His breath that was coming out in thick white clouds.

Caden suddenly realized that it was even colder indoors than outside. His teeth chattered and he gripped himself

hard as he shivered. Amar laughed and patted him on the shoulder.

“These houses were built to be heated by Iltech, so they’re not great during the winter. We’ve had to improvise. Come on, let’s go to the living room.”

He opened a door and a wave of warmth wafted out of a new room. It was enormous, the same size as the entire Home that Caden had grown up in. A brick fireplace built into the wall blazed with a hungry fire, boiling water in a ceramic pot hanging above it.

Oddly enough, the floor was covered in books, lying strewn about like leaves in fall. Back at the Home they’d only had one book, the Book of Metl, but that was boring and gray. These had full-color pictures on the front, with titles that popped right off the covers. Some of the open ones even had what looked like photos inside, showing strange animals, smiling people, and magnificent landscapes. They were like little windows into other worlds, just lying on the floor.

“You’ve brought guests?” came a voice. It was a woman in a chair. Long messy hair hung down to her knees, and she wore a puffy wool dress that was grungy and brown like it hadn’t been washed in ages. Her drab outfit clashed with her gloves; they were bright sky blue and covered everything from her fingertips to her shoulders. A few odd pieces of straw stuck out from them here and there. She didn’t smile or move at all.

“This is my daughter, Rosemary,” Amar said. “She’s Holly’s ... mother. Rosemary, these two are visiting New Darien and I thought they could wait here until the Wish ceremony.”

Rosemary stared at them, as if at a loss for words.

“Why would you visit a place like this?” she whispered.

Caden and Annika exchanged glances, not knowing how to respond. Thankfully Rosemary didn't seem interested. She turned to the fire, as if no one else was there. Holly had said in the forest that her parents made her join the Holy Police, but looking at Rosemary it didn't seem like she could so much as make Holly eat her vegetables.

“Rosemary's not much for chit chat,” Amar said. “She's more at home with her books.”

“What's the deal with these books anyway?” Annika asked, looking around the floor. “Aren't they Iltech? Especially the photos in them?”

Rosemary spoke in her tiny voice to no one. “Books aren't Iltech. They're just paper, cloth, and ink.”

Annika looked conflicted, like she wanted to ask more, but was worried that the mere words out of her mouth might give the fragile-looking Rosemary a heart attack. Amar took them by surprise by clapping his hands together and beaming at them.

“So Caden Aire, Annika Crane. What *really* brings you to New Darien?”

Cold fear gripped Caden. All thoughts of books and Rosemary left his mind. He instinctively thrust out his gloved hands, ready to use his ANGEL weapon. Annika reached into her uniform and whipped out the magnetizer, its green light already glowing. Amar laughed out loud.

“Oh don't worry. I'm not going to turn you in to the Holy Police.”

Caden and Annika continued to hold their weapons out, ready to fire. But the way Amar smiled at them, a defenseless

old man with his hands behind his back, Caden couldn't help but feel ridiculous. He lowered his palms and Annika followed suit with her magnetizer.

"How long did you know it was us?" she asked.

"Oh, I knew who you were the moment I saw you. Gray-eyed boy, dark-skinned girl, white horse. But I tell you, the thing that gave it away the most wasn't any of that. It was Holly herself."

"How did Holly give us away?" Caden asked. "She didn't say anything."

"She didn't have to. That smile of hers said it all. All the girl's been talking about ever since you sent Metl back to the sky is, well, *you*. Every time she starts going on about 'King Caden,' her face lights up. I haven't seen her that happy in years, so seeing her smiling with two strangers, it kind of gave you away."

"Then are we safe?" Annika asked. "Or will other people recognize us?"

"I think you're fine," Amar said. "With you dressed up like miners, and of course without anyone else knowing what Holly's smile means, you'll blend in. Besides, most everyone will be concentrating on the Wish anyhow."

Caden looked over at Rosemary. He expected her to be shocked that King Caden was in her home, but it was as if she hadn't even heard them. She just sat in her chair, staring at the fire.

"So," Amar said, rubbing his hands together. "Any chance I could see those red Xs of yours?"

Slightly embarrassed, Caden removed his gloves and showed off the glowing Xs on his palms. The way Amar eyed

them like slabs of meat reminded Caden of Clops's hungry look when he gazed at his ANGEL weapon in the Basement.

"It really *is* you ..." Amar said, his voice trailing off. "Castor's Wish, it really will come true."

"Who's Castor?" Annika asked sharply. "And what do they have to do with Caden?"

Amar stepped back from Caden's palms. His dreamy look faded as he came back to reality.

"Castor is my brother. He's the one making the Wish today. He's supposed to make a certain Wish, but if I'm being honest, I wasn't sure if he'd go through with it. His heart's as strong as stone, but his spine's brittle as branches. With you here though, it's a sign that everything's going to be fine."

"But what do I have to do with anything?" Caden asked.

Amar sighed. "A long time ago, something bad happened in New Darien. Gotama punished us Sparrows ... again. Everyone of age was forced to work in the Hole, even if they had another job farming or stonemithing or anything. Twelve, thirteen, fourteen-hour workdays for some. We were told that we had to work harder, and that it would continue until we found 'the red X.' No one knew what that meant, until the red X appeared on Metl a few months back. And then we heard about you, the boy with red Xs on his palms. The Church says you stole the red X, that you're not the sign we've been waiting for, but I disagree. I think that, with you here, it's a sign that our troubles are over."

Caden wasn't sure how to feel. It was like he was back at the top of the church in Salem, being worshiped by the crowd after saving the world from Metl. He didn't want to be anyone's savior. He just wanted to find his dad.

“I didn’t come here to save anyone,” Caden said. “I just felt some electric signals and followed them. That’s all.”

“Well, seems like they led you to the right place,” Amar said. He glanced out the window. Crowds of people were moving through the street. “But enough talking. It looks like it’s time to head out. You coming, Rosemary?”

Rosemary gave the subtlest shake of her head. She looked like she was gazing into a different world, or even a different time.

“All right,” Amar said. “Follow me and try not to stick out too much just yet.”

Back outside in the cold, Caden and Annika did their best to remain hidden underneath their gray uniforms and smeared dirt. But if Amar was right and the thing that had given them away was Holly’s smile, then they had nothing to worry about. When they caught up with her outside, far from smiling, Holly looked petrified. She no longer had her crossbow, and she walked along with them, staring straight ahead, not saying a word.

“Are you okay, Holly?” Caden asked. She jumped as if scared by a ghost.

“Oh. Yes. Of course. I’m fine. Just ... try not to talk until it’s over, okay?”

Caden felt like he should press Holly for answers, but right now all he cared about were the electric signals. They were getting stronger with every step, and he couldn’t wait to find out why. Could his dad possibly be hiding here, waiting for him? Amar had said that the town had been looking for “the red X” for a long time, so maybe his father had been trying to find him here?



A little farther into downtown New Darien, the mansions turned into stores. A clothes shop, stonemith, bakery. Just like the houses, they were beautiful two- and three-story buildings with cloth awnings and signs carved out of polished wood. Caden stared at them, dumbfounded by their size, until he spotted his and Annika's wanted posters plastered on one of the storefronts. He quickly turned away, pretending he hadn't seen anything.

Right now there was nobody inside the shops. It seemed the entire town was at the center, an open grassy area surrounded by bare winter trees. More than a thousand people were gathered there, all in matching gray uniforms. In the middle of the common was an elevated wooden stage with a strange device rising up from it. It looked like a door frame, only much taller. The wooden rectangle extended twenty feet straight up, and on the sides at the bottom were two horse-sized wings made of thousands of feathers.

Standing inside the hollow frame between the two wings was an old man. He had no hair on his wrinkly head except a white, wispy beard jetting off his chin. Was that Castor, Amar's brother? Caden couldn't tell. The old man looked worried, his eyes darting from the crowd to the ground as if he was hiding something. Caden would've expected him to look a lot more relaxed if he was about to retire and make a Wish.

Behind the stage was a giant building that had to be New Darien's church. It was huge, which was saying something in a town where even normal people's homes were mansions. Easily five times the size of the other houses, a stone staircase flowed out from its colossal entrance doors like a solidified

waterfall. Sitting on top of the church was a massive wooden sparrow with a human head and bird beak, half the size of the building itself. Creamy birch made up the face and beak, with deep red mahogany for the feathers, white ash for the body, and rich brown oak for the legs. Spreading its wings and shooting its tail feathers up behind it, it looked like it might jump right off the building and fly away. All around it were five smaller human-sparrows soaring in the air, connected to the larger one by the tips of their feet and wings. The sun reflected in the shiny rock-eyes of the large one, as if it were the one giving it permission to set in the sky.

“They’re coming!” came a voice. The same words echoed all over in excited whispers. It wasn’t long before Caden saw who “they” were. Two women dressed in black marched out from the church and across the green, escorted by a group of Holy Police with sparrow silhouettes on their uniforms. Three of the Holy Police were carrying something hidden under sheets.

When the group arrived at the stage, the Holy Police surrounded it at the bottom, and the two women in black climbed up a staircase to the top. They stood side by side next to the old man, visible to everyone in the crowd. As soon as Caden saw them, his electrical sense gave its hardest yank yet, dragging his heart down with it.

These two women were Apostles.



## Chapter 5

### The Wish Ceremony

“We present the Guardians of New Darien!” announced the Holy Police. “Mother Simona and Mother Thadi!”

The two women stepped forward. They looked over the cheering audience with their heads held high, expressions as stoic as the giant human-sparrow on top of the church.

Simona had fair skin, a slim figure, and hair dyed turquoise done up in a tight bun, pulling back her bird-like face to a sharp point. A matching turquoise dress shimmered underneath her black cloak. Covering her hands—and, Caden guessed, the *Xs* that marked her *ANGEL* weapon—were turquoise gloves. Heavy boots came up to her knees and ended in spikes on the soles, adding an intimidating flair to her otherwise elegant appearance.

Next to her, Thadi was built like a statue of boulders. Her arms and legs were twice Simona’s size. Freckles dotted her face beneath her short, bright-orange hair. Under the black cloak, her leather shirt and pants glistened with a fiery finish. Caden only caught a glimpse of her orange gloves before she held them behind her back, giving the crowd a stern look.

Both of them had to be Apostles. They were wearing the same black Apostle cloaks as Jadice, Five, and Six had in Salem. And more importantly, Caden could sense the electric signals from their ANGEL weapons. The only other time he'd felt it this strongly was when he'd met Jadice, and that hadn't turned out well.

"Caden," Annika whispered, "those two, they look like Jadice."

"I know," he whispered back. "I felt their signals. They have to be Apostles."

"Then we need to get out of here. Now!"

"Not yet. If we run, we'll stick out. We have to wait until it's over."

Annika fixed her gaze on the two women and patted her uniform, double checking that the magnetizer was still hidden underneath. Hopefully it wouldn't come to that.

Caden looked over at Holly, to make sure she wasn't going to give them away. Thankfully she wasn't smiling. Far from it, her pale face was a light shade of green, like she was going to be sick.

"My fellow Sparrows!" boomed Thadi, the fiery orange-haired woman. "Today we honor one of our own, Castor Flint, for having devoted fifty years to the greatest of all Six Virtues: work. He has dedicated his life to laboring in the Hole, and now we will commemorate his incredible achievement by seeing firsthand the fruits of his labors: the lost relics of the Great Gotama!"

Lost relics of the Great Gotama? Caden had no idea what they were talking about. Three of the Holy Police raised whatever they were holding above their heads, still covered

in sheets. Simona, the turquoise Apostle, extended a gloved hand over the Holy Police beneath her.

“First, the holy garment of Gotama,” she said. One of the Holy Police pulled down his sheet, revealing underneath a blue shirt with red sleeves and the name “GOTAMA” printed across the chest in bright white. It was woven out of material that Caden had never seen before, making it shine in the sun.

“Next,” announced Thadi, “the holy controller of Gotama.” The second Holy Police brought down her sheet. Underneath it was a small plastic device with buttons and a thick wire hanging off it. She turned it around, revealing the name “GOTAMA” written on the back in black letters.

“Finally,” said Simona, “the holy bear of Gotama.” The last sheet was removed, uncovering a fuzzy animal doll. It was a bear, a child’s toy, with blue fur and beads for eyes. The Holy Police rotated the bear so its feet faced forward. Something was written on one of them, but it was too small for Caden to see. He assumed that it too was “GOTAMA.”

“All of these lost relics of Gotama were uncovered thanks to Castor’s hard work,” Thadi continued. “He has scavenged wide these past fifty years. Now, it is time for him to soar high.”

The Sparrows in the crowd repeated after her, chanting, “Scavenge wide, soar high!” Castor’s wrinkled face twitched with nervousness. Thadi spoke again.

“Castor Flint, have you decided on your Wish?”

“Y-yes!” he said, his voice cracking.

“And what is it?”

“I Wish that ...”

Next to Caden, Holly and Amar tensed. Both of them

were watching Castor so intently neither of them blinked.

“I Wish that ... our town had a pizzeria!”

The crowd went silent. Caden stifled a laugh. Was this guy serious? A pizzeria? As in, a shop that specialized in making pizza? Sure, pizza was great; he'd had it once before at the Home when Mother Mildred had traded for fresh tomatoes and cheese. But really? That was his Wish after working for fifty years in the Hole? He couldn't be serious.

There was a smattering of polite applause from the crowd. Holly and Amar stood in silence. Both their faces were white. Veins popped out in Amar's forehead. Holly's whole body was shaking.

“Thank you, Castor Flint,” Thadi announced. “We accept your Wish. Let him be an inspiration to us all, fellow Sparrows. Scavenge wide, soar high!”

The crowd chanted the last words after her. Thadi and Simona both put their hands into what looked like Sparrow prayer position: thumbs wrapped around each other with palms facing in, the center three fingers of each hand extending out like bird wings. Everyone in the crowd followed suit, including Caden and Annika who hoped it didn't look like they had no idea what they were doing.

The only one who didn't put their hands together was Castor. He thrust his arms into the massive feathery wings on either side of the tall wooden frame that surrounded him. Beneath the stage, two Holy Police gripped ropes that Caden hadn't noticed before. They yanked down the ropes in unison, raising Castor up high. Each time they pulled, he rose another few feet inside the frame, until his head touched the very top. He clenched his teeth and looked to the sky, his

legs dangling beneath him, and his arms looking as if they'd completely transformed into bird wings.

The crowd applauded again and the Holy Police slowly let Castor back down. He removed his arms from the wings, chuckling with relief to be back on the ground. Thadi, the orange Apostle, put an arm around him and directed him to the back of the stage where he left.

It looked like the ceremony was over. Caden figured that now was the time for him and Annika to leave. But then the other Apostle woman, turquoise Simona, stepped forward.

"However," she announced, her voice harsher than before, "concerning Castor's Wish, there is one matter that needs attending. Mr. Linden, will you please step forward?"

Murmurs of confusion spread through the crowd. A middle-aged man walked out in front of the stage. He was wearing a greasy apron over his gray uniform, and he looked like he had no idea what was going on.

"Mr. Linden," Simona said. "You run the bakery in town, do you not?"

"I ... I do," he stuttered. Simona reached into her cloak and removed a crescent-moon-shaped piece of bread.

"And this ... *croissant*," Simona said with a flourish of distaste, "is from your bakery, is it not?"

Mr. Linden cracked a smile. "Well, I'd have to taste it to know for sure. If it's good, then yeah, it's mine."

There were some laughs from the crowd. Simona's face remained frozen as an ice cube.

"Tell me, Mr. Linden," she said, "if you have time to be baking such fancy breads, then why don't you have time to be fulfilling your duty working in the Hole?"



Silence. All laughing stopped. For a moment the entire crowd held its collective breath.

“I don’t know what you mean, Mother Simona,” Mr. Linden said. “I do work in the Hole. Just like everyone. I work at my bakery in the morning and afternoon, then dig during the night shift.”

Simona glared down at him. “Mr. Linden, why do you lie to your Guardians?”

All eyes were now on Mr. Linden. He fidgeted with his apron. A bead of sweat trickled down his forehead.

“I ... I’m not lying. I swear.”

“According to the records from your Hole Supervisor,” Simona continued, “you check in for your shift on time, and you check out on time, but there have been several hours during holy digging time when your whereabouts have been unknown. What do you have to say about that?”

Mr. Linden was at a loss for words. His mouth opened and closed but nothing came out. Around him, fearful murmurs spread through the crowd.

“Let me offer a theory,” Simona hissed.

She snapped the croissant in two, reached her gloved fingers inside, and removed a rolled up piece of paper. Dropping both halves of the bread to the ground, she unfurled the paper and presented it to the crowd. There were gasps and shrieks as if she were showing off Iltech. Caden couldn’t tell what it was. The paper was bright green and had lots of words on it, but he couldn’t make them out from far away.

“This is what you’ve been doing while you should’ve been performing your duty!” Simona roared. “Passing around

Reactor propaganda disguised as meal rations. Poisoning the food and minds of our town.”

Mr. Linden balled his hands into fists and shook them at Simona and Thadi.

“Fine!” he yelled. “I did sneak away from ‘holy digging time.’ I did meet with the Reactors. I did help spread the word about them. But you know why? Because their dream of a future is far better than the life we have here!”

Simona looked down on him as if he smelled like an outhouse. “I think we’ve heard enough. Holy Police, arrest him.”

The white-clad Holy Police moved in on Mr. Linden, but he dashed into the crowd. The Holy Police aimed their crossbows, causing screams as everyone covered their faces and crouched.

“Don’t fire at the crowd,” Simona ordered. “Gotama will take care of the sinner.”

She extended her turquoise gloves to the sky and muttered a prayer. The gloves glowed bright for a second, and a cold chill blew through the air. Glittering ice appeared above her, shooting forward as streams of dust in the wind, gliding above everyone’s heads. The icy tendrils descended, coiling like snakes until they crashed into Mr. Linden.

He fell to the ground and didn’t move. He couldn’t move. The cold streams had turned into solid ice bricks the size of feeding troughs, connecting and encasing his hands and feet. He groaned and struggled, but he couldn’t budge an inch. The crowd around him backed away, leaving him alone to agonize in his ice prison on the ground.

Thadi joined Simona at the edge of the stage. “And the

bakery must be dealt with as well,” she said. She raised her orange glowing gloves. “O Great Gotama! If the building has been tainted so thoroughly by the Reactors that it can no longer be used, then give us a sign!”

A ball of flame ignited above her, flying through the air and spinning so quickly it whirled into a giant wheel of fire. The heads of the crowd followed it, the hurtling blaze reflecting in everyone’s eyes as it soared overhead. It landed on the roof of the bakery, instantly sending it up in flames.

Everyone took a collective step back as the heat pulsed through town. Caden knocked into Holly, the only one in the crowd who stood glued to the ground. She stared at the fire, eyes wide, mouth gaping without a sound coming out.

Within seconds, all of the bakery—wood, brick and concrete—had burned to ash. The raging fire disappeared, leaving behind nothing more than a black scorch on the ground. The buildings on either side didn’t have so much as a singe mark.

“The Great Gotama has spoken!” Simona announced to the silent crowd. “Here in his most holy town, we are lucky to experience his divine interventions firsthand. In his infinite wisdom, he has shown us where Castor Flint’s pizzeria will be built. Hopefully the new business will put its location to better use. Scavenge wide, soar high!”

Caden tried to stay calm. He and Annika had to get out of here now, before the two Apostles spotted them. They’d been nearly killed by Jadice before, and that was just one Apostle. He didn’t dare think what would happen if they had to go up against two. If they could slip away with the rest of the crowd without being noticed, they’d be fine.

“We need to go,” Annika whispered, terror filling her voice.

“I know,” Caden said. “We’ll walk away when it’s over. Blend in with the crowd. Then get Deber and leave.”

Annika nodded. The Holy Police picked up Mr. Linden and dragged him away, his ice-brick feet trailing behind on the ground. Next to Caden, Holly wasn’t doing well. Her face was pallid. She was shaking. Tears spilled from her red, unblinking eyes.

“Holly, what’s wrong?” Caden whispered.

“They know!” she shouted, loud enough that several people turned to her. “They know what I did!”

Caden put his hand on her back to try to calm her, but she didn’t respond.

“What are you talking about?” he asked. “Who knows what?”

Holly took a deep breath. For a moment Caden thought she was going to throw up. Something far worse came out of her mouth.

“King Caden is here!” she screamed at the top of her lungs. “Mother Simona! Mother Thadi! King Caden is right next to me!”

## Chapter 6

### The Hatching

It was the worst-case scenario. All heads turned to Caden, Annika, and Holly. Screams rang out as people pointed at him and backed into each other, trying to put as much distance as possible between themselves and Caden.

Caden couldn't believe he'd been so stupid. Annika had warned him about Holly, just like she'd warned him about the magic trick. He'd gotten so caught up in following a clue about his dad that he couldn't see the trap right in front of his eyes.

Holly stood away with the crowd. Behind her, Amar clasped his hands on her shoulders. Caden was so mad he wanted to use his ANGEL weapon to throw her into the Hole, but right now he had more pressing worries. They had to fight. They wouldn't be able to defeat two Apostles, but they might be able to distract them enough to make a break for it.

Annika was one step ahead. She had already ripped the magnetizer out from her uniform and brandished it at the stage. She pressed the button for "nine," maximum power.

"Everyone get down!" she yelled. Caden had no idea what would happen at level nine, but if there was ever a time

to find out, it was now. The people in front of her ducked as she pointed the magnetizer's green light above their heads, then pressed "enter."

Nothing happened. Annika pressed it again and again but still nothing.

Dread fell over her face. "The charge packs! I never changed them. It must be out of power."

"Do not approach the sinners!" boomed the icy Simona. Both Guardians were poised at the edge of the stage, hands up and ready. "Gotama will handle them!"

Annika scrambled to reach under her uniform for another charge pack around her waist. Caden couldn't wait for her. He threw off his gloves and thrust out the red Xs on his palms. There were terrified yells from the crowd, but Caden paid them no attention. He let his fear take over, let the adrenaline run through him like sweet fire. It pumped faster and faster building up in his hands until it had to be released. He aimed at the stage and—

A frozen wind whipped past Caden, stinging his eyes and piercing his skin. Before he could even react, his fingers went so cold they burned. He collapsed to the ground hands-first.

Caden pried his icy eyelids open. He'd suffered the same fate as Mr. Linden. A long brick of ice connected his hands together, as if they were encased in a chunk of frozen pond. He tried letting loose with his ANGEL weapon, hoping to shatter the ice and break free, but nothing happened. He couldn't even feel his fingers. It was as if he didn't have hands anymore—only arms that ended in useless, frozen stubs.

"No!" Annika cried. Next to Caden something thudded against the ground. He looked over and saw Annika's

magnetizer, now encased in a slab of ice, lying on the grass. She rubbed her cold fingertips on her sides, staring down in horror at her useless weapon. Without Caden's ANGEL weapon and without Annika's magnetizer, they were just two teenagers against an entire town.

Someone grabbed Caden, yanking him to his feet.

"King Caden!" said the man who had pulled him up. He had desperation in his eyes. His gray uniform, disheveled hair, and face were covered in dirt. "Quickly! You have to escape."

Next to him a woman spread out her arms like a human shield between Caden and the crowd.

"She hasn't frozen your legs!" she shouted. "Both of you, run!"

Caden didn't know who these two were, but he couldn't agree more. Doing his best to stay steady, he ran. Right next to him, Annika grabbed his arm and helped him stay balanced. If they could just make it to town, if those two strangers bought them enough time, maybe they could hide. Maybe they could get to Deber and get out of here.

Just as they reached the end of the grassy common, the crowd of angry Sparrows closed in from every side. Suddenly Caden and Annika's escape was brought to a halt by the impenetrable wall of people standing in front of them, smirking and glaring, blocking their path.

"Let us go!" Annika yelled. In one last-ditch effort she let go of Caden and ran with a shriek to break through the crowd, but she didn't even make it past the first line before she was subdued. Two strong men clasped each of her arms, holding her as she kicked and screamed and Caden watched helpless.

“Move aside!” came the voice of Simona. The crowd parted for her and Thadi. Up close, they looked even more imposing. Thadi’s eyes burned the same as her glistening leather uniform. Simona’s smile was even icier than her dress.

“Well, well,” Simona said. She stepped up to Caden and caressed his face with her fingers. They were cold as icicles. “Who would’ve thought the famous thief ‘King Caden’ would decide to pay us a visit?”

“I’m not a thief!” Caden spat. Simona ignored him and waved her hand.

“Holly, dear!” she called in a gleeful tone. “Oh Holly, my dearest. Come here please!”

Holly stepped through the crowd and stood next to Thadi and Simona. She looked like a completely different person. No longer was she on the verge of tears. She was smiling and confident, as if this was exactly what she’d been planning all along.

“You’ve done an excellent job, Holly,” Simona said sweetly, putting an arm around her. “The Great Gotama is proud of you, and so are we.”

Caden couldn’t take it anymore. He’d thought he was Holly’s hero, her friend!

“Holly, you betrayed us!” Caden shouted. “Why? Why did you do it?”

Holly merely grinned. “I wanted to make my parents proud.”

Caden glared at her in confusion. Her parents? Wasn’t her mother Rosemary, that weird woman at Amar’s house?

No. In front of him, Caden saw the answer. Thadi and Simona each rested a gloved hand on Holly’s shoulders. All



three of them were radiating joy, something stronger than even catching “King Caden” could bring. They were a family.

“These two ... they’re your parents?” Caden asked in disbelief.

“Of course they are,” Holly said. She clasped her fingers around Simona and Thadi’s hands. “The best mothers in the world.”

“Holy Police!” Simona yelled. “Escort these sinners to the prison, along with those other two traitors.” She pointed a sharp finger at the man and woman who had tried to help Caden and Annika, then patted Holly on the back. “Holly, go tell Barron to get ready. He has work to do.”

The Holy Police prodded Caden with the blunt ends of their crossbows, marching him and Annika around the church. Ahead of them in the same line were the Sparrow man and woman, bound in wooden handcuffs. Strangely, neither of them looked upset. Far from it, they were grinning with excitement. They kept peeking back at Caden until the Holy Police shoved them in the back and moved to block their view.

Caden tried to struggle out of his icy encasing, but it was useless. His fingers were completely immobilized inside the block. The ice brick was so heavy he couldn’t even lift it up. It just bounced against his stomach as he was forced to stumble forward. Caden worried that his hands would freeze right off. Hopefully his ANGEL weapon would prevent that from happening, if it was still working.

“Caden Aire,” said Simona as she walked alongside him. “I have to say, I’m disappointed. For all the Church talks about you being so powerful, you went down easily. How

you ever managed to steal Gotama's red Xs is beyond me."

"I didn't steal anything," Caden said through gritted teeth.

Simona cackled. "You've stolen more than you could ever know." She turned to Annika. "And you too, little girl. The accomplice. Oh, we know all about you. Tell me, how does it feel to be betrayed, again, by someone you thought you trusted?"

Annika stayed silent, but Caden could see the hatred burning in her eyes. He knew that some of it was directed at him. He deserved every bit of it. It was his fault they were in this mess.

The Holy Police marched them to the back of the church. Compared with the front, the back was a mess. The brick foundation was covered in moss, the concrete wall was chipped away, and a battered wooden door stood guarded by Holy Police. When the group arrived, the Holy Police opened it, revealing a dark cellar lit by torches hanging on damp stone walls. Caden was nudged in the back by a crossbow and pushed inside. The doors sealed behind, leaving them in near darkness as they walked farther in.

Inside was a narrow hallway with cells along the sides, each one sealed with stone bars. They housed people in gray uniforms lying on wooden planks, sitting on the cold ground, or standing up, hands clasped around the bars, anxious to see the newcomers.

"What're you all in for?" asked one of the prisoners. "You try to take a day off work too?"

Caden didn't say anything. He was trying his hardest not to imagine what was going to happen to him. Having his

ANGEL weapon ripped out of his body, spending the rest of his life here rotting away behind bars, being experimented on by the Church. Each thought was worse than the last.

At the end of the hallway was a staircase that led upstairs, blocked off by a barred door and a Holy Police guard. To the sides were the final cells, same as the others. One of them had the baker Mr. Linden in it. His hands and feet were no longer bound in ice, but his skin was an unhealthy blue as he sat curled on the ground shivering. The group stopped in front of his cell.

“Put these on,” came the forceful voice of Simona. She thrust Iltech handcuffs at Caden, and he felt a painful tug in his stomach. “These are magnet-cuffs. They negate the electrical power of anything they touch. Quite uncomfortable, I’m sure.”

Caden would rather have an ice brick the size of a cauldron attached to his arms.

“No,” he said, glaring at Simona. A smile curled on her lips.

“Put these on, or else your little friend is going to get hurt,” she said, looking at Annika.

“Don’t do it, Caden,” Annika said. “I don’t care what they do to me.”

Despite Annika’s words, Caden didn’t have a choice. This ice woman could easily kill Annika if she wanted. But no matter what happened to him, his robot insides would keep him alive. Hopefully. Using all the strength he had, Caden lifted up his ice-covered hands, presenting his arms for the magnet-cuffs.

“Smart choice, boy,” Simona said. She clasped the

magnet-cuffs around his arms, just above the ice brick.

As soon as she locked them in place, a shock ran through Caden like an electric parasite wriggling through his body. He shook and collapsed to his knees. His ice-brick hands fell to the floor with a clunk. He felt so, so weak, as if the magnet-cuffs were draining the life out of his body.

But then Caden felt light. Through his convulsing he looked down at his hands. The ice had melted into a puddle. His fingers were shivering and he still couldn't move them, but at least he was free of one prison.

"No more need for that," Simona said, her turquoise gloves glowing from having removed the ice. "Holy Police, lock these four up. And remove the worker uniforms on the two sinners. They don't deserve to wear them."

The Holy Police put their fingers together in Sparrow prayer position and bowed. Simona opened the barred door to the staircase and climbed up, the sound of her footsteps growing softer and softer until they disappeared.

The Holy Police ripped the gray uniforms off Caden and Annika, and confiscated Annika's charge belt too, bringing them back to their overalls and green dress. They shoved Annika, Caden, and the man and woman inside the cell with Mr. Linden, then locked the bars behind them. Some of them stomped up the staircase, and the rest stood guard outside. Caden sat on a stone, shaking, too weak from the magnet-cuffs to even look up. Annika squatted next to him.

"You all right?" she asked.

"This is all ... my fault," Caden eked out.

Annika rolled her eyes. "Yes. It is. But we're here now. We have to deal with it. We'll figure something out."

“King Caden.” The man who had been led into the cell with them knelt in front of Caden, and the woman did the same. Both of them were smiling at Caden as if he’d saved their lives. “It’s an honor to meet you. I’m Remi, and this is my wife Mikaela. I’m sorry we couldn’t do more.”

Caden only had the energy to nod. Mr. Linden, sitting in the corner with his hands under his armpits for warmth, looked up.

“I knew it!” he whispered, a smile on his purple lips. “I knew I’d heard someone scream ‘King Caden’ while I was being taken away. Do you really have them? The red Xs?”

Caden meekly held up his palms, revealing his ANGEL Xs. Remi, Mikaela, and Mr. Linden all gazed at them as if they were glowing treasures.

“So what’s your plan to save our town?” Mr. Linden asked. “Just tell us what you need us to do and we’ll do it.”

“Okay, I’ve had enough!” Annika said. “Someone here needs to explain what the steel is going on. Everyone thinks Caden is some savior, but we’ve never even heard about this town before today.”

Remi gave Annika a curious stare. “If you’ve never heard about New Darien, then why are you here? What is your purpose?”

“You explain first,” Annika said, arms crossed.

Remi nodded as if taking an order. Caden did his best to pay attention.

“We’ve been digging the Hole for a thousand years, ever since our ancestors—”

“Yeah, yeah, we know that part,” Annika said, waving her hand. “You’ve been digging to find the pieces to put that

robot Erelim thing back together. Got it. But it's all fixed now, isn't it? Shouldn't you be done digging?"

Remi was so shocked by Annika's interruption that he couldn't form words. His wife Mikaela scooted forward and took over.

"Our parents and grandparents finished putting Erelim together forty years ago," she said. "Back then you only had to dig in the Hole if you wanted to. It was a job like any other, and miners had the respect of the town, not to mention the Wish waiting for them in retirement. After Erelim was fixed, they kept digging, waiting for a sign from Gotama that our debt was finally repaid, but nothing came. After a year, one of the Sparrows made a Wish that we wouldn't have to dig anymore, and that was supposed to be the end of it. But then, that same day, we finally got our sign from Gotama. Erelim attacked."

Annika squinted her eyes in confusion. "The robot attacked the town?"

"Yes," Mikaela said. "People call it the Hatching, the day Erelim was finally reborn. It stomped through town crushing buildings and people as easily as eggshells. It only stopped when Mother Simona and Mother Thadi pleaded for it to have mercy. Ever since, far from stopping digging, we've been digging more than ever before. Everyone in town is assigned shifts. If you're not working your normal job, then you're digging in the Hole. You might get a few hours to sleep, if you're lucky."

"And we don't even get Wishes," Remi added. "Only the people who started working in the Hole before the Hatching still get them, the full-timers. For everyone else, us part-

timers, death is the only retirement we have to look forward to. That and watching the full-timers waste their privilege by Wishing for pizzerias.”

“This is no way for us to live,” Mikaela said. “We’re Sparrows. We should be scavenging wide, soaring high, not digging in the ground.”

“But I don’t get it,” Annika said. “If Erelim is fixed, then what are you still digging for?”

“To find the red *X*,” Remi said, his eyes fixated on Caden’s palms. “When Erelim attacked our town, it said the same thing over again over again: ‘The digging will continue until the red *X* is found.’”

“Our parents and grandparents thought Erelim was talking about some sort of relic of Gotama. But then we saw the red *X* appear on Metl, and then we heard about King Caden, the boy who saved the world and had red *Xs* on his palms.”

Mr. Linden shuffled forward and clasped Caden’s hands in his own.

“King Caden,” he spoke in a smiling whisper. “We’ve been waiting for you to come save our town. The Church says you stole the red *Xs* from Gotama, and most people in town believe it, but we Reactors know better. Erelim wasn’t telling us to *find* the red *X*, he said we’d have to keep digging until it *was found*. And now, we’ve found you! You can join the Reactor army and help us fight to not have to dig anymore!”

Annika gently brushed Mr. Linden’s hands away, which Caden was thankful for. It was awkward enough for these people to think he was their savior, when he didn’t even know they existed until a few hours ago, but now he was being recruited into some sort of army.

“Okay, that’s another thing,” Annika said. “Who are the Reactors?”

Mr. Linden’s face fell. “The Reactors are rebels fighting against the Church. They’re all over the country. Surely you must’ve heard of them.”

The sound of footsteps coming down the staircase cut off their hushed conversation. The barred gate on Caden’s cell creaked open, and the Holy Police stood at attention. Thadi, the orange-haired, fiery Apostle, walked in the doorway.

“Caden,” she said gently. “Please, come with me. We need your help.”



## Chapter 7

### Nine and Ten

If Caden had the energy, he would've laughed. "I'll never help you."

Thadi shrugged. "Well, you're not really in a position to argue right now."

Caden grunted. Back in Salem he'd almost been convinced by Father Yohan to help the Apostles, but that was only to stop Metl and to try to save Annika's mom. Whatever they had planned for him now, he wanted no part of it.

Annika gripped Caden's shoulder protectively and narrowed her eyes at Thadi. "What are you going to do with him?"

"Just going upstairs for a little chat," Thadi said. "And if it goes well, I'm sure you can join shortly after."

Annika leaned in close to Caden and whispered. "Don't listen to them. Whatever they want, don't do it."

Unfortunately, right now fighting was useless. With the magnet-cuffs on his wrists, Caden could barely move, and he'd seen what Thadi's fire was capable of. It was useless to resist. Better to save his and Annika's energy for something that might actually work.

“I’ll ... be fine,” Caden said. He turned to Thadi. “I’ll go with you.”

“Excellent,” she said. “Follow me.”

Caden slowly shuffled out, leaving his cellmates behind. He had to practically drag himself to the bottom of the staircase. Going up the stairs was impossible. Just one stone step knocked the wind out of him. Two steps up he was out of breath and heaving.

“What’s wrong?” Thadi asked.

“It’s ... the handcuffs,” Caden wheezed.

“Oh. You should’ve said something. Holy Police, assist him.”

The Holy Police behind Caden scooped him up and carried him like a baby. Caden felt humiliated, but there was no other way he could’ve made it.

Torches lined the narrow staircase, and another team of Holy Police guards met them at the top, opening and closing the stone-barred gate. They entered a large alcove lit by sunlight through windows, and arrived at yet another staircase. This one was wider and rose upward in small sections to slowly but surely climb to the top of the church. White tapestries with sparrow silhouettes draped the walls, and the tiled stairs clacked underneath the boots of the Holy Police.

Like the houses in town, the inside of the church had an ancient air to it. The plaster walls were stained yellow, and grains of dirt were ground into the floor, but it still gave off an aura of sophistication, knowing that people so long ago had built it. Although remembering the prison underneath it immediately took away its allure.

They climbed eight stories to the top of the staircase. As he was being carried, Caden could see the entire town out the windows: the green common surrounding the church, the shops and mansions beyond that, and finally the Hole in the distance watched over by Erelim. Seeing the massive robot again, after learning about its attack on the town, made it feel like a silent overseer, ready to lash out at any moment for the slightest dissent.

Waiting for them at the top of the staircase was a single wooden door. The Holy Police slid Caden onto the ground. He wobbled for a moment, then found his bearings, glad to be out of his embarrassing position.

“Thank you, Holy Police,” Thadi said. “You may return downstairs.”

The Holy Police put their fingers together in Sparrow prayer position and disappeared down the steps.

“I apologize for the harsh treatment,” Thadi said once they were gone. “But Simona thought it was necessary. She didn’t think you’d cooperate otherwise.”

Caden found the strength to glare. “She’s right. I won’t.”

Surprisingly, Thadi smiled. “You’re not making this easy, you know. I want to help you. Don’t make me regret that. Or this.”

She reached into her black cloak, pulled out a key, and inserted it into Caden’s magnet-cuffs. With a twist they came right off.

Caden immediately felt so alive! The parasite that had been sapping his strength was gone. His first thought was to use his ANGEL weapon to break a window, fly to the Hole, get Deber, and ... leave Annika behind? No, he couldn’t do that.

He'd have to fight his way down to the prison, which would mean getting past the locked doors, dozens of Holy Police, and not to mention Thadi right behind him.

"I can see the wheels turning in your head," Thadi said. "But before you think about escaping, at least hear us out, won't you?"

Thadi removed another key from her cloak, this time using it to open the door. She motioned to Caden to step inside.

"After you," she said.

Caden hesitated but walked through. If he was going to get anywhere, he had to play along. At least for now.

He stepped into a room that looked very familiar. It was similar to the top of the church in Salem: there was Iltech everywhere. The walls were lined with lit screens, and tables were covered in metal and plastic instruments. Caden spotted Annika's charge belt and magnetizer lying among them, the ice it'd been encased in thawed away. Crates of Iltech were strewn about the floor, and shelves upon shelves were crammed with books, papers, and broken trinkets.

Two people stood at the other end of the room. One was Simona. Just seeing her turquoise dress and icy smile made Caden's anger boil inside. The other person was a bulky older man dressed in thick winter clothing. He had unkempt hair and a wild beard; he looked like a street beggar. When he saw Caden walk in, for a moment he went pale as though he'd seen a ghost. But then he snapped right back to a serious, skeptical look.

Simona's smile vanished. "Why is the sinner no longer handcuffed?"

“I had them removed,” Thadi said. “He couldn’t move with them on.”

“Doesn’t sound like a problem to me.”

Thadi sighed. “I think he’d be more willing to listen if we showed a sign of good faith.”

Simona’s glare sharpened. “Signs of good faith don’t mean much, in my experience.”

The silent tension between them grew more intense by the second. Caden had already had enough.

“You can show whatever signs you want,” he said. “I’m not going to help you.”

Simona lowered her eyes at Thadi, as if to tell her I told you so. Thadi didn’t seem to care. She flashed Caden a hopeful look.

“Perhaps you’ll change your mind when you talk to One,” she said.

“One?” Caden asked.

“The leader of the Apostles,” Simona answered. “We all have numbers, one to twelve. I’m Nine. Thadi is Ten. You do know there are twelve of us, don’t you, sinner?”

Caden didn’t answer. Jadice had told him and Annika a lot about the Twelve Apostles, how the lower your number in the organization meant the higher ranked you were: Twelve was at the bottom and One must be at the top. But Jadice had told them a lot of lies. It was hard to disentangle the truths.

“One has been searching for you for a long time,” Thadi continued. “Now that you’re here, we can contact headquarters and put an end to it.”

“Finally, Gotama will be satisfied,” Simona said, her eyes

sparkling like sunlight on snow. “The red *X* will be back in the hands of its rightful owner.” She narrowed her gaze right at Caden. “The suffering that you’ve brought to our town by stealing it for so long ends today.”

Caden had no idea what they were talking about. He didn’t steal anything, Gotama wasn’t real, and he didn’t care about this One person or whatever their name was.

But before he could say anything, the door flew open. Holly ran into the room, out of breath, sweat dripping down her pale face.

“Dr. Barron!” she called, doubled over and gasping. “I’m ... back!”

“Oh, thank you, Holly,” the bearded man said. Holly wiped her brow with her uniform sleeve and handed him a small box. The man named Barron smiled.

Seeing Holly set off something inside Caden. He forgot all about the Apostles and One and escaping. Holly was the reason he and Annika were in this mess in the first place!

“What are *you* doing here?” he said. Holly looked him up and down with the same critical eyes as Simona.

“Mom, why isn’t he bound?” she asked, sounding worried. “What if he escapes?”

“That’s my girl,” Simona said. “Sharp as an icicle. But don’t worry. If he tries anything, I’ll freeze everything but his head, so he can watch as his body slowly succumbs to frostbite. And the same will happen to his little friend too.”

Hearing that didn’t seem to reassure Holly. She had one hand clasped around her arm, as if she were holding herself back from slamming the magnet-cuffs right back on Caden herself.

Barron cleared his throat. “However,” he said in a scruffy voice, “there’s the question of whether or not this boy is even *capable* of doing anything in the first place.”

All heads turned toward Barron, Caden included.

“What do you mean?” Thadi asked.

“I’m saying that before we contact One, we should confirm that this boy is in fact Caden Aire.”

Simona let out a cackle. “Well of course he is! Just look at him. He’s got the ANGEL weapon, doesn’t he? Not to mention the blond hair, gray eyes, and those ugly, ugly overalls.”

Barron smiled as if humoring a child. “You’re right. Then I suppose you’d better go ahead and contact One immediately. It certainly wouldn’t be worthwhile to confirm that it’s actually him and not a look-alike impostor.”

Simona glowered at Barron. “Don’t get cheeky with me, young man.”

It seemed strange for Simona to call Barron “young man” when he looked twice her age, but he didn’t seem to care. He didn’t seem intimidated by her either. He stood perfectly still, hands behind his back and a smile on his face. Caden noticed a metal chain locked around his ankle. Was he a prisoner here too?

“I would never go against my Guardians,” Barron said, a sarcastic grin on his face. “Which is exactly why we should confirm the boy’s identity. Your reputation in the Apostles is at stake.”

“Fine!” Simona said, swiping a hand through the air. She turned to Caden. “You, sinner. Do something with your ANGEL weapon. Something small. Try anything funny and you know what will happen.”

This was Caden's chance. He could use his ANGEL weapon on Simona, throw her into Thadi, and make it downstairs to Annika before they caught up with him.

"However," Barron said, cutting off Caden's thoughts, "if you're incapable of doing anything, then let us know too. That would be just as important."

Caden didn't know what this guy was talking about. Why wouldn't he use his ANGEL weapon? It wouldn't make sense not to.

Then it hit him. These two Apostles, they hadn't actually seen him use his ANGEL weapon yet. They'd frozen his hands before he had a chance to do anything. They didn't know for sure that he was actually Caden Aire. Like Barron had said, for all they knew he was an impostor that looked like him.

A plan started buzzing in Caden's head. If he could convince them that he wasn't Caden, that could be his best chance of getting out of here. They'd underestimate him, even more than they already did, then he could take them by surprise when they least expected it.

"Yeah, he's right," Caden said with a shrug. "I can't do anything. I don't actually have an ANGEL weapon."

Caden wasn't used to lying, but he hoped he was doing it right. He dropped his gaze to the ground, avoiding eye contact with the two Apostles. He didn't have to look at them to know they didn't like what they were hearing.

"You're lying!" Simona hissed. She grabbed Caden's hand, forcing his palm upright. The X was glowing red. "Look! It's him. We're wasting our time with his stupid lies."

"I can feel his electric signal too," Thadi added. "There's no way he's a fake."



“Actually,” Barron said, “it’s far likelier he’s a fake than the real thing. Imitating the electric signal of an ANGEL weapon is a simple process. As is finding a boy who looks like Caden. As is getting him to act as a decoy while the real Caden is getting away somewhere else.”

“But what about the effect the magnet-cuffs had on him?” Thadi asked.

Barron grinned. “Easier to fake than a cold.”

Simona took another hateful look at Caden and threw his hand down. Caden had no idea why this Barron guy was so adamant about proving that he wasn’t real, but he was thankful for it.

“Is there any way to test to be sure?” Thadi asked.

“As a matter of fact, there is. And that’s exactly what I sent Holly out for.” Barron took out a thin glass knife from the box she’d brought him. “The real Caden is unable to bleed. All it will take is a little prick.”

Simona brushed her hand impatiently. “Well then, get on with it already.”

Barron approached Caden, glass knife in hand. He stood like a thick wall between Caden and the Guardians. This was it. Caden’s last chance to do something before he was found out. He’d been shot by an arrow, fallen ten stories, and electrocuted, but never once had he bled. As soon as Barron pricked him and no blood came out, the lie would be over.

“This will only take a second,” Barron said. He held out his hand for Caden. “Give me your arm. And hey, don’t worry. If you do bleed, I’ve got a device that will heal you up quick.”

There was something about Barron’s calm tone and gentle

smile that disarmed Caden. Not even really thinking about it, Caden gave Barron his hand. With a quick flick of his wrist, Barron pierced the tip of the glass knife into Caden's forearm.

"Ow!" Caden yelled, pulling his arm back.

"Ah, just as I suspected," Barron said. "Look. The boy bleeds."

Caden couldn't believe it. A thin stream of blood was running down his arm.

"Impossible!" Simona yelled. She pushed Barron aside and grabbed Caden's wrist, yanking his arm up to her eyes. After examining it in disgust, she wrapped her fingers around the red *X* on his palm.

"What are you doing?" Thadi asked.

"I'm taking out whatever thing this boy has implanted in him. I want to see for myself if it's a real ANGEL weapon."

Barron stepped forward. "I wouldn't do that, Mother Simona."

"And why not?"

"I can assure you that it's not a real ANGEL weapon. But removing it may still kill the boy. If he is indeed a decoy, then having him alive to question is the best way to find out where the real Caden is hiding."

"He's right," Thadi said. "Every second we waste with this decoy is another second farther away the real Caden is getting. Whoever sent him here must be planning something nearby. They're just trying to distract us."

Simona's hand trembled as she gripped Caden's arm harder, then finally threw it down. Her face was red with rage.

“I knew from the moment we caught him that he was a fake,” she seethed. “This boy is too weak to be the real Caden Aire. We should’ve known.”

“So what do we do?” Thadi asked. “We can’t contact One yet.”

“No, but the real Caden can’t be too far off. If we hurry we can still capture him before the sun goes down.”

Thadi jerked her head toward Caden. “And what do we do with him? Recuff him?”

“No,” Simona said. “Don’t waste the magnet-cuffs on him. We’ll need them for the real one. Give him the wooden ones.” She glared at Caden one final time, then looked away. “Holly, get this sinner out of my sight. Tell the Holy Police to interrogate him. I want to know who sent him here, why, and I don’t want to look at his face again until they’ve bloodied it enough that he’s started talking. And that includes his little friend too.”

Simona stormed out of the room and down the stairs. Thadi reached into her cloak, pulled out a pair of wooden handcuffs, and handed them to Holly.

“Holly,” Thadi said. “Tell the Holy Police to contact us immediately if he says anything.”

Thadi took one last look at Caden, shook her head, and left. Caden couldn’t believe it. He’d actually gotten away with it! Although he still wasn’t sure why he’d bled when Barron pricked him. Maybe the magnet-cuffs had made him malfunction?

But right now, that didn’t matter. Caden didn’t have an ice block on his hands or the magnet-cuffs either. All he’d have to do is play along until he got back to Annika, then

he could blast the two of them out of here. And maybe even some of the imprisoned Sparrows too.

Holly reached out with a white cloth and wiped the blood off Caden's arm. "We need to get these on you," she said. With one hand still wrapped around her arm, she locked the wooden handcuffs in place on Caden's wrists. They felt like nothing compared to the Iltech ones.

"You did well, Holly," Barron said. "I hope you're not hurt too badly."

Holly rolled up the sleeve of her gray uniform. There was a white bandage with a deep red splotch where she'd been holding herself.

"I'll be fine," she said. "It's nothing compared to what others have bled for."

Caden didn't understand what they were talking about. He looked at his own arm. The point where Barron had pierced his skin was already healed. But that didn't make sense. If he was malfunctioning, then he should still be bleeding ... just like Holly.

Suddenly realization took hold of him.

"Wait a minute, was that *your* blood, Holly?"

She nodded. Barron held up a small glass vial. Little droplets of red liquid lingered inside.

"Thank Holly for coming up with the idea in such little time," he said. "She filled this up with her own blood. I drizzled it on your arm when I used the knife."

Caden had no idea what was going on. Was Holly not actually their enemy? And why was this Barron guy helping him too?

Barron set the vial down, rummaged through a black

bag on the table, and took out a handheld Iltech device. He pressed its shiny metallic end against Holly's wound as it glowed a warm orange. When he was done, all signs of her bleeding were gone.

Holly rolled her uniform sleeve back down. "We need to get downstairs. Now."

"Go." Barron waved them away. Before Caden could get another word out, Holly pulled him out the door and back to the staircase. Barron remained chained in the room behind them. As they hurried down the steps, a million questions buzzed in Caden's mind.

"Holly!" he said. "What is going on?"

She stopped and shushed him quiet.

"Don't say anything to me!" she whispered in a hiss.

"But you need to tell me why—"

"I can't. It's too much of a risk."

"But—"

"Be quiet. Please, King Caden. I promise everything will be fine."

She yanked Caden down the stairs, dragging him along like a rag doll. Before he could even open his mouth again, they were back to the team of Holy Police guarding the stone-bar doors to the prison.

"Take him downstairs," Holly said. "Guardians' orders."

Even Caden knew better than to question Holly when they were surrounded by Holy Police. But still, he couldn't just go back to his cell and sit around waiting.

"What should I do?" he asked her. He hoped his question was vague enough to not give anything away. It seemed to work. Holly let out a convincing snicker.

“You should just stay put until tomorrow night. I’m sure my moms will have something very special to give to you by then.”

She was a good actor. Even the Holy Police chuckled along with her. Caden didn’t want to risk asking more, but he didn’t know what she was talking about. Tomorrow? What was going to happen tomorrow?

“Are we supposed to make this sinner sing?” one of the Holy Police asked, cracking his knuckles in anticipation.

“No. No one is to touch him until the Guardians say otherwise.” She turned to Caden with a perfectly-acted sinister smile. “Goodbye, King Caden. And remember, don’t go anywhere, all right?”

The Holy Police laughed and shoved Caden in the back, marching him down the steps to the underground prison. At the bottom of the staircase, they unlocked the cell with Annika and the others and shoved Caden inside.

“Are you okay?” Annika asked, looking him over.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” Caden said. “Listen. I’ve got a lot to tell you.”

Caden told Annika everything that had happened upstairs ... *almost* everything. When he got to the part about Holly helping him, he became acutely aware of the Holy Police guards, and he decided to skip over that part.

“But wait,” Annika said. “Why did you bleed?”

Caden cleared his throat. “I think it had something to do with the magnet-cuffs. I’m not sure.”

Annika eyed him suspiciously. “Why are you lying to me?”

“I’m not! It’s just ... I can’t explain everything, you know.”

“What happened up there? Does it have anything to do with that glasses girl?”

“Holly?” Caden said, nearly choking on the air. “No. No way. Of course not.”

“Then why did I hear her talking to you at the top of the staircase?”

“That was, uh, someone else,” Caden said quickly. Annika shook her head.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with you. But when you’re ready to stop being weird and start telling me the truth, you know where to find me.”

She leaned against the cell wall opposite Caden and slid down. Caden felt horrible. He wanted to tell Annika what had happened, how Holly and Barron had covered for him, but what if the Holy Police overheard? He couldn’t risk that.

The next several hours passed awkwardly. Remi, Mikaela, and Mr. Linden reassured Caden that they believed his story one hundred percent, and they’d do whatever he ordered. Caden ordered them to be quiet, but apparently that was the one command they couldn’t obey. They kept going on about how honored they were to meet him, asking him again if he was a member of the Reactor Army, and whispering questions about how they were going to escape. Caden told them over and over that he didn’t know, but they just took his denial as part of a bigger plan. He looked over at Annika for help, but she was stone silent. It had been a lot easier to deal with them when she wasn’t ignoring him.

It was only now that Caden realized he should’ve just told Annika the story that Barron had practically served up for him: that he was a decoy. Annika would’ve caught on

quickly, and the others probably would have too. But it was too late. Caden was already horrible at lying, and if he tried now it would be even worse. He'd stumble through his words as if magnet-cuffs were locked around his lips, and Annika would get even more upset. So he said nothing.

Instead, he watched the sun go down through the barred window high up on the wall in their cell. The sky turned a fiery red, then orange, and finally black. He wondered how long he'd have to wait for Holly's "surprise" to show up. Or if it would even show up at all. Sure, she'd helped him upstairs, but it was her fault he was in jail in the first place. He still didn't know if he could really trust her.

Remi and Mikaela started up another barrage of questions, but were interrupted by the sound of footsteps coming down the staircase. The stone-barred door at the bottom of the steps opened and a group of Holy Police walked into the dungeon carrying trays with bowls and bread.

"Listen up!" one of the guards announced. "It's dinner time. Get up, go to your bars, and grab your food. You miss your chance, you don't eat."

The prisoners shambled toward their cell bars, hands outstretched through the gaps. Caden joined them, though Annika remained sitting.

"Come on, Annika," Caden groaned. "We haven't eaten all day. Get up."

She glared at him. "I'm not getting up until—"

*BOOM!*

An explosion shook the underground prison. The floor rumbled, bringing everyone to their knees, and the meal trays clattering to the ground. Smoke and stone dust blew



down the narrow hall. The Holy Police steadied themselves and armed their crossbows, shouting orders to fire. Out of nowhere, the bangs of metal smashing against stone crashed through the soot-filled corridor.

Caden desperately tried to see through the bars. The hallway was a chaotic mess of fleeing prisoners and Holy Police firing their crossbows at whatever was coming from the other direction, but each arrow they shot landed with a dull metallic clang.

The smoke began to clear. Light from outside shone through the blasted-open hole in the wall. It was bright, far too bright for this time of night. Caden had no idea where it was coming from, but it let him see what had caused the explosion. Or rather, *who*.

A group of people dressed in bright green uniforms and matching bandanas over their noses and mouths marched into the prison hallway, smashing heavy metal hammers against the stone locks on the cells to break them open and free the Sparrows inside.

Leading them was a man wearing the most insane outfit Caden had ever seen. In addition to the green uniform and face-bandana, he wore a gold helmet with two curvy horns, and he brandished a golden cape in front of him that looked like it was made of liquid metal. The Holy Police's deadly crossbow arrows bounced harmlessly off it with clunk after clunk, falling uselessly to the ground.

Next to Caden, Remi and Mikaela cheered.

"They're here!" Mikaela cried. "The Reactors have come to save us!"

## Chapter 8

### The Breakout

Green-uniformed Reactors smashed their metal hammers against the stone cell bars. Dust clouds billowed as Sparrow prisoners fled their chambers, escaping through the bright hole that had been blown into the wall. The man in the spiked helmet stood at the front of it all, facing backward, spreading his golden cape wide as it shimmered in the light, protecting everyone like a giant shield.

Caden, Annika, and their three cellmates pressed themselves against the bars. Their cell was the only one that hadn't been broken open yet. Remi and Mikaela cheered and yelled for help. Caden and Annika watched in shocked silence.

Two Holy Police had their crossbows out, firing at the Sparrows and Reactors. With each shot, the caped man moved as if floating, breaking the path of the arrows, knocking them harmlessly to the ground. As the Holy Police reloaded, the caped man dashed toward them. He clocked one of them in the face with his fist, knocking him out. The other one fired his crossbow but missed when the man swerved out of the way. The man's fist smashed into the Holy Police's jaw, and he too fell to the stone floor.

Caden's view was suddenly obscured by bright green uniforms as Reactors gathered in front of his cell. Their bandanas were drenched with sweat and they wasted no time in smashing the stone lock. With a loud crash and a squeak, the bars swung open.

"I don't see him," one of them said, peering inside.

"He's not here. What do we do, Helmut?"

"It's too late!" growled the man with the cape and spiked helmet through his face-bandana. His voice was deep and raspy like it was covered in ash. "Go now!"

The Reactors wasted no time dashing away, not giving Caden or any of the prisoners another glance. The caped man, apparently named Helmut, waved them out.

"Quickly!" he said. Caden and his cellmates stepped out of the cell over the rubble and fallen Holy Police. He wasn't sure if the Reactors were looking for him, but it seemed like they were on the same side, so it couldn't hurt to ask.

"Who are you looking for?" Caden asked.

Helmut glared at Caden. Then at Annika. Back to Caden. Back to Annika. His eyes, the only human part of him that was visible, grew to the size of saucers.

"Gotama's Ant ..." he whispered. "It really is you."

That was not the reaction of someone who had expected to find Caden here. But there was no time for questions. A Holy Police army clattered down the staircase, filling the entranceway with white uniforms and loaded crossbows, ready to fire. Helmut spun his back to them and thrust out his golden cape.

"Get in front of me!" he commanded.

"No, stop!"

A voice broke out above the rest. The Holy Police held their crossbows ready as they filed into the dungeon, parting to make room for Holly. Her face was red with rage, her fists clenched by her sides as she took in the disaster.

“King Caden!” she yelled. “Don’t run! If you stay, I promise everything will be all right. Surrender now and you won’t be hurt.”

There were twenty Holy Police, each aiming their crossbow at either Caden, Annika, Remi, Mikaela, Mr. Linden, or Helmut. If they tried to run, they wouldn’t make it two feet before they were pummeled by a hailstorm of arrows. They wouldn’t even make it behind the protection of Helmut’s cape.

But what choice did they have? Trust Holly that everything would be okay? She’d helped Caden upstairs, but now was their chance to get out of here. Not to wait around for help, but to help themselves.

Holly tried to remain strong but her voice was shaking. “P-please, King Caden.”

Caden made his choice. He focused on his hands, still bound in the wooden handcuffs. He thought about the horror of being trapped here, the relief of tricking the Guardians, and the thrill of breaking free. Millions of tiny particles shivered their way through his body. His palms tingled with heat, begging to be released. He didn’t hold back.

Caden thrust his palms out, revealing the bright red Xs to the Holy Police. Before they could react, millions of invisible particles erupted out of his hands, slamming into the Holy Police and knocking them down like dominoes, Holly included.

The next second was a blur. Helmut's shouts for everyone to get in front of his cape mixed with Holly's pleas to stop. Caden and Annika dashed in front of Helmut. Mr. Linden, Mikaela, and Remi followed close behind. One of the Holy Police righted herself more quickly than the others. She shot the first arrow. With a heavy crack, it punctured Remi's back, sending him crashing to the stone ground.

Mikaela screamed. Caden made a move to help. Helmut grabbed him and pushed the four of them that remained toward the bright exit.

"Run!" Remi wheezed from the ground. "Don't ... stop!"

The Holy Police were all back on their feet. They marched over Remi's fallen body, took aim, and fired.

A flurry of arrows buzzed past like high-speed wasps. Most clanged harmlessly off Helmut's metal cape, but just as many seared past Caden so close he could feel the heat as they flew by. He'd survived a Holy Police arrow before, but that was just one. He didn't know if his body could take twenty at once. And then there was Annika. If one of them struck her, she'd be done for—just like Remi. Caden cursed himself under his breath. If only he'd been faster! If only he'd hit the Holy Police harder! He could've saved him.

Above the chaos Holly cried out. "No! Stop! You're just making things worse!"

The Holy Police army charged behind them in pursuit. The bright opening at the end of the dungeon was within their reach. Caden had no idea what was on the other side, but if they could make it out, they'd be safe. He could use his ANGEL weapon to fly himself and Annika out of here. He'd have to leave the others behind, but it was going to be hard

enough controlling two people in the air while handcuffed; he couldn't risk accidentally dropping someone.

They dashed through the hole. It was insanity outside. Green Reactors and gray Sparrows were scurrying onto horses and wooden carts, dashing off in all directions into the night. Screams, wild neighs, and some sort of loud clanging rang through the darkness. Caden readied himself to fly away, hoping that they would get out of crossbow range before the Holy Police knew what had happened.

But then something made Caden gasp out loud. It was the source of the bright light through the hole. The thing that was making the clanging noise.

It was a truck. An Iltech truck.

At the Home, Mother Mildred had shown the Nobodies old pictures of farm equipment from before the Iltech Apocalypse. She tried to scare everyone with the harvesting machines that had blades and looked like monsters, but her tactics hadn't worked on Caden. He was mesmerized. He'd asked question after question: "Why did they have wheels instead of legs?" "Why did people need so much food?" "Are you sure they ran on blood and not electricity?" But he'd gotten nothing except glares and punishments to clean the outhouse.

Now a real truck was in front of his eyes. Patches of scrap metal covered it like Annika's makeshift blankets. Black smoke poured out of a pipe in the back. Bright yellow lights lit up the front like glowing eyes, and an array of smaller ones around the back of the cabin shone onto the wide open bed. The whole truck shook as it wheezed and groaned, as if it was barely holding together. A heavyset Reactor woman sat in

the front seat behind the steering wheel. Tattoos covered her arms, neck, and the skin around her eyes—the only part of her face that wasn't hidden by a green bandana. She slammed her hand against the side of the truck and yelled at the top of her lungs.

“Helmut, let's go!”

Caden had gotten so lost in thought that he'd kept running along with the group, all thoughts of flying away having disappeared.

“Climb inside!” Helmut yelled, stopping next to the truck and fanning out his cape to its full width. The Holy Police had spread out around them. Some fired at the Reactors and Sparrows escaping on horses, but most concentrated on Caden's group, ready to shoot at the first opening.

If they wanted a target, then Caden figured it might as well be him. He grabbed the edge of the open truck bed and heaved himself up. As soon as his back was in the air, the twang of a dozen crossbows went off at once. Two arrows hit him in shoulder, sinking in deep like he'd been bit by a wolf.

He cried out and collapsed into the metal bed, seething spit through his clenched teeth. But he had no time to waste; the Holy Police were reloading. Gripping the side of the truck with his shaking fingers, Caden steadied himself and reached his cuffed arms out to Annika. He grabbed onto her hands and pulled her up with him.

“Are you okay?” she asked, looking at the arrows lodged in his shoulder.

“I'm fine! Let's get the others.”

Annika ducked into the bed and reached out with Caden to grab onto Mikaela's hands. Together they pulled her in and

she lay low in the corner, sobbing at having left Remi behind. Only Mr. Linden and Helmut remained.

“Grab on!” Caden called, extending his cuffed hands to Mr. Linden.

“Caden, no!” Annika shouted. “Not now! The Holy Police have reloaded!”

It was too late. Mr. Linden grabbed onto Caden’s hands, and a whirlwind of arrows shot right at him. With one disgusting pop after another, six of them struck Mr. Linden in the back and sides, as if they’d sprouted from his skin. His body turned to dead weight. He let go of Caden’s hands and crumpled to the ground. Caden yelled and reached outside the truck, but Helmut smacked his arm away and climbed in. He pressed his heavy hands down against Caden and Annika’s heads, keeping them as low as possible.

“Go, Patches!” he yelled to the woman driver. “Go!”

The truck’s wheels screamed. Pungent heat mixed with thick smoke clouds, propelling them forward at speeds Caden never thought possible. Faster than he’d ever galloped on Deber. They had to be going thirty miles an hour. The wind whipped by as they left behind a trail of tire tracks and confused Holy Police.

“But what about Mr. Linden!” Caden cried. “And Remi!”

“Stop,” Helmut growled. He released Caden and Annika from his grip and the three of them sat up. It was hard to see anything behind them through the clouds of black engine smoke, but the occasional clang of an arrow against the back of the metal truck let them know that the Holy Police were still firing.

When the truck hit the black asphalt road in town, it was



as if it had found its home. It went faster and faster, doubling Deber's top speed. Forty, no, *fifty* miles per hour. On all sides, the truck's lights illuminated people in gray uniforms yelling and hiding in their homes and stores, pulling their children away from the Iltech monster screeching through town.

Despite being free from the prison, all Caden felt was deep regret. The pain in his shoulder from the two arrows was nothing compared to the guilt. Remi, who had explained everything about New Darien, and Mr. Linden, the man whose shop had been burned down—both of them were gone. And it was his fault.

Finally safe from the Holy Police, the truck slowed down. As they continued through town, Helmut nudged Caden in the side, snapping him out of his dark thoughts.

"Handcuffs," he grunted.

Not knowing what he meant, Caden raised his wooden handcuffs up. Helmut tapped the top of them and grasped his gold cape with the other.

"Stay still," he whispered.

A flash of light reflected off Helmut's cape as he swung it out in front of him. It swooshed between Caden's hands. The wooden handcuffs around Caden's wrists fell to pieces.

"I guess that cape can do more than just protect," Annika said, sounding impressed. "I've got to get me one of those."

His hands now free, Caden reached for the arrows in his shoulder. They still hurt, but at the light touch of his fingers, they fell away, just like the last time he'd been hit by an arrow in Salem. He looked over to where they'd pierced his skin. There were no marks. No blood. His robotic healing had done its job.

“You truly are King Caden,” Mikaela whispered in awe.

Caden cringed, remembering her husband’s fate. “No, really, I—”

A snapping sound rumbled behind them, like the tremors of a frozen lake cracking in half. It came from every direction, overpowering the truck’s sputtering, and bringing with it a frigid gust. The very air around them chilled like ice.

Caden looked back and saw it along with everyone else. At first, he wasn’t sure what it was. It was dark and difficult to see. The way the truck’s lights reflected off it, it looked like some sort of puffy white cloud zooming through the air.

Then he saw the bright turquoise Xs. This was no cloud. It was Simona.

She was riding on the head of a giant ice snake. It slithered along the ground as fast as the truck, spewing out thick clouds of cold in its wake. Her turquoise Xs were unsheathed from her gloves, held out at the front of the snake so they glowed like eyes, so bright they lit up her fuming face. In only a matter of seconds she was going to catch up with them and crush the truck with a glacier.

“King Caden!” Mikaela yelled from the corner of the truck bed. “Please! Do something!”

All eyes were on Caden. Helmut’s cape was useless against Simona. Annika’s magnetizer was gone. The only way they could escape Simona was for Caden to stop her.

Caden thrust out his palms and focused on the head of the ice snake, right where Simona was standing. He closed his eyes and concentrated on the fact that he was their only hope. Even though he’d caused Mr. Linden to get shot full of arrows. Even though he hadn’t been able to save Remi. Even



though he hadn't listened to Holly to stay and that might've cost their lives. He wasn't going to let anyone else get hurt!

He unleashed the millions of invisible particles from the red Xs on his palms. They crashed into the head of the ice snake, shattering it to pieces. Freezing smoke rose off it, and Simona howled as she fell to the asphalt.

Caden breathed a sigh of relief. He wiped his forehead and tried to steady his pounding heart. He'd done it. He'd messed up before, but he'd saved them. Now they were free. So long as Thadi didn't somehow follow them using her fire weapon, then they were—

A ferocious roar thundered. Frozen clouds plumed. The ice snake was back, slithering after them twice as fast as before with Simona at the helm, her face now twisted with rage.

Her palms flashed, shooting out a frozen beam right into the back of the truck. A mass of solid ice grew out from where it hit the corner of the bed, like an icy explosion expanding to engulf everything. The driver swerved out of the way, sending the beam at the ground, but the damage had already been done. Half the truck's open bed was ice, spewing off freezing white mist.

Caden looked at the ice in horror. Mikaela had gotten hit. The bottom half of her body was frozen under a foot-thick layer of steaming ice. She clawed at it with her fingers, but her face and hands were already blue and shivering.

Caden panicked. Maybe if he used his ANGEL weapon. Maybe that would break her out! He thrust out his palms and aimed at the ice.

"No!" Annika slammed his arms down. "Caden, you'll blow up the truck!"

For the first time ever, Caden felt angry at Annika. “If I don’t break her out then—”

“If you don’t stop Simona then we’re all going to end up like that!”

“P-p-please, K-king Caden.” Mikaela pointed a shivering finger toward Simona. “S-stop her!”

Caden had no idea what to do. He’d unleashed his strongest attack, and all it’d done was knock Simona down for a few seconds. And caused yet another casualty. Another victim at the hands of “King Caden.”

“But what can I do?” Caden said. “I already hit her once and it did nothing.”

Annika gripped Caden’s shoulders and shook him. “Stop feeling sorry for yourself and try something else! Hit Simona in the face! Blast her own ice back at her! Do *something* for Gotama’s sake!”

Caden couldn’t concentrate. Annika’s words were distorted. Wrong. He wasn’t feeling sorry for himself. He was feeling sorry for the people who had been lost because of him tonight. Annika could tell him to blast Simona’s ice back at her all she wanted, she didn’t have to feel the pain when he failed.

Something sparked inside Caden. He realized what he had to do.

Caden readied himself. Simona was coiling through the air on her ice snake, rising and falling like a hunter finding the best moment to pounce. Caden focused his eyes on her turquoise Xs. When she extended her palms, preparing to fire, Caden was ready.

Remi. Linden. Mikaela. Just the names alone were enough to get Caden’s blood boiling.

Simona's turquoise *Xs* shone bright. Caden reacted right away. As soon as the ice beam shot out of her palms, Caden unleashed another burst of his own, this time aiming for her hands. He imagined the millions of particles inside him creating a wall right in front of her, one that her ice would smash into.

Simona's ice flew at them, halfway to the truck. Nothing stopped it. Did he mess up? Was it not going to work?

The ice beam crashed into Caden's invisible barrier, and Simona slammed into it like a brick wall. She screamed as the ice snake collapsed to the ground, bringing her down with it. Caden knew better than to celebrate early again. He leaned over the edge of the truck, peering above the cloud of exhaust to see if she was down for good.

It was over. As the truck sped away, Caden could just make out Simona lying on the ground, her arms covered in a mass of thick ice. She yelled and smashed her ice-covered hands against the asphalt over and over, but moments later Caden couldn't hear or see her. They were too far away.

Annika patted him on the back. "Nice work," she said. "See what happens when you listen to me?"

Caden felt like he should smile. Thank her. But he felt nothing but shame. He should've been able to defeat Simona earlier. Before Mikaela had ...

In the corner of the truck, Helmut was chipping away with his cape at the thick ice surrounding Mikaela's bottom half. The sharp sides of the cape may have sliced through Caden's wooden handcuffs like warm butter, but it was doing nothing against the rock-solid ice that had frozen her to the truck.

The worst part was, Caden couldn't use his *ANGEL* weapon.

He might be able to conjure up a blast strong enough to break the ice, but any blast that strong would break both the truck and Mikaela herself. He felt useless. He *was* useless.

Caden couldn't bring himself to look at Mikaela. He hated himself for it. She was the one trapped there, slowly freezing to death. What right did he have to be feeling any sort of pain?

Caden felt cold, and it had nothing to do with Simona's ice. He slid down in the corner of the truck, trying to make himself as small as possible. His hands wrapped themselves around his body, searching for warmth. They didn't find any.

"I just want to find Deber and get out of here," Caden whispered.

No one said anything. Annika sat across from Caden. Helmut stopped chipping against the ice. The truck continued bumping along the asphalt road.

## Chapter 9

### Amar's Answers

The paved roads ended. The truck slowed and groaned over grass and dirt. New Darien receded behind them, the lights from the shops and houses dimming in the distance. Caden thought they were heading to the horse stable to pick up Deber, but at the end of town the truck took a hard turn into the woods, the same place they'd come from hours ago.

Back when at least three people hadn't been hurt, or killed, because they'd believed in Caden.

Mikaela was sitting frozen in the same position. The bottom half of her body was swallowed up by ice, and the top half was pale blue. Her teeth chattered as she rubbed her sides. Her eyes were closed, as if imagining this was all a bad dream.

The truck slowly rumbled through the forest. Its bright lights illuminated the trees and cold white breaths coming out of everyone's mouths. Helmut was murmuring to Patches, the tattooed driver, through the window into the cabin.

Finally, the truck creaked to a halt. Darkness and slumbering trees surrounded them, as if they were the last people on Earth. Without any warning, Helmut heaved



himself out of the bed and leaped to the ground. He raised a hand and motioned for Caden and Annika to follow.

“Come,” he growled.

Annika hopped out after him, but Caden stayed put. He couldn’t take his eyes off Mikaela.

“What about you?” he asked. She smiled with her chattering teeth.

“I’ll be f-fine,” she said. “Go on, K-king Caden. D-do what you m-must.”

Patches peeked through the rear window of the truck. She pulled down her bright green bandana, revealing her face. It was just as tattooed as her arms, covered in angry-looking bats, owls, and other symbols that Caden didn’t recognize.

“So you’re really that Caden kid, huh?” she said, glancing at Caden’s glowing red Xs. He hid them in his overalls pockets. The Xs were embarrassing, useless in their current predicament.

“Will she be okay?” Caden asked, glancing at Mikaela.

Patches rocked her head. “I’m headed to Reactor Headquarters down south. It’s warmer there. I’m sure she’ll melt in no time. Plus we’ve got doctors. She’ll be fine.”

Caden knew she was just saying that to make him feel better. It didn’t work. But another idea popped into his head.

“Can we come with you?” he asked. “If you just stay here for a minute, I can go grab my horse.”

“Absolutely not,” Patches said. “This truck is meant to be a distraction, not a getaway vehicle. While everyone else is hiding in the woods, I’m supposed to lead the Guardians away. And if they think that you’re with me, then that’s even better bait. I’d love nothing more than for the last thing I see to be

their faces when they catch me and realize I don't have you."

Patches grinned from ear to ear, but her words were like claws in Caden's chest. He couldn't handle anyone else getting hurt because of the Church coming after him.

"There has to be another way," he said.

Mikaela leaned forward in her icy prison and clasped Caden's hands. They were colder than a corpse.

"K-king Caden," she said. "You leave r-right now and follow that m-man!"

Caden tried to protest, but she didn't let him.

"My husband had his p-purpose. And I have m-mine. Now go f-fulfill yours, King Caden!"

She released his hands and fell back into the corner of the bed, breathing hard. Her speech had sapped her energy. Caden knew there was no way she was going to survive the ride, no matter how far Patches made it, but he also knew there was nothing he could do. He weakly brought his legs over the side of the truck and slid to the ground next to Helmut and Annika.

Patches leaned out the passenger window. "You take good care of him, Helmut. The last thing we need is the Church getting their grimy hands back on him."

She banged the side of the truck and started it up with a clang, giving a final wave out the window and driving off in a cloud of black smoke. The lights from the truck slowly faded away through the trees, leaving Caden, Annika, and Helmut alone in the darkness.

Until another light shone. A glow as bright as a lantern flickered on from a plastic tube Helmut was holding. With the new light to guide them, he motioned again for Caden

and Annika to follow.

“Come,” he grumbled as he walked away.

Helmut didn't bother with any more explanation. It seemed like he was annoyed. Caden couldn't blame him. Obviously, whatever they'd planned tonight had failed, and Caden had a feeling that he was to blame. He was ready to do everyone in New Darien a favor and get out forever.

“I just want to get to my horse,” Caden said. “I appreciate you helping us escape and bringing us this far, but just tell us where the stables are and we'll leave.”

Helmut didn't look at him. “No,” he answered, marching forward.

“Excuse me?” Rage bubbled inside Caden. Cold air spewed from his mouth as he yelled. “I don't know where you think you're taking us, but we're not going! We're done with this town. Now tell me where my horse is!”

“Hey.” Annika laid an arm on Caden's shoulder and spoke just above a whisper. “I don't know what this guy's deal is either, but he and his friends just saved our butts. I think we can trust him.”

“Kind of hard to trust anyone who only speaks one-word grunts,” Caden grumbled.

“Come on,” Annika said. “Good things happen when you listen to me. Let's go.”

Caden hung his head. Guilt was eating through him, burning in his eyes. “I just want to leave, Annika. We should've never come here.”

“Exactly,” Annika said. “That's what I told you when we first stumbled onto this place. And now, I'm telling you we should follow this guy. So listen to me for once, okay?”

She slid her arm off his shoulder and walked after Helmut. Caden reluctantly trailed behind. He didn't want to spend any more time in New Darien, but Annika was right. What other choice did they have? Wander around aimlessly in the dark until they got caught?

A few more steps brought the three of them to the base of a thick pine tree, lush with bristles and branches. Helmut stopped, shined his Iltech light on the ground, then crouched down. He wrestled his fingers into the earth, and to Caden's shock, lifted up a square plot of dirt. Underneath was a wooden hinge and a dark hole leading underground.

As Caden and Annika stood there, mouths agape, Helmut propped open the hole cover on a stick, sat on the edge, and slipped inside. The hole was just big enough for him to fall through. When his head disappeared underground, he stuck his Iltech light out the top and waved for Caden and Annika to follow. Then it too went back beneath the ground, leaving Caden and Annika alone in the dim glow of the moon and Metl.

"So are we going with him?" Caden asked.

"I guess," Annika said.

"I wish he'd be a little more vocal. You know, maybe a, 'Follow me,' or something."

"Yeah ..." Annika trailed off. "There is something definitely weird about him. But come on, let's go. Before he gets too far ahead."

She slid down the hole, vanishing into darkness. The soft thud of her shoes meant that it wasn't far of a drop.

"It's cramped down here, but it's okay. Come on down and close the cover behind you."

Caden sighed, sat down, and swung his legs over the side of the hole. It was like sitting on the edge of a bottomless pit. He closed his eyes and lowered himself in.

His feet almost immediately touched the ground. It was narrow; only a few feet separated his body from the dirt walls surrounding him. He grabbed the stick holding up the cover outside and pulled it away, sealing them underground. The red light from his Xs lit up a tunnel wide enough to crawl through. It was held together with rotting wooden beams and bricks, all covered in a thick layer of dirt and moss. Annika was already squirming through it, and Helmut's electric light glowed in the distance like a faraway star.

"Get crawling," Annika said, her voice muffled.

Caden got down on all fours and scuffled forward like a baby through the tunnel. Every movement brought a shower of dirt crumbling onto his head, some spilling into his mouth. He spat and wiped his face, but that just brought down even more. Caden quickly learned to deal with having a bit of dirt in his mouth and kept his lips shut tight, breathing in the cold, earthy air only through his nose.

Each shuffle farther was worse than the last. Rotted wooden supports on the walls and floor reeked of mold; puddles of moist mud soaked his hands and overalls. Worst were the scuttling insects on his neck and in his hair. He had to fight the urge to reach up and swat away whatever had crawled on him, stopped only by the horrifying thought of swiping too hard and being buried alive in an avalanche of dirt.

It was impossible to tell how long they'd crawled for. Ten minutes? Half an hour? Caden's red Xs didn't light up anything

when they were crawling on the ground and covered in dirt. The darkness behind and in front seemed endless. Were they headed away from New Darien, or back into it?

Just when Caden felt like they'd dragged themselves all the way back to the church prison, Helmut's light went out. It simply vanished, as though it'd been engulfed by the tunnel.

"Helmut!" Caden called out. There was no response.

"Maybe his light broke or something," Annika said.

"What if he fell into a hole? Should we stop?"

"I'm pretty sure we would've heard him yell if he fell. Come on."

Caden scuffled slowly behind Annika, wary of what lay ahead. If something had happened to Helmut, then that meant they were crawling toward the same—

Annika fell with a scream.

"Annika!"

A light flashed ahead as Annika disappeared. Caden scrambled forward, shining his red Xs, trying to see in the inky blackness. A couple feet forward his hands touched something that felt like cloth. Moving it aside, he edged forward.

And he fell. Not into a hole. *Out* of one.

Caden landed on his chest, sliding out of the tunnel and onto the cold hardwood floor of an underground room. Annika helped him to his feet and he brushed himself off. It didn't help much. All three of them were caked in mud and dirt. Helmut stood off to the side, shining his Iltech light on the wall. A cloth flap covered up the end of the tunnel they'd just crawled through. The room was a large windowless basement, with wooden shelves lining the walls, glass jars full of preserved food, buckets of what looked like paint and

powdered glue, and worn sheets covering up crates.

And, standing in a corner, was Deber, bundled up in her patch-woven blanket.

“Deber!” Annika ran over to her. The horse whinnied happily and trotted forward, lowering her head to let Annika wrap her arms around her neck. She licked Annika’s cheek and Annika rubbed her mane as the horse whinnied affectionately. Annika laughed and coughed and clutched her nose. “Oh wow! It reeks down here, girl. Smells like you’ve been eating well.”

Caden looked at Deber, expecting to feel the same kind of joy as Annika. But the horrors from tonight still crawled over him like centipedes.

“Where are we?” Caden asked Helmut. “And how did Deber get here?”

As expected, Helmut didn’t answer. He put a finger over his lips. Seeing that made Caden want to shout even more. He was only stopped by the sound of an out-of-sight door creaking open and shut above them, followed by thumping footsteps, then human voices.

“Castor!” came a familiar voice. It was Amar. Were they underneath his house?

“Listen, Amar,” Castor said. His voice was dulled through the wood ceiling above, but his desperation was loud and clear. “I’m sorry about what happened. But you have to—”

“I don’t want to see your face in my house,” Amar seethed. “Get out.”

Castor took a few steps back. “I thought I was doing the right thing. I thought the other Wish would be too big of a risk. I’m your big brother, I know better.”

“Don’t you pull that crap on me,” Amar said. “You had your chance to make up for what you did to my family. And you blew it. Now get out of my home before the Guardians catch you skipping out on search duty. I know how scared of them you are, *big brother*.”

Silence. Even in the cellar, the air was tight with tension.

“Fine,” Castor said. “But just remember this. I thought I was doing the right thing. Today, and back then too. It’s not my fault things went sour. All the bad things that have happened, it’s always the Reactors’ fault, not mine.”

Stomping footsteps. The door opened and slammed shut. A heavy sigh from Amar. He slowly walked away above them. Helmut stepped over to the opposite corner of the cellar, climbed up the staircase to the door at the top, and knocked hard against it.

Amar’s footsteps stopped. They thumped toward the door, and it opened with a creak. Amar peeked down at them, his lantern lighting up his shocked face.

“Gotama’s Sparrow! You made it.” He crept down the stairs, staring at Caden and Annika in disbelief. But when his eyes met Helmut, they narrowed to slits. “You! What were you *thinking*? That stunt you Reactors pulled in the prison might’ve cost us everything!”

No answer from Helmut. He stood, arms crossed, looking away from Amar.

“What do you mean?” Caden asked Amar. “And where are we? How did Deber get here?”

Amar unglued his gaze from Helmut and turned to Caden. An uneasy combination of relief and concern smoldered in his eyes.



“This is the basement of my house,” he said. “When you were taken away by the Guardians after the Wish ceremony, I brought your horse here, to keep her safe. She put up quite a fight. Probably would’ve been just as hard pushing her through the tunnel as it was dragging her down the stairs.”

“But wait,” Caden said. “Why do you have a tunnel leading to your cellar in the first place?”

Amar waved Caden’s questions away. “Not now.” His eyes met Helmut and lit up with anger. “You. Answer me. What was so important that you couldn’t wait one more day before storming the church like that?”

“New leader, new plan,” Helmut grumbled in his raspy voice. Amar stood expectantly, waiting for more, but Helmut was silent.

“That’s it?” Amar said. “Decades of working toward my plan and that’s all I get?”

“What’s your plan?” Caden asked. Amar brushed him away again.

“I know today’s Wish didn’t work out like I said it would,” Amar said to Helmut. “But I promise you, tomorrow will be different. But only if you stick to what we agreed. So please, promise me you’ll follow the plan.”

Helmut looked like he’d had enough. He stomped over to the tunnel in the wall, lifted the cloth covering, and brought a knee up to the hole, ready to climb in and leave.

“Is that all I get?” Amar asked. “A few grunts? I remember you Reactors being a lot more eloquent. Or maybe that was just because we were giving you everything you wanted.”

Halfway back inside the tunnel, Helmut stopped.

“Morning,” he said. “Meet here.”

He heaved the rest of his body into the tunnel and the cloth draped back behind him, covering the entrance once more. Amar furiously marched up to it, yanked the cloth to the side, and yelled into the hole.

“You better believe I’ll be here tomorrow! And I’ll have some choice words for your ‘new leader’ too!”

There was no response, just the sound of Helmut shuffling through the dirt until that too faded to silence. When it was clear that their meager conversation was over, Amar let go of the cloth and rubbed his face.

“I’m sorry about that,” he said to Caden and Annika. “All of this, it has nothing to do with you. I’m glad to see you safe.”

Caden wasted no time spitting out his burning questions. “What was supposed to happen today? What went wrong?”

“And what was the ‘other Wish’ Castor was talking about?” Annika asked.

Amar ignored them both. “You must be starving. Let’s get you something to eat. Rosemary!” He called out to the open door at the top of the stairs. “Bring down some of the dinner leftovers, please. We have two guests.”

Caden had completely forgotten about the somber woman, the one who Amar had said was Holly’s mother. He had questions about that, but even more pressing things were on his mind.

“Thanks,” Caden said, not wanting to sound unappreciative. “But please, tell us what’s going on. Why did the Reactors break into the prison today? What’s happening?”

Amar dragged over a wooden crate from the side of the cellar and sat down. He placed the lantern on the floor and

bent his body forward, as if the weight of what was on his mind was crushing his body and soul.

"I can't explain everything," he said. "It's too dangerous."

"Why?" Caden asked.

Amar chuckled. "I can't even explain *why* it's too dangerous. You'll just have to take my word for it. I'm sorry."

Caden crossed his arms. He was deterred but he wasn't done yet. "You said something is going to happen tomorrow. Holly said the same thing to me inside the church. Are both of you talking about the same thing?"

Amar looked surprised. "You saw Holly in the church?"

"Yeah. She saved me. Her and the scientist Barron. Holly used her own blood to convince the Guardians that I wasn't the real Caden Aire."

"You didn't tell me that!" Annika blurted out in a huff. "You said the magnet-cuffs made you malfunction."

"Yeah, because the Holy Police were right outside our cell," Caden said. "Didn't seem like a good idea to blab about how Holly saved me."

Annika didn't answer. She stayed put in the corner, her suspicious eyes on Caden as she petted Deber.

"Well," Amar said, "you know more than I thought. Probably too much. I can't risk saying any more."

"At least tell us what was supposed to happen today," Caden said, practically pleading. "Whatever it was, it *didn't* happen, so it should be okay, right?"

Amar's serious face melted into a reluctant grin. "Fine. How about this? I'll tell you one thing. You heard me and Castor arguing, didn't you? Well that's because he was supposed to Wish for something else today, not a stupid

pizzeria. He owed me. Big time. And that's all I can say."

"And the Reactors?" Caden tried to sound innocently curious. "They weren't supposed to break into the prison either?"

Amar answered quickly this time. "Absolutely they weren't supposed to! A little while after you were taken away, the Guardians came out and told us that the boy they'd caught was a decoy, and the real Caden, the thief who'd stolen Gotama's red X, was still out there. They organized everyone in town into search parties. They said whoever found you wouldn't have to work in the Hole anymore. That got some people real excited. Most of them are still out there searching, combing through the woods and into the next towns over. The only reason I'm not out there with them is because ... I have to care for Rosemary.

"But anyway, with both Guardians away looking for the 'real' you, the Reactors decided to take advantage of the opening and break into the prison. Honestly, I can't blame them. They were only supposed to wait until today anyway, then Castor got cold feet."

Caden's curiosity was about to pop. "What was Castor supposed to Wish for?"

A stomp came from outside the cellar door. Rosemary was there, casting a shadow from the dim light above. At her feet was a wooden tray with two golden-brown bread rolls, some hard cheese, and bowls of steaming soup. As soon as she'd gotten their attention she walked away without a word.

"Well then," Amar said, smacking his thighs. "How about a dinner break?"

The hunger that Caden had been suppressing all day

came out in a wild fervor as he started shoving food into his mouth. Both he and Annika wolfed down the rolls and cheese. It was Caden's first real, homemade food in weeks. The bread was crusty on the outside, soft and buttery on the inside, perfect for dunking in the piping hot chicken soup and taking big, warm bites. Caden almost felt sick from eating so much so quickly. Annika patted her stomach with satisfaction as she lay on the ground, leaning against Deber who was now curled up trying to sleep.

"You like that bread?" Amar asked. "It's from Linden's bakery. Hope he made it out okay tonight."

Caden swallowed the last bite of bread as heavy as a rock. Remembering Mr. Linden taking half a dozen arrows in the back quickly turned his full stomach nauseous. He changed the subject.

"So why did the Reactors break into the prison today?" Caden asked. "You never answered."

Amar sighed. "I was hoping you'd forget. And honestly, I don't have to answer any of your questions, so you should consider yourself lucky. But ..." He stretched and gave Caden a smile. For a moment Caden felt as if Amar was his own grandfather, telling him stories before bedtime. "I suppose you deserve at least one answer. And seeing as you already know about Barron, it couldn't hurt. So there you go. The Reactors, they want Barron."

"They just want some scientist?" Annika asked.

Amar scoffed. "He's not just some scientist! He's Dr. Barron Hector, one of the greatest minds the world has ever known. He used to be the Reactors' Vice Commander, before he was captured."

“So the Reactors just want their leader back?” Annika asked. “They don’t care about helping the Sparrows?”

Amar rocked his head from side to side. “The Reactors promise to help us, and we promise to help them. But that’s all it’s been so far: promises. For years they’ve been trying to get the information out of me and Holly about where Barron is, but we’ve kept our silence. Breaking in and trying to kidnap him would just end in disaster, like you saw today.”

“But what is the Church even doing with Barron?” Caden asked. “Why do they have him upstairs and not in the prison with everyone else?”

“We’re not sure,” Amar said. “But we think it has something to do with what we’re digging to find in the Hole.”

Caden scrunched up his face in confusion. “You mean the red X?”

Amar raised an eyebrow. “Not just any red X. The red X on Gotama’s ANGEL weapon.”

Caden looked over at Annika and she sat up straighter. Outside of the Apostles, no one ever talked about ANGEL weapons. No one even knew about them. To hear Amar just casually mention them was a shock.

“What do you mean Gotama’s ANGEL weapon?” Caden asked, trying to keep his voice calm.

“Well I’m not entirely sure,” Amar said. “It’s Rosemary’s theory. All the books she used to read, she found something in one of them about ANGEL weapons. Apparently when Gotama was alive he created ANGEL weapons for his closest followers, and he gave his most loyal one the most powerful of them all: the legendary ANGEL weapon, the one with the red X.”

Caden’s head was spinning with questions. Was the Great

Gotama actually a real person at one time, like the Sparrows believed? And if so, why did Caden have the same red Xs on his palms?

“You don’t really believe all that, do you?” Annika asked. “Like Gotama being alive and everything? They’re just made up stories. Right?”

Amar shrugged. “I don’t have all the answers. But I do know this: we all need something to believe in. Maybe that something is Gotama. Maybe that something is the Reactors. Or maybe that something is a boy with blond hair and overalls named Caden Aire, who some people believe is out there, somewhere, and will someday come to save them.”

Amar’s words cut through Caden like broken glass. He knew Amar only had good intentions, but the guilt still sliced him open. It physically hurt. Caden clutched himself and bent over.

Remi. Linden. Mikaela. He’d been their savior, their King Caden, and he’d failed them. He’d failed all the Sparrows in New Darien. It was his fault they were out now, being forced to search for him even though he was safe and sound. It was his fault there were Reactors out there whispering stories about King Caden setting them free that had no chance of coming true.

And months ago, it was his fault Jadice had blown up the Basement in Salem to try to destroy him, causing hundreds of Ants to die because of his mere existence. He’d been suppressing that horrible memory so hard that when it came bubbling up now it burned like boiling water.

“I ... I can’t help anyone.” Caden closed his eyes and choked through heavy breaths. “Everyone here thinks I’m

‘King Caden’ or whatever ... but I’m not! I’m just ... me. I’m just looking for my dad. And I can’t ... I can’t do anything! I should just ... I should just turn myself in to the Church. Then everyone can stop digging, and stop dying all because of me!”

A strong arm gripped Caden’s shoulder. He opened his eyes and Amar was sitting next to him on the crate, wrapping an arm around him.

“It’s okay,” Amar whispered. “It’s not up to you to save our town. It’s up to us. If we can’t save it, then we don’t deserve it in the first place. And if everything goes according to plan, then tomorrow everyone will forget about ‘King Caden.’”

Again, Amar was trying to be nice, but Caden knew the truth. There were only two options he had to help the town: turn himself in, or get out. Caden rubbed his eyes and took a deep breath.

“We need to leave tomorrow,” he told Amar. “Before I cause any more trouble.”

“I think that’s the best idea. Get some rest. You can leave first thing in the morning, once everyone’s back from looking for you.” Amar then slapped his thigh and smiled at Caden and Annika. “But hey! You kids ever seen some real photographs before?”

Annika immediately piped up. “I have. My parents and I, we had a bunch. We’d make up stories about the people in them.”

“Oh, looks like I’m dealing with some pros then. Guess I’ll have to break out the bigger stuff. Excuse me for one moment.”

Amar let go of Caden and walked to the stacks against the wall covered in sheets. He pulled down one of the coverings,



revealing something underneath that was definitely not a crate. It was black, shiny, and after a moment of staring and wiping his eyes, Caden realized what it was: a TV.

The screen was strapped to a black metal frame on wheels, and a long plastic rope snaked out its back, leading to some other small Iltech device that Caden didn't recognize. Amar wheeled the TV away from the wall and set it in front of Caden and Annika. He picked up the connected piece of Iltech, something that looked like a miniature bean grinder, and started cranking it. As he did, the black TV screen slowly came to life, turning blue with the words "Input 1" in the corner.

"Is this TV actually working?" Caden asked, his gaze fixed to the screen.

"Of course," Amar said proudly. "We have to turn in the Iltech we find in the Hole, but every now and then I save a few things for myself. And when I found a TV that actually worked, I couldn't just send it away."

"Wait a minute," Caden said. "So this TV ... we can watch stuff on it?"

"Well, we can watch *one* thing," Amar said. "It's the only one I've found that still works."

Amar handed Caden a plastic box the size of a thin book. On the front were the words "Investing in Hartford" in bright yellow letters. In the background were buildings so tall they made the church in Salem look like a shed. Just holding it, feeling the hard plastic and seeing the photo of the city, Caden's heart swelled with joy.

Annika scooted forward to look at the box. "But where does the electricity come from?"

“That’s what this is for,” Amar said, nodding to the device he was cranking. “It doesn’t produce a whole lot, but it’s enough for this. Now, let’s get started.”

Amar pulled a shimmering disk out of the plastic box. Caden had seen CDs before at the Home, but they’d been cracked and dirty. This one was pristine as Metl in the sky. Amar inserted it into a black box underneath the TV, then went back to cranking. The screen flickered to life with a breathtaking view of an ancient city and the voice of an invisible narrator.

“Hartford, Connecticut is the fastest-growing city in our nation. And with big changes on the horizon, that growth will only increase. If you’re watching this, then you may be considering relocating your company, corporation, or nonprofit organization to our lovely city. Let me be the first to say thank you for your consideration, and to welcome you along on this forty-five minute informational program.”

Caden was enraptured. The buildings that touched the clouds. The vehicles of all sizes and colors. The people dressed in bizarre clothes: men with cloth straps dangling from their necks and women wearing jewels on their ears. It was like watching human-shaped creatures go about their daily lives. Caden had no idea what half the words meant that the narrator used, phrases like “tax incentives” or “international airport” or “eco-friendly,” but he did figure out one new word: “skyscraper.” Caden silently mouthed it to himself. It felt so good to say.

At some point Amar sat back down next to Caden on the crate, and Caden found himself leaning against his side, as if Amar were a warm cushion. It made him feel like he was little again, falling asleep propped up against Mother Mildred

back at the Home. It was so nice and comforting. For just a little while it let him feel like a child, and not anyone's savior.

What felt like mere minutes later, the movie was over. A bunch of names scrolled up the screen, then it blinked back to the bright blue that it had been before.

"Can we watch it again?" Caden asked. Amar laughed and set down the Iltech generator. He was sweating. Caden had gotten so caught up in watching that only now did he realize he probably should have offered to crank it. "I can make the electricity if you want. I don't mind."

"You're welcome to watch as many times as you'd like," Amar said. "But I think I've had enough for one day. Watched it plenty of times myself. Have to say, that one part about 'cellular reception' and the man talking to himself, still makes me laugh."

Amar stood and handed the generator to Caden who immediately started cranking it. Amar pressed a button on the TV, and the movie restarted with the same opening narration.

"Well, I'm off to bed. You two get some rest too. The Reactors will be back first thing tomorrow morning. I'll try to get them to show you the way out of town."

"Thank you, Amar," Caden said, cranking nonstop. "For the food. For hiding us. For everything."

Amar merely nodded. He walked up the stairs back into the house and closed the door behind him, sealing them in darkness except for the bright glow of the TV.

Annika yawned and lay down against Deber. "I think I'm going to call it a night. How about you?"

"Yeah, in a little while." Caden cranked the generator and sat mesmerized by the film. Within minutes Annika was

snoring, but he still sat there, watching. When the movie finished again he jumped to his feet and pressed all the buttons until it restarted. The familiar narrator's voice came back on. Caden sat down and continued cranking.



Caden woke the next morning, slouched over, the Iltech generator still in his hands. It was dim in the cellar, the only light peeking through cracks in the ceiling. The TV screen was off. Caden's first thought was to turn it on and start watching again, but the sound of footsteps upstairs stopped him. A dozen people were stomping around up there, at least one of them wearing extremely heavy boots. Each booming step shook the wooden planks above, knocking down sprinklings of dirt.

Then Caden heard a voice. A horribly familiar voice.

Annika moaned from the floor. "Good morning," she said, wiping her eyes. "Oh for Gotama's sake, don't tell me you were watching that all night."

Caden shushed her. Annika looked hurt, but then she silenced herself too. She'd heard the same familiar voice.

"—heard some rumors that King Caden was seen around this town," the female voice said. It was strong and sarcastic. Angry and alluring. Misty and electric. "Although I have to say, that is a silly name for the boy. I've always called him Blondie."

It was Jadice.

## Chapter 10

### New Plans

Caden's heart hammered against his chest. Annika's eyes widened to the size of eggs. Thankfully Deber was still fast asleep. Caden didn't know if she'd recognize Jadice's voice, but if she did, her nonstop neighing would get them all caught real fast.

Caden had thought Jadice was dead. The last time he'd seen her he'd been in DEVIL mode, tearing off her Iltech legs and throwing her out of Salem's church windows. But there was no doubt it was her. The tug of Jadice's water and electric ANGEL weapons was as strong as a hook latched around his navel.

But why was Jadice here? And why did she have an army with her? Last night Helmut had grunted something about a "new leader" and "meet tomorrow," but he couldn't have meant Jadice. The Reactors were supposed to be the good guys!

"What in Gotama's name are you doing?" came the muffled voice of Amar. He sounded just as frustrated as yesterday when he was talking to Castor. "You Reactors can't just barge in here in broad daylight! What if somebody saw you?"

Jadice grunted. “This place is a ghost town. Everyone is out looking for Blondie. There was no way I was going to crawl through that tunnel anyway. Helmut here says it’s awfully cramped.”

Caden clenched his teeth so hard it hurt. So Helmut was with them upstairs. Was that his plan? To lead Caden here to the cellar and turn him over to Jadice in the morning?

“All that aside,” Amar said, “who are you?”

Jadice chuckled. “You’ll get to know me soon enough. Your entire town will. The name’s General Jadice. The Commander put me in charge of the Reactor group here in New Darien.”

“I see,” Amar said. “So tell me, General Jadice, why were you on nickname terms with King Caden?”

Jadice gave a melodramatic sigh. “Blondie and I, we used to be allies. Until the little brat betrayed me. He attacked me and left me to die. I barely survived. I had to go into hiding for weeks. That’s when I met the Commander of the Reactors. Needless to say, he recognized my strength and promoted me right away. We have the same goal, he and I: the destruction of the Church. Though we disagree on how to get there, and how to deal with the boy.”

“I see,” Amar said, still sounding skeptical. “And what do *you* think should be done to King Caden?”

Jadice didn’t answer. Her heavy boots stomped above Caden and Annika. Her legs were nothing but Iltech vessels for the electric ANGEL weapon inside of them, making each step as loud as metal pounding against the floor. She walked in circles, like a predator searching for prey. Maybe it was Caden’s imagination, but he thought he heard a hissing

sound. He held his breath, trying not to panic.

“I feel electrical signals nearby,” she said. “Are you hiding Iltech in this house?”

Caden and Annika snapped to each other. Annika silently pointed at the tunnel in the wall. They could hide in there, but would Jadice hear them scuffling over? Would she sense him moving?

“It’s probably the Iltech from the Hole that I’ve kept over the years,” Amar said. “I’ve got a bunch in the cellar. A generator, a TV, even a movie that actually works. Do you want to watch it? There’s this hilarious part where a guy puts his hand up to his ear and—”

“No thanks,” Jadice said. Her stomping stopped. “I just thought I felt ... no matter. Our mission is to rescue Vice Commander Barron, and once we do that, he’ll help us find the boy.”

“I don’t understand,” Amar said. “What can Barron do to find Caden?”

Jadice snickered. “Everything! Vice Commander Barron was one of the scientists who created Caden Aire.”

Caden’s heart beat so hard he had to place his hands over his mouth to stop from crying out.

“Created Caden Aire?” Amar asked. “What do you mean? Isn’t he just a boy?”

“Just a boy?” Jadice scoffed. “Please. He’s a monstrous, living weapon. The Commander wants to capture him and study him, but I know better. The sooner we destroy him, the better off we’ll all be.”

Cold sweat trickled down Caden’s neck. The Reactors wanted to capture him. Is that why Helmut had brought

them here last night, to store him away like fish in a bucket until Jadice came for him? If he was upstairs with Jadice, then it was only a matter of time before he led her down here. Caden's brain knew he needed to run, but his body was frozen in place.

"What do you mean he's a 'living weapon?'" Amar asked. "How do you know this?"

"Because I used to work for the Church," Jadice answered with a cackle. "Why do you think the Church captured Barron in the first place? To have him design a bigger shovel to dig your precious town's Hole? No, they want Barron to help catch Caden, or barring that, have him build another Caden of their own."

Amar was silent, taking it all in. So far, he hadn't told Jadice that Caden was right beneath her, though Caden couldn't really blame Amar if he did. Jadice was with the Reactors, a group Amar trusted, and she'd just informed him that Caden was a dangerous weapon. Caden hoped that their brief time together was enough to show him otherwise.

"I don't understand why you all want this boy so badly," Amar said, "but all I ask is that you have patience and wait until after tonight. By then the Holy Police and the Guardians will not cause you any more problems."

"Well then, you're in luck," Jadice said. "It will take us until tonight to finish our project. So you have until then to do whatever you'd like. But for now, we have work to do."

Jadice's heavy boots stomped away, followed by a dozen others behind her. It wasn't long before all the footsteps disappeared, leaving behind a heavy silence. Caden and Annika exchanged glances, not sure if it was okay to speak.



What if there was still a Reactor up there, standing guard?

Footsteps headed back toward them. Caden held his breath as the cellar door opened, flooding the underground with sunlight. Thankfully it was just Amar, alone.

“Don’t trust that woman, Amar!” Caden was breathing hard, his mouth moving at a mile a minute. “She’s lying to you! We didn’t betray her, she betrayed us. She lied to us and she’s doing the same to you!”

Amar merely nodded. “That’s what I thought. Some people have ticks when they’re lying, and she was ticking like a dog who’d been rolling in the woods.”

“So what do we do?” Caden asked.

Amar rubbed his face, each wrinkle seemingly letting out its own sigh of exhaustion. Caden felt bad for him. The last thing Amar needed was to worry about Jadice, or Caden and Annika’s safety for that matter.

“Well it seems we can’t trust the Reactors to escort you out of town,” he said. “Just crawl back through the tunnel. I’ll have your horse meet you on the other side. With some luck, you won’t run into anyone searching for you. It’s safer than staying here if the Reactors are planning something.”

Caden had completely forgotten about running away. As soon as Jadice had uttered the words about Barron creating him, all thoughts of leaving vanished. If Barron had helped make him, then maybe he could tell him about his father.

Caden wasn’t going anywhere.

“I can’t leave,” Caden said. “I need to talk to Barron.”

Annika groaned from across the room. “Caden, you can’t be serious! We just barely escaped from the church last night, and now you want to go back?”

“I’m not saying we go back to the church,” Caden explained as gently as possible. “I’m saying we wait here another day and see what happens. Amar, you said that everything would be okay after tonight. If we wait here until then, we can see Barron, right?”

Amar looked uneasy, as though Caden’s words were making him ill. “That’s a big risk you’re asking me to take. If you get caught in my house, who do you think is going to be in trouble?”

“Please, Amar,” Caden begged. “If Jadice and all those Reactors didn’t find us, then no one will.”

Amar let out a sigh. He looked off to the side and ran a hand through his white hair.

“Fine. One more day. You can come upstairs for air if you want. I’ll shut the curtains so no one will see you. But no matter what, don’t leave the house. I’ll tell Rosemary to cook something up for you too.”

Caden beamed from ear to ear. “Thank you, Amar!”

The old man hastily waved Caden’s words away. “I have to go. With everyone else in town out searching, I’ll have my work cut out for me today in the Hole. I’ll see you two tonight, hopefully under much better circumstances.”

Amar left, leaving the cellar door open. His footsteps faded, and then there was silence. Caden balled his hands into fists and nearly jumped for joy.

“Annika! Can you believe it? That scientist Barron, he knows all about me! I should’ve known something was up when he helped me. I can’t believe I wasted my chance to talk to him about my dad! But I won’t make that mistake again. Isn’t this great, Annika?”

Annika wasn't thrilled. She sat in the corner next to Deber, stroking her mane as she let out quiet horse-snores.

"I think we should leave, Caden," she said softly.

"What? No way! This is my chance—*our* chance—to finally meet someone who knows my dad. In person!"

"I know," Annika said. "But every bone in my body is telling me to get out of this town. And I'm always right."

She gave him a knowing look. Caden rolled his eyes. Yes, she'd been right a couple times, but this was so important. There was no way he'd give it up.

"Amar says everything will be fine."

"Just like when he said it'd be fine when he first brought us into town?"

"No, that's—"

"He also said we should leave. Immediately."

"Yeah, but—"

"Listen, Caden." Annika stood and brushed off her hands on her dress. "You wanted to leave yesterday, and that was *before* we knew Jadice was here. With her around, everything is a million times worse." Caden opened his mouth, but Annika put out her hands to silence him. "Stop. Listen. How about this: why don't we leave now, but then keep an ear out for information on New Darien. If we find out that the town is safe again, that the Guardians and Jadice are gone, then we can come back and talk to Barron. How about that?"

"By then Barron will be somewhere else," Caden whined. "I wouldn't stick around a town that had imprisoned me." Another thought suddenly hit Caden, one that Annika might agree with. "Oh! And if we meet Barron, we can get your magnetizer back. I saw it upstairs in the church with him."

Annika glared at him, digging her fists into her sides. “Are you serious, Caden? I don’t care about the stupid magnetizer. I care about getting out of here alive!”

Caden wasn’t getting through to her. If worse came to absolute worst, and he had to choose between leaving with Annika or staying here alone, he knew which he’d pick. He hated that he knew, but he’d do it if he had to.

Then he had an idea. Something that Annika would understand.

“What if it was *your* dad?” he asked. Just the mention of Annika’s dad caused a shadow to cross her face.

“So what if it was?”

“I’m saying that if it was your dad, you’d do anything to find him, wouldn’t you? Even if it was dangerous. Even if it was just a hint of a clue. Wouldn’t you?”

Annika sucked in a loud breath through her nose and let it out in a huff. Caden had hit her weakest spot. He wasn’t proud of it, but he had to get through to her.

“Fine,” she said. “We’ll stay. But just one day.” Caden nearly leaped out and hugged her, but was stopped by Annika’s scowl. “I’m not happy about it. I’m getting breakfast.”

She stomped up the staircase and Caden followed. The misery he’d felt clinging to him last night was finally starting to peel away.

They climbed out of the cellar into the house’s entrance hall. Caden was again briefly stunned by its size and splendor. White-painted walls, thick rugs, enough empty space to hear an echo. Aside from a few cracks and scuffs, it was like a castle from a bedtime story.

Inside the living room was the same familiar sight.

Crackling fireplace, bubbling ceramic pot, warming slates with a full dozen eggs frying. Two empty plates on the floor were practically calling out to be loaded up with food. Rosemary was there, silently sitting in her chair, surrounded by books on the floor. Annika eyed the eggs so longingly it looked like drool was going to start waterfaling out of her mouth. Caden didn't blame her. The delicious, meaty smell was overwhelming.

"Help yourselves," Rosemary spoke in a whisper.

"We can have the eggs?" Annika asked. Rosemary gave the faintest nod.

That was all the permission they needed. Caden and Annika descended on the eggs, scraping them off the stone heating slab with wooden spatulas onto their plates, each not-so-subtly vying to get more than the other.

"Apple too," Rosemary said. Caden looked around to see what she meant and spotted a large, red apple lying nearby. He snatched it up for Deber, giving Annika the opening she needed to lean in and scrape away the last bits of egg for herself.

The two of them thanked Rosemary. She didn't reply. They slipped back down to the cellar, woke up Deber to give her the apple that she happily gnawed on, and wolfed down their eggs like they hadn't eaten in days. Which, aside from last night, was mostly true.

As he was eating, Caden felt a few odd crunches in his mouth. He reached into his teeth and pulled out a piece of eggshell. The first time he didn't really care. But by the second, third, fourth and fifth times, he noticed Annika doing the same, picking out eggshell from her mouth and setting it aside.

“She’s not very good at cracking eggs, I guess?” Caden said. Annika snorted, her mouth too full of food to laugh.

“You’re complaining?”

“No, of course not. It’s just ... she’s a little weird, don’t you think? Never really moves. Can’t even crack an egg, apparently.”

Annika shrugged. “She reminds me of Helmut. Both of them barely talk.”

Hearing Helmut’s name made Caden remember something. “Wait a minute. Why didn’t Helmut tell Jadice that we were in the cellar?”

“Add it to the list,” Annika mumbled through another mouthful. “When whatever happens today is over, you’ve got a lot of questions to ask.”

Caden and Annika finished their food and kept talking about everything that had happened. They wondered how much Barron knew about his dad, who the Reactor’s Commander was, and whether or not Holly was on their side. Now that Caden knew about Barron, he was firmly in the yes camp, but Annika wasn’t.

“Holly’s friends with Barron, Annika! They worked together to save me.”

“Yeah, but you only had to be saved because she betrayed us in the first place.”

They finally stopped arguing when Deber started whinnying, begging them to stop.

Caden felt fidgety in the cellar. He couldn’t sit still. He wanted to go out and find Barron. Annika however was quite relaxed, probably happy that for the first time in months they weren’t spending the day running for their lives, or doing

backbreaking farm labor for Pebbies.

Despite Rosemary's silence, she treated Caden and Annika well. When lunchtime rolled around, she walked to the cellar opening, whispered, "Lunch," and disappeared. Sure enough, upstairs they found two steaming bowls of corn porridge waiting for them, and carrots for Deber. Caden and Annika thanked her and brought the food downstairs. Caden cranked the Iltech device so they could watch the movie again while they ate.

After three more viewings for Caden and a nap for Annika, it was dinner time. Rosemary once again came over to softly call for them, and they went upstairs to the living room. The shades were drawn, but Caden could hear groups of Sparrows walking and grumbling through the streets, finally returning after spending all day and last night searching for him. Even though he'd been hidden away safely underground the whole time.

Caden tried to push the thought out of his mind. Amar had said everything would be okay after tonight. He had to trust him.

Their dinner was warming in front of the fireplace. Bread and soup, with small puddles of liquid littered around the bowls, next to a box of raw oats for Deber. Rosemary still sat in the same chair, unmoving, as if she had conjured up the food magically. Caden wondered how she cooked everything. And why did she spill the soup? What was wrong with her?

Curiosity tingled through him. He wondered if Rosemary would open up to him if he used his powers. Maybe it would make her happy, or maybe it would surprise her. Anything but sitting in a chair all day, one step above being a corpse.

Just to try, Caden held out his palm to his share of the dinner. He'd make it levitate toward Rosemary. That had to get her to say something. He at least wanted to give her a proper, conscious thank you before they left. The excitement of thinking about meeting Barron, and talking about his dad, was plenty to send out the millions of invisible particles from his body, just like he wanted.

But something went wrong. Instead of wrapping around the bread and bowls, Caden felt the particles go somewhere else, as if they had a mind of their own. They changed course to Rosemary, too small for her to notice. They clung to her skin. Her hands. Her face. Some of them went into her nose. Her mouth. Her ears.

A crack of silent lightning split Caden in half. He felt himself double over in pain, as if he was watching it happen above through a thick layer of clouds. Everything was wrong. He could taste the sound of the fire snapping, like spicy licorice. He could hear the colors of the scattered books, yellows crashing and purples screaming.

Everything. Then. All. Shifted. Broke.

Flas hed. D i s t o r t e d.

He was MoDifiCationNNNnNN

hE Was cADen

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## Chapter 11

### Rosemary and Gabriel

Seven-year-old Rosemary stomped home from school. Her eyes were red, tears streamed down her face, and her dress and pigtails were caked in dirt. In her shaking hands she held two halves of a torn book.

She yanked open the front door, slammed it shut once inside, threw the pieces of the book onto the living room floor, and collapsed into a crying mess. All around her the room was lined with shelves upon shelves of books from the floor to the ceiling. They were all shapes, sizes and colors, each one patiently holding mysteries and secrets.

Rosemary's father Amar glanced over as he tended to dinner cooking in a pot in the fireplace. The sleeves on his gray mining uniform were rolled up to his shoulders, showing off the tight muscles on his arms. The dark hair that knotted its way from his knuckles to elbows matched the scruffy beard that framed his smile.

"Did you have a bad day at school, Rosemary?" he asked.

"I hate school!" Rosemary shouted. "I hate it so much!"

"Oh really?" Amar said.

"Yeah!" Rosemary glared and wiped her dribbling nose.

“If I had a Wish ... then I’d Wish that no one has to go to school anymore because it’s stupid!”

Amar stopped stirring the soup. He looked over to the torn pieces of Rosemary’s book on the floor. He rubbed his hands together, shuffled up next to her, and picked them off the ground.

“Do these have something to do with why you hate school so much?”

Rosemary nodded and rubbed her nose, wiping snot all over the sleeves of her dress.

“It’s the mean kids at school. They took my book and broke it. I brought it to show Gabriel, but then they just ... they just ...”

Gabriel was Rosemary’s best friend. The two of them swapped books at school sometimes, but usually only ones that were small enough to fit in their pockets and hide from the other kids. Today Rosemary had taken a risk with a bigger one, and she’d paid the price. Gabriel had helped her pick up the pieces after a group of kids had torn it down the spine, but she was so mad she’d run home without even thanking him.

Amar looked at the book, examining the back and front covers that had been ripped apart. The title “Whales of the World” was written in big bright letters on top of a gorgeous picture of a humpback whale breaching and blowing a cloud of water from its blowhole. It had been Rosemary’s favorite book. Just looking at it now sent another wave of anger through her.

“Now, Rosemary,” Amar said, “what have we said about bringing books to school? You knew this could happen.”

Rosemary sniveled hard, sucking back tears. “Yeah, but

books aren't Iltech! They're just paper and cloth and ink. They don't even have plastic like photos or anything!"

Amar shook his head. "It doesn't matter. Books are still scary to a lot of people. They're from the past, same as cars or computers."

"But it's not the same!" Rosemary said. "It's just a book. And now they broke it and it's gone forever!"

Rosemary buried her face in the cushion of a chair and started crying. It wasn't just the book; it was where the book had come from. When she was little, her mother used to read to her before bedtime. Every time Mom brought a new book home, either from the Hole or given to her by other people, Rosemary couldn't wait to start reading it. Sometimes she'd jump into bed in the middle of the day just to get her mom to come over so they could read the first few pages together.

But those memories were little more than warm vapors now. Rosemary's mother had died in the Hatching. Now one of her books had died too.

Amar put his hand on Rosemary's back. She'd stopped crying. Thinking about her mom had scooped out her anger, leaving her numb and empty. She brought her face out of the chair cushion and wrapped her arms around her dad. He patted her back with his strong hands.

"Hey, did I ever tell you what Mom was going to Wish for?" he asked. Rosemary stood up straight and shook her head, suddenly interested. Dad rarely talked about Mom, and she wasn't going to spoil the moment by crying. "She loved books just like you, and she thought that people shouldn't be scared of them. So she wanted to Wish for our town to have a library."

Rosemary wiped her nose and lowered her eyes in confusion. “A library? What’s that?”

“It’s a place where they have thousands and thousands of books. So many books you couldn’t even read them all if you tried. And they’re all about anything you can imagine. Animals. Plants. Weather. History. And anyone can go in and read as many as they’d like.”

Rosemary’s eyes widened with every word out of her dad’s mouth. “Did you say history?”

“Of course! History and—”

“Even history about Gotama?”

Amar’s smile crumbled in confusion. “What are you talking about, Rosemary?”

Rosemary dashed over to the book shelves. She ran her fingers across the uneven spines, then ripped one out and brought it to Amar. It was smaller than the whale book, and its worn cover was torn in half. The only part of the title that was legible were the first two words: “The Meaning.”

She presented the book to Amar proudly. Cautiously, he took it in his hands, skimming through the worn pages. Rosemary watched closely as he did. The text was small, there were lots of words on every page, and about half of them were torn away or faded, but it was still the most fascinating book she’d ever read.

“You can read this?” he asked. “There’s a lot of words in here even I don’t know.”

“I just use the dictionary,” Rosemary said. “Did you know what a ‘revelation’ is? It’s like when you realize something really important.”

Amar raised his eyebrows. “Where did you get this book?”

I don't remember seeing it before."

"Gabriel gave it to me. That's why I wanted to give him the whale book, to thank him. But that doesn't matter!" Anxious to get to the point, she snatched the book back from Amar and flipped through the pages, stopping when she found what she'd been looking for. "Here! Look. It says here that Gotama made these things called ANGEL weapons for his followers, and they're made of Iltech. But in the Book of Metl, it says that Gotama taught his followers *not* to use Iltech. So I don't know which book is right."

Amar opened and closed his mouth as if he had no idea what to say. "Well, that's interesting."

"I know, right?" Rosemary said. "But if we had a library, then I could find out more about the history. I could find out what *really* happened back then!" She turned to her dad, eyes wide, imagining the possibilities. "Oh! That's what you should Wish for, Dad! When you're done working in the Hole, you should make the same Wish that Mom was going to make. A library for our town!"

Amar chuckled. "Well if everything goes according to plan, I won't *have* to Wish for a library. You'll be able to open one yourself, if that's what you want."

Rosemary scrunched up her face. "What do you mean?"

Amar looked away, drumming his fingers on his leg as if thinking hard. Slowly, he brought his gaze back to Rosemary.

"I wasn't planning on telling you until you were older," he said. "But if you promise you can keep a secret ..."

Rosemary hopped up and down. "Yes! Yes! Tell me."

"All right, all right." Amar put a hand on her shoulder to stop her bouncing. "Well then, here goes. When my time is

up at the Hole, I'm going to Wish ... for everyone in town to be free."

Rosemary's smile vanished. "What does that have to do with a library?"

"Everything!" Amar said, his eyes twinkling. "When I Wish for everyone to go free, no one will have to work in the Hole anymore if they don't want to. No one will be put in jail anymore. Everyone will be free to do whatever job they want."

Rosemary's mouth fell open in shock. "And Gotama won't be mad at us for stopping?"

Amar shook his head. "I think by the time I've made my Wish, we'll have worked plenty for Gotama. Us Sparrows, we're not meant to be trapped digging underground. We're meant to be free, soaring through the sky."

"Oh!" Rosemary squeaked, suddenly realizing something. "I just had a 'revelation!' If I don't have to work in the Hole, that means I can open a library. I can work there!"

Amar ruffled Rosemary's hair. He stood up, stretched his back, and gazed at the shelves of books around them.

"Now then, dinner's almost ready, but how about we find you a different book about whales? I'm pretty sure there's another one around here somewhere."

Rosemary shook her head. "It's okay. Gabriel said that he wanted to come over later to try and fix it. Is that okay, Dad?"

Amar grinned at her. "I think that's an excellent idea."



Twenty-five years later, thirty-two-year-old Rosemary tiptoed out from the backroom inside her and Gabriel's bookstore, gently closing the door behind her. Little Holly had finally gone to sleep in their cramped bedroom, lying in her bassinet and whistling out of her nose like an old man. Rosemary smiled as she shut the door.

She had work to do.

In the main room of the bookstore, Gabriel and Amar were waiting for her. The shelves that had once adorned her father's house were now all here, twice as tall and with twice as many volumes lining them. Every book that was unearthed from the Hole came here, to be repaired by Gabriel's magic hands, as Rosemary liked to call them. The way he lovingly cleaned them up, made their dirt-crusting pages shine like new, it was nothing short of a miracle.

Most people in town were too scared of the bookstore to spend any time inside it. They'd drop off what they found and then slowly back away outside, their eyes darting around the shelves as if being watched by demons. Rosemary and Gabriel offered any book in the store out for free as a loan, but so far no one had ever taken up the offer. The only way books left the store was in the hands of travelers and merchants who bought them, people not as blindly devout as those in New Darien, who were eager to add them to their collections.

It wasn't quite the library that Rosemary had dreamed of, but she didn't mind. Up until Holly was born, working in the bookstore was the only thing that gave her and Gabriel hope for the future. It was the only thing they looked forward to after working their shifts every day in the Hole.

The front windows let in nothing but darkness from

outside. The only light in the store came from a single glass lantern on the register desk. Like every other surface, it was covered in books, some of them waiting to be repaired, some of them waiting to be bought, all of them waiting to be loved.

In front of the desk, Gabriel stood tall in his gray mining uniform. Rosemary loved every inch of him, from his messy brown hair to his bright sky-blue eyes behind his bone-rim glasses. But most of all, and even Rosemary knew this was a little strange, she loved his fingertips, always so delicate with everything they touched. Whether it was a book he was fixing, pages he was turning, little Holly he was holding, or even Rosemary herself, his touch was smooth as polished stone, soft as a cloud. A shame they had to spend most of their time grasping a shovel.

Next to Gabriel, Amar looked old. The years of working day in day out in the Hole had started to catch up to him. His hair had grayed, and while he was still strong, the flesh on his arms had begun to sag. The wrinkles under his eyes cast shadows on his face from the light of the lantern.

“Thanks for coming, Dad,” Rosemary said.

Amar crossed his arms. “Well, out with it already. What did you want to talk about that you couldn’t have just told me in the Hole?”

The door to the shop creaked open. All heads turned to a man walking in, dressed in a strange outfit. He had a gold helmet with two curved horns on each side, a green bandana covering his mouth and nose, and a shining golden cape that fluttered around him. He gently closed the door behind him and nodded to Gabriel and Rosemary.

“Good evening,” he said in a deep voice.



“What do you think you’re doing?” Amar hissed in a whisper. He flicked the man’s helmet with his fingers. “You’re wearing Iltech around town! Do you know what would happen if you were caught? If you were caught with *us*?”

“Dad,” Rosemary said, “this is Helmut. He’s with the Reactors.”

Amar’s face went completely pale. “You can’t be serious. The Reactors want to take down the Church! We can’t have them here in our town.”

“On the contrary,” Gabriel said, “we need them here more than anywhere. Our town is dying, Amar. And the Reactors will help us breathe life back into it.”

Before Amar could protest, Helmut stepped forward.

“I apologize for the late introduction,” he said. “My name is Helmut. I’m from Salem, and I’m here to help your town. New Darien is ripe for a revolution against the Church. If we can land a blow on them here, then we can start to topple the entire system.”

Amar’s mouth trembled as if he was at a loss for words. Rosemary stepped in to seize the moment.

“I’m sorry we didn’t tell you earlier,” she said. “But it’s safer this way. For now, the fewer people who know, the better.”

“Then why are you even telling me?” he asked. “I wish I didn’t know!”

“Because we need your help,” Gabriel said. “We need somewhere to meet. And this place,” he waved his hand around the bookstore, “it won’t work. The Church is already suspicious of us, with our books that are one step away from Iltech. If we bring Reactors here, we’ll be caught in a week.”

“We want to use your house, Dad,” Rosemary said. Then, seeing the horror in her father’s eyes, quickly added, “The cellar of your house. The Reactors will dig a tunnel from the forest to the cellar, then we can have meetings there. They can sneak into town, and we can come visit you to meet with them. No one will suspect anything if we can meet there.”

“You can’t be serious!” Amar said. “No, we can’t do this. This is insanity. No Reactors. No revolution. We just need to work hard, play by the rules, and we’ll be fine.”

Gabriel shook his head. “How many others thought the same? How many others died working hard and playing by the rules? Working for decades in the Hole and then having an accident or working themselves to death before they got their Wish?”

“And the Church hasn’t been playing by the rules either,” Rosemary added. “The ‘red X’ that Erelim told us to find, it’s the mark of the legendary ANGEL weapon. They want it for themselves.”

Amar grumbled. “Now you’re going on about those ANGEL weapons again. You don’t even know what they are!”

This time Helmut answered. “We do know what they are. They’re weapons so powerful that a single person could annihilate an entire town. And the legendary one has the power to destroy the world.”

Amar shrugged awkwardly. “That can’t be true. None of it can. If it was, then people would be revolting in the streets against the Church.”

“When?” Gabriel asked, biting down hard. “When would they be doing that? No one has time to rebel here. We’re all too busy being worked to the bone! The only way

we have any hope of changing anything is with the help of the Reactors.”

“No,” Amar said. “The only way we have any hope of changing anything is by playing it safe and having me make my Wish.” Amar put his hands on Rosemary’s shoulders and gripped tight. “You have a child now. Think about Holly. You have to keep her safe and happy.”

Rosemary clasped her father’s hands and slid them off. “Safe and happy are sometimes two different things.”

“And we *are* thinking about Holly,” Gabriel said. “She’s the whole reason we’re doing this. You tell me, Amar. Are you satisfied with your life? Spending all day every day digging in the Hole, finding trinkets for the Church? Would you be happy if Holly led the same life you’ve lived?”

Finally, they’d gotten through to Amar. His expression cracked like it’d been smashed by a stone hammer. He blinked long and hard, rubbed his forehead, and looked up to the ceiling with red eyes.

“But what if somebody finds out?” he asked.

A smile crept up Rosemary’s cheeks. “We’ve kept your secret for twenty-five years. I think it’s time you let us have our own.”

Amar slowly and silently shook his head, sucking in a deep breath through his nose. Then, he stopped, letting it all out in one syllable.

“Fine,” he said. “You can build your tunnel to my cellar. You can have your meetings there. I’ll even try and round up some things for Holly, keep her occupied while you’re doing whatever you do.” Gabriel nodded and Rosemary ran up to wrap her arms around her father. He put out a hand to stop

her. “But please, I’m begging you, don’t try anything until I make my Wish. It’s the only way to save this town without anyone getting hurt.”

“Agreed,” Helmut said. “We’ll start work on the tunnel tonight.”

Rosemary tried to smile, but it didn’t work. She’d expected to feel relieved if they convinced Amar. Instead all she felt was a dark curtain drawn over their lives, covering up their secret from the rest of town.



Five years later, thirty-seven-year-old Rosemary’s heart was racing as she stood outside the bookstore. Gabriel was next to her, and Holly was in front, clasped in her arms. Rosemary and Gabriel had both heard the sounds of talkative crowds outside and went out to look, only to see a group of Holy Police marching down the road.

Everyone was standing outside their homes and shops, or peeking out the windows. The Holy Police almost never came through town like this. They usually spent their days supervising the Hole. In New Darien, everyone was either too busy, too poor, or too pious to even think about owning Iltech. So why were they here now?

Rosemary tried not to think about the worst-case scenario: that they were coming for her and Gabriel. But that was impossible. Even after five years of working with the Reactors, progress had been much slower than they’d expected. It had taken a full year just to construct the tunnel

and begin their meetings, which they couldn't have too often for fear of looking suspicious. They had to be so careful about who they tried to recruit, spending months slowly talking to people to see if they were trustworthy. Trying to talk about the Reactors during their shifts in the Hole was impossible; if the Holy Police overheard them, they were done for.

Thankfully they had another option: the bookstore. Anyone who came in and didn't immediately run away was already a candidate. Rosemary and Gabriel would ask them what they thought about working in the Hole, what they thought about the Church, and if they'd ever heard of the Reactors. If their eyes turned to terror, then Rosemary and Gabriel would play it off as a joke. If they were curious, then Gabriel would give them one of the leaflets he'd made. It was a single piece of green paper, easily foldable and concealable, that explained who the Reactors were and what they wanted.

Gabriel had made the leaflets using an incredible piece of Iltech given to him by the Reactors. It was a metal tablet with a screen that you could draw anything on with the simple swipe of a plastic pen. Every color imaginable, every conceivable brush stroke, more fonts for words than there were even words in the dictionary. And all he had to do was put in a piece of paper for it to print out exactly like he'd made it. Gabriel giggled like a little boy every time he used it. Rosemary loved seeing him put his fingers to use for something that wasn't digging.

So far everyone who'd been given a leaflet had shown up at the secret meetings. The only exception was Uncle Castor, Amar's twin brother. He'd seemed enthusiastic about changing the town up until Gabriel had given him a leaflet;

then he'd turned pale and left. Still, he was Rosemary's uncle. Not him or any of the other members would let their secret out. That thought gave Rosemary some comfort.

Until she saw the Guardians.

Mother Simona and Mother Thadi strolled behind the tail end of the Holy Police. They received Sparrow prayer-gestures from those they passed. Mother Thadi gave light bows back, but Mother Simona stared straight ahead as they marched. She was holding something in her arms. It looked like a Holy Police crossbow, but it was red with a silver tip. Rosemary had heard of the weapon before from the Reactors: it was a magnet-bow, designed to disable and suck up Iltech.

Rosemary didn't want to believe it, but she had no choice once the Guardians' faces were close enough to see. They were marching right to the bookstore.

Gabriel leaned into Rosemary's ear and whispered, "What do we do? That bow could find the tablet."

"Everything will be fine," Rosemary said. "The bow won't work through the wood floor. We need to take a page out of Dad's book. Just play by the rules. We'll be okay."

Despite sounding strong, Rosemary was terrified. She gripped little Holly harder. Mother Simona and Mother Thadi stomped right up to her and Gabriel. The army of Holy Police stood silent behind them.

"We've heard reports about propaganda for the Reactors terrorist group being spread here," Mother Thadi spoke calmly. "Can you confirm this?"

Mother Thadi was so straight to the point it knocked Rosemary off guard. Suddenly she couldn't speak. She couldn't breathe. Thankfully Gabriel somehow remained

calm, talking clearly and without a trace of fear in his voice.

"I'm sorry, Mother Thadi," he said, "but I don't know what you mean. I've never even heard of the Reactors."

Mother Simona stepped forward, cradling the red and silver magnet-bow.

"Don't play dumb with us, boy," she said, her words sharp as shards of ice. "Holy Police, search the bookstore."

The Holy Police pushed their way inside, past Gabriel and Rosemary. The Guardians stood watch. Mother Thadi kept an eye on what was going on indoors. Mother Simona's gaze didn't budge from Gabriel and Rosemary.

"Mommy?" Holly asked, looking up to Rosemary. "What's going on?"

"It'll be fine," Rosemary said, patting Holly on the head. "Just stay quiet for now."

The Holy Police ripped the books off the shelves, tossed them in a pile on the ground, and yanked the shelves away from the walls. Every thud of a book against the floor gripped Rosemary's heart. She hoped that, when this was over, the books would all be okay.

After an eternity of searching, one of the Holy Police came out and stood before the Guardians.

"There's nothing here," she said. "We checked every book, every shelf, even their bedroom too."

Simona hissed and rolled her eyes. "Step aside."

She shoved her way past the Holy Police into the bookstore, armed the red and silver magnet-bow, and aimed it at the walls of the shop. She pulled the trigger, sending an electric tingle through the air that made the hairs on Rosemary's arms stand on end.

*THUD.*

A heavy, metallic bump came from beneath Mother Simona's feet. Apparently the magnet-bow *did* work through the wood floor.

Mother Simona bent down and pressed her gloved hand against the flooring. She slipped her fingers into the cracks, yanked up a floorboard, and smiled like a child getting a surprise dessert.

"Well what do we have here?" She reached into the opening and pulled out a fistful of Reactor leaflets in one hand, and the Iltech tablet in the other. All Rosemary could do was watch, ice scraping through her veins.

Mother Simona marched triumphantly out of the bookstore, holding the tablet and green papers above her head like spoils of war.

"This is nothing but Reactor propaganda!" she bellowed. "A group dedicated to slandering lies against the Church! I ask you, loyal citizens of New Darien, why would someone have these things if they didn't want to destroy our beautiful town, our faithful way of life?"

A hundred people stood around, looking on in terror, whispering to each other. Among them were Amar, Castor, the Lindens and their teenage son, and a few of the others Gabriel and Rosemary had managed to recruit. All of them unable to do anything except watch.

"For too long, we've put up with this so-called 'book store' in our town!" Mother Simona continued. "What are books, but one step away from Iltech? What other books do we need, except for the Book of Metl? It is the only book that has the truth in it. All others must be destroyed for spreading lies!"



Mother Simona cocked her head to Mother Thadi.

“Do it,” she said.

Mother Thadi shook her head. “We don’t need to do this, Simona.”

“I said, *do it!*”

Mother Thadi closed her eyes, lowered her head, and raised her gloved palms up to the sky.

“O Great Gotama,” Thadi spoke, all emotion sapped from her voice. “Is there a sinner in this town? If so, show us with a sign.”

The words had barely left her lips as a heat wave blew through the crowd. Rosemary stepped back, pulling Holly with her, shielding her from the heat.

The bookstore was in flames.

In an instant, the entire building was engulfed by a raging inferno. The wooden structure swirled in blood-red fire; black smoke spewed off the top. Cracks and creaks came from within as the wooden frames snapped. Worst of all, Rosemary saw the books, their pages burning, crying out in pain as they fluttered like embers in the breeze, disintegrating into the wind.

“No! This is too much!” came a voice from the crowd. Uncle Castor came running up to the Guardians. “Mother Thadi, Mother Simona! It wasn’t supposed to be like this!”

Rosemary was too shocked to say anything. Her voice was gone, as if burned away with the bookstore. Gabriel spoke up for her, his eyes smoldering.

“*You?*” he spat. “You were the one who betrayed us to the Church?”

Castor put his hands out defensively and backed away. “I ... I didn’t think this would happen! I thought they’d just

talk some sense into you.”

Before anyone could say anything, Mother Simona grabbed Gabriel by the wrist and yanked his hand up high.

“Thank you, Castor Flint, for your service,” she said. “My whole life, I’ve done nothing but try to keep our town in Gotama’s good graces. Now it’s time for Gotama to show everyone in New Darien what happens to those who go against him!”

“Everyone!” Gabriel yelled to the crowd. “We don’t have to live like this! We can rise up against the Church and—”

It happened so fast. A flash of cold, then suddenly Gabriel was ice. From hand to foot, his frozen body shimmered in the morning light, silent as a statue, his arm still up high. The bone-rimmed glasses sat on top of his frozen nose.

Rosemary screamed in silence. Holly unlatched herself from her leg. She ran to her frozen father, smacking her palms against his rock-hard, icy exterior.

“Daddy!” she cried. “Daddy, no!”

“Holly,” Mother Simona crooned. “Your parents have been very bad. So now Mother Thadi and I are adopting you. You will come live with us. Now I’m your mommy.”

Holly turned and pounded Mother Simona’s legs with her little fists. Tears streamed down her face as she screamed.

“Turn Daddy back! Turn him back now!”

Mother Simona reached down and clasped Holly’s fists with one hand. She shook her head and clicked her tongue in disapproval.

“That’s no way to treat your mother, Holly. You’re being a bad girl. Just like your old parents. And since you’ve been bad, I’ll have to do something to make you listen.”

She released Holly's hands and grabbed onto Rosemary's arms. Rosemary was still in shock from what had happened. The bookstore. Gabriel. All she could do was gasp as Mother Simona wrapped her gloved hands around her wrists.

"Remember, Holly," Mother Simona said. "This is all your fault."

Rosemary's arms went numb. Starting from her fingers, then her forearms, then her elbows. It felt like icicles dragging along her skin, erasing all warmth and feeling. When she looked down, the horror was even worse. Ice was slowly creeping along the outside of her arms, engulfing her the same way it had Gabriel.

"No!" Holly screamed. She tugged at Mother Simona's black cloak. "Please! Stop!"

Mother Simona grinned at her. "Call me mommy, Holly. Call me mommy and I'll stop."

"Mommy, stop!" Holly cried. "Please, Mommy! Stop hurting ... her!"

Mother Simona let go of Rosemary's arms. They were frozen up to her shoulders. As soon as she released her, Rosemary collapsed to the ground, the weight of her ice arms too much to bear. She lay sideways, breathing hard and staring wide-eyed into space. Mother Simona squatted down next to Holly and whispered into her ear.

"If you ever disobey me again, I'll finish the job."

Holly didn't respond. She sucked in her tears. Mother Simona stood up, patted Holly on the back, and raised her hands up high.

"The Great Gotama has spoken!" she announced. "Since our holy town has never before had the need for a Home

for Nobodies, Mother Thadi and I will adopt the innocent child and give her a new home to save her tainted soul. Let this serve as a lesson to anyone else thinking of working with illegal, blasphemous groups. Now, back to work, everyone! Scavenge wide, soar high.”

Some in the crowd mumbled Mother Simona’s final words back to her, but most were pale with fright. Mother Simona paid them no care. She marched away from the smoking building, now nothing more than a sizzling scorch, and the Holy Police followed behind her. Mother Thadi gave a mournful look at Rosemary before leaving, taking Holly’s shaking hand and leading her away.

Once the Guardians were gone, Amar ran from the crowd to Rosemary. He yelled for help. A few sympathetic Sparrows helped him carry Rosemary to the town doctor. The whole way there, Rosemary was in shock, unable to speak.

Eight years later, she’s barely spoken. And Holly never disobeyed her Mothers again.

## Chapter 12

### The Last Wish

Caden's vision snapped and fizzled. The back of his head pounded like a ringing bellrock. Everything was black. Then gray. Then colors started drizzling in. The room was shaking. In front of him, Annika was mouthing words.

"... okay ... Caden?" she asked, sounding far away.

The ringing disappeared with a pop. Caden's view snapped back, crystal clear. Their dinner of bread and soup lay untouched in front of the fireplace. Rosemary sat in her chair, staring at Caden, mildly interested in what was wrong with him.

Seeing Rosemary sent a flood of memories through Caden. All that he'd just seen, her as a child, as an adult, and then ... was it all real?

"Did you see that?" Caden asked. He turned to Annika. Just the slight movement brought a searing headache. He winced and pressed a hand against the throbbing pain.

"Caden, what's wrong?" Annika looked him over. "You blacked out for a second there. You weren't moving."

"You didn't see it?" Caden asked. Annika shook her head. That only meant one thing: it had happened in his head. But

why? Did it have something to do with his ANGEL weapon? He'd never seen anything like that before. And was any of it true? Or was it just something his brain made up?

Caden's eyes locked on Rosemary. A chill ran through him. Her sky-blue gloves. The bits of straw sticking out. Her weird cooking. Now it all made sense.

"You don't have arms, do you?" Caden said, barely above a whisper. "Simona froze them off, didn't she?"

Rosemary's face drained of color. She looked at Caden with wide-eyed horror, as if the scene he'd just witnessed was playing again in her head.

"Caden," Annika said. "What are you talking about?"

Caden ignored her and kept speaking to Rosemary. "Simona froze Gabriel too, and stole Holly from you, didn't she?"

Rosemary's lip trembled. "I ... I couldn't do anything ..."

Caden's heart beat faster as he realized everything he'd seen was real. "Amar's twin brother Castor turned you in to the Church. That's what Amar meant when he said Castor owed him. Castor was supposed to make Amar's Wish yesterday, for everyone in New Darien to go free."

Caden stopped. One terrible piece of the puzzle fell into place.

"Rosemary," he said. "Amar and Castor, they're twin brothers, right?"

Rosemary meekly nodded, as if scared of Caden's words.

"But Castor said he was the older brother."

"Castor's older by one day," Rosemary said softly. "He was born ... before midnight. Dad was born ... after."

Caden swallowed hard. "Does that mean Amar started

working in the Hole one day after Castor?”

Again, Rosemary nodded. Caden’s heart dropped into the pit of his stomach. If Amar had started working in the Hole one day after Castor, then that meant Amar was going to get his Wish one day after Castor too. Today.

Now Caden knew what Amar and Holly had meant when they said everything would be fine after today. Amar was going to Wish for everyone in New Darien to be free, which would release everyone from prison—including Barron and Caden too if he had still been in the church jail. But there was a reason Castor hadn’t made that Wish.

Because he knew that if he did, there was no chance he’d survive the Guardians’ wrath.

Outside the curtained windows, the sound of Sparrow crowds was growing, all of them walking toward the town common. They sounded exhausted, grumbling to each other after spending all last night and today searching for Caden, and now having to drag themselves toward the stage where Castor had made his Wish the day before. Because Amar would be making his Wish there any minute.

Yesterday’s events flashed through Caden’s mind. How he could’ve saved Remi if only he’d used his ANGEL weapon better. How he could’ve saved Mr. Linden if he’d been more careful. How he could’ve saved Mikaela by taking down Simona faster. He wasn’t going to let someone else get hurt while he stood around and did nothing!

“I have to go to Amar,” Caden said. “I have to stop him from making his Wish!”

He made a move to leave, but Annika grabbed him by the arm.

“Caden, stop!” She was looking him up and down like he’d gone crazy. “What are you doing? And what do you mean Amar’s Wish?”

Caden didn’t have time to explain. He didn’t know how long he had until the ceremony started. He had to leave now!

“Annika, I have to go!” Caden shrugged her off and descended into the cellar. He clapped his hands loudly, snapping Deber to attention. She trotted up and down in the corner, anxious for anything that sounded like fun after being cooped up. Caden grabbed her reins and led her up the staircase. Her hooves weren’t made to walk on steps, but she wobbled her way up, a little more quickly than she would’ve liked with Caden’s pulling. As soon as all four of Deber’s legs were on the upstairs floor, she let out a whinny of joy, happy to be above ground again.

Annika’s mouth was open aghast. She clasped onto Deber’s reins. “Caden, stop!”

“Let go!”

“Not until you tell me what the steel you’re doing.”

Caden groaned. He didn’t have time for this. “Fine. Listen. I don’t know how it happened, or why, but I saw into Rosemary’s past ... somehow. I think it was with my ANGEL weapon. And I saw Simona freeze Rosemary’s husband, and freeze her arms, and steal Holly from them. And now Amar’s going to Wish for everyone in town to be free, and Simona’s going to freeze him too! I have to stop him, so let go!”

Annika blinked in bewilderment. “Okay, even if that all happened, and you didn’t hallucinate or whatever, it doesn’t matter. Amar told us to stay here. He said that by tonight, everything would be fine.”



“He’s wrong!” Caden’s blood was boiling. Every second that passed was another second lost. “He thinks his Wish is going to solve everything, but he’s wrong. He’s spent fifty years convincing himself that his Wish will save the town without anyone getting hurt, but he can’t see the danger that he’s in himself!”

Annika still looked overwhelmed by all this new, suspect information. “Even if that’s all true, it’s not anything you have to worry about, Caden. You said it yourself: Amar has worked fifty years for this. He knows what he’s doing.”

“Three people have already lost their lives because of me, Annika!” Caden couldn’t stop. The thoughts he’d been suppressing for months reared their ugly heads. “And hundreds of others back in Salem, in the Basement. You think I don’t think about that every day? About how all these horrible things happen just because I exist? Well I do! And I’m not going to wait here and do nothing and let it happen again.”

Annika stared at him in shock. “You’re really going to do this, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” Caden said, never more sure of anything in his life.

Annika sighed. “Well, I guess that means I’m going too. Someone needs to make sure you only do one stupid thing today.”

Adrenaline surged through Caden. Not wanting to waste another moment, he and Annika pulled Deber to the front door.

“Wait!” came the voice of Rosemary. It was the first time Caden had heard her say anything above a whisper. She was standing in the doorway to the living room, leaning against the frame for balance, her face red and her breathing heavy.

Her straw-stuffed gloves dangled by her sides. “Leave from ... the back door. It’s easier to ... stay hidden.”

Caden nodded in thanks. He hadn’t been looking forward to riding through the crowded streets. If there was a less conspicuous way to town, then all the better.

He and Annika led Deber back through what looked like a kitchen. There were smooth marble counters and wooden cupboards, but most importantly a wide glass door leading to the backyard. Caden had assumed it was just a window, but close up he could see the handle. He slid it open and stepped outside with Deber and Annika, closing it back up behind them.

The backs of the neighboring houses were empty. Most were fields of overgrown grass, dead in the winter cold, bordering a forest. Far ahead, Caden could make out downtown New Darien and the top of the Sparrow church. As long as they stayed in the backyards, they might stay hidden the whole way there.

Caden mounted Deber, and Annika leaped up behind, holding onto his waist. He gave Deber a squeeze with his knees and, quietly yet forcefully, ordered her to go.

“Let’s run, girl!”

Deber pounded the ground to a full gallop. She neighed with happiness to be outside again, but Caden patted her on the neck, telling her now was not the time. The sound of her running was loud enough. They didn’t need any more noises to give them away.

Caden stayed in the backyards as long as possible, but that cover ended once they arrived downtown. He rode hidden behind the shops, keeping off the main road. He tried

to keep his eye on the Sparrow church to guide them, but it was nearly impossible. It kept getting covered up by tall trees or buildings, and whenever Caden finally found it again, he had to slow Deber down and change direction. Those few seconds could mean the difference between making it on time and ... not.

Finally, they reached the edge of the town center. They stopped in a rock quarry behind a stonemith shop, just far enough away from the green common surrounding the church not to be noticed. The same crowd that had gathered yesterday for Castor's Wish was already there, though significantly quieter and more fatigued.

And in front of them all, poised on stage, was Amar.

Caden's heart sank. He was too late. Amar stood inside the tall wooden frame, feathered wings prepped on each side. Five Holy Police guarded the front of the stage, all of them holding up relics of Gotama. Two of them held books, one of them had a small computer, and the last two were carrying what looked like boxes of playing cards. Right next to Amar were Simona and Thadi. Thadi was standing calmly, but Simona's eyes were slits and her arms were crossed, as if she couldn't wait to get this over with and go back to searching for Caden. She was probably itching for revenge after he'd used her own ice to freeze her last night.

It was now or never. Caden gave Deber a kick, telling her to run as fast as she could. If they were quick, maybe they stood a chance!

But one trot in, Deber's hooves scraped to a halt. Behind Caden, Annika had squeezed Deber with her legs, telling her to stop.

“Annika!” Caden seethed. “What are you doing?”

She grabbed his shoulder. “Caden. Stop. This is the reason I came with you. To stop you from doing something even more stupid than what you’re already doing.”

“But Amar’s going to—”

“Caden, if you go galloping into that crowd, we’ll be turned to ice before you even make it halfway to Amar.” Caden tried to protest, but she shoved her hand over his mouth. “Stop. You really want to save Amar? Then stay here. Watch what happens. If things go sour, then you can use your power from here. Otherwise you’ll only make things worse for him.”

Caden knew she was right, but that didn’t change the fact that he hated it. He jerked his head, shaking off her hand, and turned to watch the ceremony, nervousness lodging itself deeper in his stomach by the second.

Thadi addressed the crowd. “All of these lost relics of Gotama were uncovered thanks to Amaryllis’s hard work. He has scavenged wide these past fifty years. Now, it is time for him to soar high.”

There was a smattering of tired applause.

“Amaryllis Flint,” Thadi continued, “have you decided on your Wish?”

“Yes,” Amar said

“And what is it?”

“I Wish that ...”

Caden clenched his teeth. Please Wish for something else, he begged. Please let him be okay!

“I Wish that ...” Amar stood tall and strong, as if nothing were wrong. “I Wish for everyone in New Darien to be free!”

Silence. There was no applause. Thadi's mouth fell open. Simona's eyes grew wide as she stood frozen. But Amar didn't care. He beamed to the crowd, threw open his arms, and bellowed.

"My fellow Sparrows! Scavenge wide, soar high ... is that not our motto? And yet, tell me, do we scavenge wide these days? No. Most of us have never left the confines of this town. Do we soar high? No. Most of us spend the better part of our lives digging underground. The opposite of what we Sparrows should be doing!

"Which is why I say, enough is enough. Yes, our ancestors betrayed Gotama. And yes, I remember what happened forty years ago during the Hatching. Many of you were not alive back then, but Erelim attacking was the most terrifying event our town has ever experienced. I lost my wife, and we were all humbled into submission. But that was four decades ago, my brothers and sisters. Does Gotama truly want us to spend eternity digging in the Hole? I think not.

"On the day of the Hatching, Erelim spoke to us and said that we must dig until we find the red X. Well look up to the sky, my fellow Sparrows! Look up to Metl and see the red X for yourselves! Are our wings so clipped, are our feathers so battered that we are afraid to even look up anymore?

"I say this is a sign that our digging is over. It was all meant to be, my fellow Sparrows! Metl nearly crashed into us, but then it stopped and went back into the sky. Just like Erelim nearly destroyed us, but then stopped and changed our town forever. This is a sign that our town must change yet again. Not through revolution. Not through violence. But through the benevolence of Gotama, showing us that

our work here is done by allowing me to make this Wish.

“But I will continue to dig! And anyone who wants to voluntarily devote their lives to digging in the Hole, as it used to be, is welcome to join me. Everyone else, however, those who have been jailed inside the church, those who want to pursue lives as farmers, merchants, artisans, or anything else, and still have free time to enjoy the other virtues that life has to offer, go ahead. Because now, with my Wish, you are free!”

Amar thrust his arms into the wings and looked to the sky, ready to be hoisted up like his brother. His eyes glowed, expecting to take in the sight of the entire town shouting for joy.

All he got was silence. Every face in the crowd was shocked, concerned, disgusted. Whispers and murmurs spread as some shook their heads.

Simona put her hand on Amar’s shoulder. He didn’t even notice, didn’t even move, as the ice spread over his body. Within a second, Amar was a frozen statue, twinkling in the setting sun.

Caden cried out, but his scream was drowned away by the crowd’s gasps. If he used his power, if he started riding Deber now, then maybe he could get to Amar in time and still be able to—

Simona lifted up one of her legs, revealing the spiked sole of her boot. She slammed it against Amar, smashing his frozen body into a million icy pieces.

## Chapter 13

### Not Playing Safe

Caden's heart shattered. He'd failed. Someone who'd fed him, comforted him, hidden him in his own home knowing the dangers to his own safety, was gone. And he hadn't done anything.

But he'd tried! He'd gotten here as quickly as he could. He was about to charge in to save Amar when ... Annika had stopped him.

Anger flared inside Caden. This was all Annika's fault. If she hadn't come, if she hadn't held him back, if she hadn't made him waste precious seconds explaining, then maybe he could've saved Amar! Caden ground his teeth. He wanted Annika off his horse. He wanted her gone.

He was about to turn around and face her when Simona stepped forward on the stage.

"My children!" she bellowed to the crowd. Everyone flinched at her words, still in shock from having seen her smash Amar. "Fear not what you have seen here today. This man was a liar and a traitor. His daughter and son-in-law were both Reactors, and he didn't deserve his Wish.

"Mother Thadi and I, in our mercy, allowed him one

final chance to redeem himself. As the last Hole worker to be blessed with a Wish, we'd hoped that we would bring the long-held New Darien tradition to an honorable end. And how did he thank us? By making the most abhorrent Wish imaginable! By Wishing for us to do the very thing that caused Erelim to lash out at our town in the first place. And now Gotama has granted him his due justice.

"But no more, my children! The time has come for us to finally weed out those from our town who want nothing more than to see it destroyed. When Reactors think they can freely come into our home and cause terror by parading Iltech through our streets, the time for leniency is over. Let's show them what we're really made of!"

Cheers erupted from the crowd. There were no more scared or shocked faces, just righteous anger. A chant of "scavenge wide, soar high" started as a whisper and grew to a crescendo. Simona smiled as if she'd won a bloody battle.

"Now we must take action, my children!" she shouted. "You've been searching all night and day to find the so-called 'King Caden,' and you have done a commendable job. Now I must ask you to continue this labor. The sooner we find the sinner and bring him to justice, the sooner our town can return to the peaceful place it was. We will not allow the Reactors to control us! We will not let them destroy our way of life!"

The crowd shouted their agreement. Angry Sparrows marched away from the church common, dispersing through town and darting their eyes in every direction, ready to pounce on anything slightly out of the ordinary.

Caden didn't care if he got caught. He was going to



ride Deber right through them and up to the Guardians himself, doing whatever damage he could before they took him down. But Deber had other plans. She slowly inched backward behind the stonemith building, hiding deeper in the shadows of the rock quarry. Caden signaled to her to gallop, but she ignored it. He turned back to see Annika telling Deber to retreat, giving her light squeezes with her legs.

“Get off my horse,” Caden growled.

Annika’s face stiffened. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Caden glared at her. For the first time, Annika was not a friend.

“I could’ve saved Amar if it wasn’t for you. I could’ve made it in time. I could’ve stopped them.”

“Caden, you don’t know what you’re talking about. As soon as Amar stepped on that stage, it was over. He knew it better than anyone, but he was prepared for the risk.”

“I was prepared for the risk too!” Caden’s breathing was heavy. His heart was racing. Annika was wasting his time again. “Get off my horse. Now!”

Annika stayed put. “If the only thing stopping you from charging out there is me on Deber, then I’m not going anywhere.”

“I’m going to do it anyway,” Caden said. “This is your last chance to get off.”

“Oh yeah? And what are you going to accomplish, Caden? Get yourself frozen, get me and Deber killed, all for what? So you can have five seconds of revenge?”

“It’s better than letting them think they can get away with this!”

“And then what, Caden? You never get to talk to Barron. You never get to find your father. I never get to find my dad.”

Caden had had enough. He’d reached his limit. “I don’t care about your dad, Annika! That’s *your* revenge. This is *mine*. And I’m going to take it, with or without you.”

He’d hurt her, and he knew it. Annika’s bottom lip shook. She shifted to the side. She looked ready to jump off Deber and leave Caden to do whatever he wanted. Ready to part ways ... permanently.

“Caden ...” came a voice.

The back door to the stonemason building creaked open, and standing in the doorway was Holly. Her face was wet with tears, but she wasn’t crying. She held herself straight and tall. Her eyes were red, her cheeks were flushed, and her fists were curled hard as stone.

“What are you doing here?” Caden asked.

“I was hiding, watching out the window in case ... Grandpa’s plan didn’t work.” She sniffed hard and narrowed her eyes. “I always thought there was a chance his Wish wouldn’t be granted. But I never thought that ...”

However bad Caden was feeling, Holly had it a hundred times worse. She’d now lost two family members to the Guardians, three including her mother. She’d spent her life being obedient, never making a single mistake, even turning in Caden with the hope that her grandfather’s fifty years of devotion would pay off. And now here she was, broken, with no one left.

Her eyes snapped to Caden with a ferocity that nearly made him jump.

“I’m ready,” she said. “I’m done playing safe. I want to

hurt them. I want to hurt them as much as they've hurt me. As much as they've hurt my grandpa. And my mom. And my dad. I know you don't know about them but—"

"I know what happened," Caden said.

Holly looked at him surprised. "How?"

"I saw it using my power," he said quickly. "But I'm ready if you are. We can charge them. I can use my ANGEL weapon and maybe take down Simona before she realizes what's going on." Annika shook her head, but Caden ignored her. This was up to Holly now.

"I have a different idea," Holly said. "I think I know a way we can defeat the Guardians."

"What is it?" Caden asked.

"We need Barron. He knows all about you, Caden. He's the one who taught me not to be scared of you like everyone else. If anyone knows how you can beat them, it's him."

Caden liked any idea that meant meeting Barron again. But there was one problem.

"How do we get to him?" he asked. "The church is surrounded by Holy Police."

Holly smirked. She reached into her gray uniform and pulled out two sets of wooden handcuffs.

"I have a plan for that."



Caden, Annika, and Holly stayed hidden in the stonemith quarry. The rest of New Darien's populace was teeming through the streets, spreading out to the edges of town and into the

woods. They must've figured that if King Caden was hiding somewhere, he wouldn't dare be anywhere close to the church. That misunderstanding bought Caden a lot of extra time.

The three of them waited until the Guardians had left the church area, taking most of the Holy Police with them. Then they waited as the Sparrows trickled away. Finally, only a dozen Holy Police remained guarding the church entrance.

That was when Holly put the wooden handcuffs on Caden and Annika.

Her plan was simple. She'd lead Caden, Annika, and Deber to the church, pretend she'd captured them, and bring them upstairs to Barron. By the time the Guardians showed up, hopefully Barron would tell Caden how to beat them, and they could blast them away.

Caden was excited by Holly's plan, but Annika was silent and scowling. She hadn't said a word since he'd yelled at her. He thought about apologizing, but there really wasn't anything to apologize about; she was the one who was wrong. And the fact that she was going along with them now probably meant that she was okay.

With the town center eerily quiet, Holly took one last peek outside the quarry, to make sure the coast was clear. She signaled to Caden and Annika to follow. The two of them, along with Deber, marched onto the common.

Caden did his best to look defeated, as if Holly had actually found and arrested him. Annika was doing the same, her head low, eyes focused as if she was contemplating the mistakes that had led her to this moment. It was quite effective.

They marched across the frosty grass. When they reached

the base of the church's stone steps, two Holy Police came marching down to them.

"Holly," said one of them gruffly. "Where have you been? The Guardians have been looking for you."

"I've been busy," she said, brushing away his concern. He glanced at her two prisoners and his mouth fell open.

"Isn't that the boy everyone's looking for?"

"I told you I was busy. While everyone else was running around, I was out actually capturing King Caden and his accomplice."

The other Holy Police stepped forward. She glared suspiciously at them. "And how do we know you're not covering for him again? Don't think we forgot your little act in the woods yesterday."

Caden's heart raced in panic, but Holly stayed cool.

"If you had half a brain you'd be doubling your intelligence," she said. The Police narrowed her gaze even more, but Holly didn't flinch. "I wasn't covering for the boy, I was luring him in. If I'd handed him over to you, he would've just blown you to pieces and run off. Instead I brought him right to the Guardians, the ones who were actually capable of subduing him."

The Holy Police didn't look convinced, but she backed off. The other one spoke up again.

"Should we contact the Guardians?" he asked.

Holly shook her head. "No need. I've already done so."

"How?"

Holly raised an eyebrow. "Are you doubting the power of my parents?"

"No," he answered quickly. "Of course not."

“I would hope not. When my mothers arrive, tell them I’m waiting for them in the hall.”

The Holy Police nodded and stepped aside. Holly led Caden, Annika, and Deber up to the giant entrance, ushered them inside, and pulled the doors closed behind them. After looking down the hallways to make sure they were alone, she removed their handcuffs.

“Okay, quick, upstairs,” she said.

Caden gave Deber a quick pat to stay in the hall, and the three of them dashed up the staircase to the top of the church, arriving at the same locked door that Caden had been brought to yesterday. Holly reached into her uniform, pulled out a key, and unlocked it. Barron was standing by a table, tinkering with an Iltech band on his arm. He gasped when he saw them, dropped his tools to the floor, and quickly rolled down his sleeve.

“Holly,” he said. “What’s going on?”

“We don’t have much time,” Holly said. “How can we defeat the Guardians?”

Barron was at a loss for words. “I ... I don’t know. The only weapon up here is the magnetizer that was brought in yesterday.” He gestured toward a box of overflowing Iltech. “It should be somewhere in there.”

“How do you know what a magnetizer is?” Annika hissed. There was a bite to her tone that hadn’t been there before. Barron simply smiled at her.

“Oh, I’d always recognize a Clops invention when I see one. We were good friends in the Basement.”

Annika was already rummaging through the box for her magnetizer. Holly kept pressing Barron for more.

“What about Caden?” she asked. “What can he do with his ANGEL weapon to beat them?”

Barron turned to Caden. Far from giving him any strategic advice, he just stared at him with a giant grin on his face.

“You look just like him,” he said.

“You mean my dad?” Caden asked. Barron nodded. Holly knelt to the ground, unlocked the metal clasp around Barron’s ankle, and pulled the chain away. But Barron didn’t even notice. He was focused entirely on Caden.

“So ... you really did know my dad?” Caden asked.

“Yes,” Barron said.

“Did you help him make me?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know why he made me?”

“Yes.”

Caden was beginning to feel frustrated. “Can you maybe give me a little more than one-word answers?”

“Wait a minute,” Annika said. She’d found her magnetizer and was buckling her charge packs around her waist. “Can’t we just turn on that giant robot by the Hole and defeat the Guardians with it? It destroyed the town before, right? Two Apostles should be easy.”

Holly spoke up first. “No human can activate Erelim. Only Gotama.”

“Seriously?” Annika groaned. “You believe all that Gotama crap?”

“It’s not crap!” Holly said. “Erelim really did attack our town, and it was Gotama powering it.”

Annika rolled her eyes. “Yeah, if you believe that, then there’s a certain metal moon in the sky I’d like to sell you.”

Before Holly could argue back, Barron cleared his throat. “Excuse me. But Gotama wasn’t the one controlling Erelim during the Hatching.”

“What?” Holly said. “But ... of course it was Gotama! It was him punishing us for stopping our digging before we were supposed to.”

Barron sighed. “Two centuries of digging, all to make up for a sin that never even happened. Erelim was never destroyed by the Sparrows. It exploded on its own over two hundred years ago.”

Holly was stuttering. “But then ... why are we digging? What are we doing wasting all of our time?”

Annika cut her off. “Okay, Gotama isn’t real, we get it. But can you or Caden activate Erelim so we can use it to fight the Guardians?”

“I believe so,” Barron said. “Caden should be able to do it. Any ANGEL weapon user should be able to pilot Erelim.”

Annika froze. “*Any* ANGEL weapon user?”

“Most likely. Any ANGEL weapon should be capable of generating enough electricity to power it on.”

At hearing the word “electricity,” Caden and Annika snapped to each other, all animosity evaporating between them. They both uttered the same name at the same time.

“Jadice.”

Before either of them could explain to Holly or Barron, footsteps came running up the stairs. The door flew open, revealing Simona and Thadi, palms glowing and ready. Simona’s eyes grew as she looked over from Annika to Caden to Holly.

“Holly,” she said. “You’ve been a very bad daughter.”



## Chapter 14

### Erelin

Simona's turquoise Xs and Thadi's orange Xs burned brightly. Caden thrust out his palms. Annika aimed her magnetizer. No one made the first move. Both sides faced one another in a standoff. Holly stood next to Caden, fists shaking. Simona snickered at her.

"Well, well. Looks like lying runs in your family, Holly. We'd heard from the Holy Police that you were waiting in the hall with prisoners. We were so proud of you. Why must you disappoint your parents like this?"

"You're *not* my parents!" Holly shouted, eyes locked on Simona. "And I've *always* lied to you. Every smile was a lie. Every laugh was a lie. I even helped Barron lie to you about Caden, so that you couldn't use him to hurt anyone!"

"Holly," Thadi said as calmly as possible. "Please, relax. We don't want to hurt anybody."

"You're lying!" Holly yelled. "If that's what you wanted, then what did you do to Grandpa? And my dad? And my mom? *You're* the liars!"

Thadi didn't answer. Simona clicked her tongue and shook her head.

“Holly dear, you should know better. All those people, they did bad things, so they had to be punished. But you, you were always such a good girl. Until now, that is. So you’ll have to be punished along with them!”

It happened so fast. Simona’s palms. Icy wind. Caden’s Xs. Annika’s magnetizer blast. Everything collided, exploding, knocking the Guardians to the floor and sending Simona’s ice beam hurtling past Holly into the wall. Not wasting a second, Caden, Annika, and Holly ran over to the Guardians, standing over them as they lay on the ground. Annika and Caden held their weapons pointed at them. Thadi was wincing in pain, and Simona was coughing from the debris. Annika was the first to speak.

“Unless you want us to blow your brains out, give us those magnet-cuffs of yours,” she said. “We’ll put them on you and then we’re getting out of—”

*CRASH!*

An earsplitting explosion from outside rattled the room. Iltech clanged to the floor. Books fell from shelves. Caden, Annika, Holly, and Barron collapsed to their knees. Smashes from far away echoed through town.

The battle indoors was forgotten. Everyone struggled to their feet and ran to the staircase window. Once they saw what was outside, they stopped in their tracks.

Erelim, the giant Iltech robot, had crashed into New Darien. It stood ten times taller than any building, its mechanical eyes and mouth glowing white against the rest of its silver-and-rust body. Around its metallic feet, green-clad Reactors came pouring into town on foot and horseback.

The massive robot raised one of its arms and uncurled its

fingers, revealing a glowing blue *X* on its palm. Water gushed out of the *X* like a waterfall, flooding part of the town and devouring Sparrow homes. Erelim raised its other hand, this one with a glowing yellow *X*. It aimed the *X* toward the other side of town and let loose a flurry of lighting that cracked out of its palm to the shops below, sending them up in flames, burning bright against the darkening sky.

Jadice. She was powering Erelim with her two ANGEL weapons. Not that she even needed them. Erelim's massive robot body was more than enough to crush buildings. The robot slowly stomped farther into town, obliterating everything underneath its gigantic metallic feet as if they were paper toys. And crushing any hope Caden had of using Erelim himself.

Just a few terrifying steps into town, Erelim stopped. It raised its two *X*-marked palms. Caden expected it to unleash something even worse. It did; it spoke.

"Sparrows of New Darien!" boomed the voice. Caden's hairs stood on end. Hearing Jadice so loud and powerful made him sick. "Your town is now under control of the Reactor Army! Hand over 'King Caden' and we will stop our attack."

Caden felt five pairs of eyes focus on him. Simona glared as if this was all his fault.

"Well then, it's easy, isn't it?" she said. "Let's hand over the boy and stop this madness."

Thadi shot her a hateful look. "Never! If we give Caden to the Betrayer instead of to One, Erelim will be the least of our worries."

"Well then what do you suggest we do?" Simona asked.

She was holding herself tight, as if trying to hide her fear. “The Betrayer is somehow controlling Erelin. We don’t stand a chance.”

Thadi gripped Simona on the shoulders. “Simona! What is wrong with you? We’re Apostles, for Gotama’s sake! We’re not children anymore. We can defend our town!”

Simona stared back at her, her lip quavering. Caden had no idea why she was nervous, or what Thadi meant by “we’re not children anymore.” Simona shot him a look.

“What about the boy?” she asked Thadi. “We can’t leave him here. He’ll get away.”

Thadi tightened her grip on Simona’s shoulders. “Simona. You loved this town once. I know you did. And if there’s any piece of that love still inside you, you’ll help me defend our home from that monster!”

Simona stood silent for a moment, then pushed Thadi’s hands off her shoulders.

“Fine,” she said. She held a finger to Caden. “But you. Stay put. When this is over, every second I have to spend searching for you will be another icicle through one of your friends.”

Caden had no intention of staying put, or letting Simona hurt anyone, but she didn’t give him a chance to respond. She extended her palms to the staircase window and unleashed an icy blast. Instantly it froze like lake water. She reeled back her leg and slammed her spiked boot into the window, shattering it to pieces. The cold night breeze blew in from the newly formed hole in the wall.

“Let’s go,” Simona said. She and Thadi clasped hands, walked to the edge, and jumped.

Their black cloaks billowed as they fell. Simona shot out an icy beam beneath them, materializing a massive ice snake underneath their feet. Thadi and Simona stood on its head as it slithered through town, pouring clouds of cold white smoke, leaving behind a shiny frost on the ground. Caden knew he should use this chance to run, but he couldn't look away. Annika, Holly, and Barron stood transfixed as well.

"Well if it isn't my old coworkers, the Wonder Twins," Jadice cackled. "I thought you'd run away as soon as a real threat presented itself. I'll be sure to thank you when I rip your ANGEL weapons from your bodies!"

Erelim extended its blue and yellow Xs, but Simona and Thadi were faster. From the top of the ice snake, Simona shot first with an ice beam. Erelim's yellow X glowed bright and lighting snapped out of it, shattering the ice to pieces. Thadi countered with a wall of flames out of her Xs, flying right at Erelim. The robot calmly held out its blue X and sprayed a torrent of water, extinguishing the flames with a smoky hiss.

Its enemies' attacks neutralized, Erelim didn't waste a second. It slammed its palms together and let loose an electrified wave of water that crashed over the ice snake, dissolving it in a flash and hurling the Guardians to the ground. Even though the Guardians were his enemies, Caden was horrified by what he was seeing. Jadice was strong by herself, but with Erelim she was able to effortlessly take down two Apostles. How did any of them stand a chance?

Thadi and Simona weren't done yet. A new ice snake rose from the ground with the two Apostles on top. Both of them put their Xs side by side, alternating between turquoise and orange. The two of them yelled so loudly that even far away,

Caden could hear them clearly.

“Zeraph!” they shouted in unison. “Come to us!”

The turquoise and orange shimmered as spirals of ice and fire swirled out of the Guardians’ Xs, spinning and intertwining in the air as if dancing, growing larger by the second. When they took shape, Caden’s jaw dropped.

It was a dragon.

A dragon made of ice, with a shimmering body, icicle teeth, and frozen tail, flapping in the sky with crystalline wings. Flames roared out of its mouth, behind its eyes, and all along its back like fiery scales. Black smoke plumed off it, and when it opened its mouth, it let out a blazing howl that shook the town.

The dragon was half the size of Erelim, and it was fast. It dove behind the robot and breathed out a blast of flames and icicles right into its Iltech body. Erelim stumbled forward as it was pelted from behind. For a second it looked like it was going to fall over, but the robot steadied itself and turned to face the dragon.

“That’s a cute pet you have there,” Jadice said. “But let me show you a *real* ANGEL behemoth! Giant Nephilia, come to me!”

Erelim slammed its own palms side by side. Water and electricity spewed from them, wrapping around each other and coiling like a waterspout. They flowed and bubbled into a spiked-tooth monster, electric fins sprouting out of the sides of its elongated liquid body. It stood twice as tall as the fire and ice dragon—a water and lightning serpent.

The serpent opened its fanged mouth with a thundering screech so loud Caden slammed his hands over his ears. The



monster surged through the air straight for the dragon and smashed into it. In an instant, the dragon was extinguished in a cloud of steam; the serpent was completely unaffected. It spun through the sky, reeling back for another attack. This time it aimed at the Guardians, both of them standing helplessly on top of the ice snake. Neither of them had a chance to react before the serpent crashed into them full force, sending waves of water and hisses of electricity through town from the impact. When the water and smoke settled, there was nothing left of the serpent. Or the Guardians. Erelim held out its glowing hands victoriously.

“New Darien!” Jadice bellowed. “Your leaders, the weak and cowardly Guardians, are no more. Surrender to the Reactor Army and hand over the so-called King Caden so we can begin to rebuild your town!”

Caden had been so caught up in watching that he’d forgotten Jadice was after him. He quickly slipped back into the Iltech room. The others followed him.

“Well,” Annika said, “I don’t want to say I told you so, but we definitely should’ve left yesterday, Caden.”

Caden shot her an angry look. She didn’t have to rub it in.

“I can’t believe it,” Holly said. “Erelim ... it beat the Guardians as if they were nothing.”

“It’s not really Erelim who beat them,” Barron said. “Erelim can’t do much on its own. It can only boost the power of whoever’s controlling it. The person inside is the one we have to fear.”

“Jadice,” Caden said. Holly and Barron looked confused, so he explained. “She’s a former Apostle and has two ANGEL



weapons: water and electricity. She tried to kill me and Annika back in Salem, and it looks like she hasn't given up."

Annika groaned. "So what do we do? We can't fight her, obviously."

"We need to escape somehow," Caden said.

"It's a little late for that," Annika said. "We can't ride Deber out of here; the town is teeming with people who want to turn you in. We can't even have you fly us out either; we'd stick out like bees at a picnic."

Hearing Annika complain about their predicament made something snap inside Caden. "Well maybe I should just turn myself in then, huh? Give myself up to Jadice so the Reactors can run experiments on me. Maybe that's what I should've done right at the beginning! Just turn myself in to the Church so none of us would be in this mess in the first place!"

Annika didn't disagree with him right away. No one said anything. Running footsteps pounded outside the room again, and frustration rippled through Caden. Who was it now? The Holy Police? More Apostles?

Helmut and two other Reactors skidded into the room. All three of them were in bright-green outfits and face-bandanas, one of them a man holding a Holy Police crossbow, the other a woman with a red-and-silver magnet-bow. Helmut thrust out his golden cape in front of them to bring them to a stop.

"Vice Commander Barron," he said in his harsh voice. "We're here to rescue you."

Barron nodded and smiled. "I appreciate it. But these kids have done a fine job so far."

Helmut's gaze fell to Caden, then Annika. "Why are you still here? Why didn't you leave?"

“You can thank *him* for that,” Annika said, gesturing to Caden with her thumb. Caden fumed internally, but at least that was one answer to their questions. Apparently Helmut wanted them to escape, that was why he didn’t turn them in to Jadice. Either he disagreed with her way of dealing with Caden or her way of stomping into town, not that any of it really mattered anymore.

“Vice Commander Barron,” said one of the other Reactors. “It’s our duty to bring you to General Jadice. Please come with us.”

“Wait!” said the woman Reactor with the magnet-bow. “That boy ... look at his palms. He’s the one General Jadice is after!”

The Reactor aimed the magnet-bow at Caden, ready to disable him. Caden raised his palms, enough anger running through him to blast all three of them right into town. Barron stood tall in front of Caden, shielding him from the Reactors.

“Put your weapons down!” Barron ordered. His voice filled the room, rumbling like a thundercloud. The Reactor with the magnet-bow looked at him confused.

“But he’s the one General Jadice is after,” she said. “She ordered us to capture him.”

“And I outrank General Jadice,” Barron said. “Unless the Reactor Army has forgotten about me. If you haven’t, then put your weapons down. You will not say a word about these children to General Jadice. I will speak to her myself. That is an order.”

The two Reactors slowly lowered their weapons, keeping a cautious eye on Caden and the others.

“But what are we supposed to do, Vice Commander?”

asked the woman. “We’re under orders to bring you to General Jadice.”

“Then you’ll do just that,” Barron said. “But first, we need to get these three to safety.”

Annika grumbled. “Didn’t we just talk about this? There’s no way we can get anywhere without being spotted.”

“What if ...” Holly piped up. “What if we caused a distraction? Then we can get away while everyone’s attention is elsewhere.”

Annika rolled her eyes. “Yeah, sure. All we need is something big enough to distract, oh, *literally everyone* in town. I’m sure we have something like that just lying around here.”

Barron’s face brightened as if a lantern lit up behind his eyes. “Annika, those charge packs on your belt ... they’re for Clops’s magnetizer, right?”

“Uh, yeah,” she said, adjusting the metal cylinders around her waist. “But so what?”

“I think I know how we can create a *very* big distraction.”

## Chapter 15

### Reunited

Caden, Annika, and Holly rushed down the stairs to the front hall of the church with Barron, Helmut, and the Reactors following right behind. Deber was waiting for them impatiently at the bottom of the steps, shaking her mane, eager to get far away from all the terrifying noises. Caden gave her a reassuring pat as they crept to the front door and cracked it open to peek outside.

It didn't look any better down here than it had upstairs. Erelim continued to slowly march through town as more Reactors followed beneath its massive metal feet. Caden gripped one of Annika's modified charge capsules. Barron held a black box in his hands with a single red button.

"Are you sure this is going to work?" Caden asked him.

Before they'd come down, Barron had asked Annika for one of the magnetizer's charge capsules. He'd opened it up, tinkered with it using tools from his black bag, and fastened some sort of small Iltech light to it, which was now blinking in Caden's hand.

Barron shrugged. "It was the best I could do on such short notice. The capsule is set to release all of its energy

in one giant burst, so yes, any number of things could go horribly wrong.”

Caden tried not to think about holding a full magnetizer blast in his hand. He'd seen what that thing was capable of at lower levels. All of its power exploding at once was not a pleasant thought.

“Remember,” Barron said, “get it as far away from here as possible. And far away from anyone else too. That's the best chance we have of causing a distraction.”

It was time. Caden focused on the explosive with his ANGEL weapon, willing it to move on its own. It didn't take much. All he had to think about was Amar, Jadice, and the fact that if they made it out of here, he'd be able to talk with Barron about his dad. The Iltech capsule floated out the door toward town.

Caden kept the blinking capsule hovering low to the ground, so as not to attract any attention. It flew just above the grass, like a small Iltech animal running along the ground. Caden felt it maneuver past the green common, through the shop area, and then beyond into the forest. It became harder and harder to control as it moved farther away, as if the invisible hands he was using were stretching to their limits. Finally, when it was deep in the woods, he couldn't even feel it anymore.

“I think it's good,” Caden said, mentally letting go. Barron nodded and handed Holly the black box with the button.

“Here, Holly,” he said. “You do the honors.”

Holly meekly took the box into her hands, her confused eyes darting back and forth between it and Barron.

“Uh, shouldn’t you be the one to set it off?” she asked.

“It’s thanks to your idea that I made it. First the blood swap, and now this. You’re full of crazy ideas.”

“Don’t forget sneaking us into the church with the handcuffs too,” Caden added.

Holly gave an awkward half-grin, but a hint of pride flashed over her face. “I come from a family of crazy plan-makers.” She held her finger over the red button and took a deep breath. “This is for Grandpa. He spent fifty years trying to save this town. Now, the only way we can help it is by destroying a piece of it.”

She pressed the button.

*BOOM!*

The explosion dwarfed even Erelim crashing into town. A pillar of flame erupted out of the forest, a fiery tornado born from the Earth. The entire town shook. Caden and the others fell to the floor, desperately trying to cover their ringing ears.

The reaction outside was immediate. Erelim lumbered toward the fire and smoke. Flashes of green Reactors followed behind it. Their distraction had worked.

“Quick!” Caden ordered, clambering to his feet. “Holly, Barron, get on Deber. Annika, keep up with me.” He turned to Helmut and the two Reactors. “You three, follow us. Let’s go!”

Holly climbed on Deber’s back and helped Barron up behind her as he cradled his black bag of Iltech devices. Caden threw open the door to the church. Annika gave Deber a pat on the rear, and with an excited neigh, they were off.

Deber trotted down the stone steps, veered past the unconscious Holy Police guards, and burst through the green

common. Caden kept pace next to her, and Annika's swift feet kept her close by. Helmut and the two Reactors mounted their own horses right behind them.

It was terrifying being outside the safety of the church. Even though Erelim was stomping away in the opposite direction, each metallic clang of its steps sent a shiver down Caden's spine. If Jadice spotted them in that thing ... it was over.

Holly guided them to the opposite side of town from the explosion. Her plan was to get everyone to Amar's house and hide in the cellar until Caden and Annika could escape on Deber. They'd part ways with Barron and the Reactors before they got there, so Barron could go to Jadice and hopefully order her to stop attacking, though Caden didn't have high hopes that it would work. He felt horrible leaving them all in this mess, but short of turning himself in, there was nothing he could do.

They dashed through the common, then behind the shops. The entire area was deserted. They splashed through muddied puddles, remnants from Jadice's water blasts, and passed by buildings that had been burnt black from her lightning. When they made it to the house backyards, they ran past a home with the roof knocked off, lying in the street in a giant pile of rubble. Caden hoped that Amar's house was okay. And Rosemary too.

"Help! Please, help!"

A familiar voice came from the woods. It was Thadi, her orange hair soaked and her black cloak ripped. In her arms she was cradling Simona, who was in even worse shape. Her eyes were closed and she wasn't moving. All around them was

charred forest and scorched earth.

“Stop!” Holly called. Deber skidded to a halt, and Caden and Annika scraped their shoes against the ground. Helmut and the two Reactors stopped their own horses behind them.

“What are you doing?” Caden asked.

“They can help us,” Holly said. “They can help us beat Erelim.”

Out of all of Holly’s ideas, this was the craziest so far.

“No way,” Caden said. “If we help them, they’ll just—”

Yells came from above. Before Caden even had a chance to see what was going on, a body fell on him like a boulder, crushing him and knocking him to the ground. He face-planted into the frosty dirt as his arms were pulled backward and a heavy weight on his back grew more unbearable by the second.

“I got him!” yelled the man on top of him. “Let’s get him to Erelim and they’ll stop attacking!”

Caden struggled to look behind him. The man who’d pinned him down was Castor, Amar’s twin brother. Deber was wailing frantically, but there was no one on her anymore. Barron was lying on the dirt groaning in pain, and Holly was stiff as a board being held around the neck by a Sparrow woman. Annika was kicking and punching a man who had his massive arms clenched around her waist. Her magnetizer lay out of reach on the ground.

Helmut jumped off his horse and made a dash to Annika’s fallen magnetizer. Just as he bent down and picked it up, the man holding onto Annika brandished a stone dagger and held it to her neck.

“You stay right there, Iltech-horns,” he said. “I don’t



know why you Reactors are trying to protect these kids when Erelim's over there trying to capture them, but one more move out of you and there won't be anything left to protect."

Two other Sparrows aimed pulled-back bows and arrows at the two Reactors on horses. Both of them put up their hands in surrender. Helmut slowly stood, his hands up too. On top of Caden's back, Castor giggled with delight.

"We were tracking down the Guardians after Erelim defeated them. We didn't know if it was safe to try to capture them yet, so we were watching from the top of that house. Never thought the actual King Caden would come running by, but I guess that's just our luck. Finally, our town is saved!"

Caden tried to use his ANGEL weapon, but it was impossible. He couldn't concentrate on anything except the pain pulsing through him. But from the corner of his eye, Caden saw Helmut making a very small move. As he held his hands up in surrender, Helmut's fingers slid over the magnetizer. First, he pressed the "power" button, then the button for "four." But how did he know how to use it?

In the blink of an eye, Helmut pointed the magnetizer at the man holding Annika and pressed "enter."

*PSHEW!*

A blast of static electricity sizzled through the air. The man holding Annika was blown backward, slamming into the side of a building. Not wasting a second, Helmut shot another blast at the Sparrows aiming arrows at the Reactors, knocking them to the ground. Immediately, Caden felt a weight come off his back. Castor ran away, huffing and puffing, along with the woman who had been holding Holly.

Caden stood up, in shock at seeing Helmut use the

magnetizer. It was specifically designed to be extra complicated with lots of buttons that did nothing, and yet he'd picked it up and used it like he'd seen it a million times. Helmut gently tossed the magnetizer to Annika. She caught it and gazed back at him with the same awestruck face.

"Should've been quicker," Helmut said in his rough, monotone voice. "Sorry, kiddo."

At his last words, Annika's eyes tightened to slivers. In one fluid movement she ran at Helmut and yanked the green bandana off his face. His stubby chin and crooked nose were only visible for a second before he covered them up with his gold cape, but in that second something snapped in Annika. She pointed the magnetizer at him.

"Wilhelm!" she screamed.

Wilhelm was Annika's father. She wasted no time in firing the magnetizer, sending an electric blast right at him, but Wilhelm was two steps ahead. He swerved, dodging the burst of electricity as it crashed into the ground, instantly evaporating the snow and roasting the grass black. Wilhelm sprinted away to the main road. Annika dashed after him.

"Caden, help me!" she called. "It's my dad, I have to catch him!"

Chasing after Annika's dad was the last thing Caden wanted to do right now. With Jadice and Erelim looming, Thadi pleading for help, and everyone in town wanting to capture them, running around hunting Wilhelm seemed like the worst idea possible.

"Annika!" Caden yelled back. "I can't! We need to—"

"Fine! Whatever!" She was already gone.

"General Helmut!" The other two Reactors dashed after

Annika and Wilhelm on their horses, leaving behind Caden, Holly, and Barron. Barron was dusting himself off, and Holly was rubbing her neck where she'd been held. Both of them looked bewildered at everything that had just happened.

"Why did Annika run off?" Holly asked.

Caden groaned. "Don't worry about it." He jerked his head toward the Guardians. Thadi was still cradling Simona, begging them for help with her eyes. "More importantly, what do we do about *them*?"

Holly bit her lip. "I don't know."

Caden's brain was fried. He had no idea what to do anymore.

"It's up to you. They were your parents."

Holly gave Thadi a long, hard gaze. "Do you still have the magnet-cuffs?" she asked. Thadi reached into her cloak and pulled them out.

"Right here, but why?"

"If you put them on Simona, you can come," Holly said. "She's never using her ice power without my permission again."



They made it to Amar's cellar without being noticed. Thadi rode Deber, with Simona unconscious and cuffed in front of her. Holly and Barron ran alongside Caden as fast as they could. Once they threw open the backdoor of Amar's house, Rosemary spotted the Guardians and slunk away, keeping her distance as the rest of them went into the basement. After they were sealed downstairs with only the lights from

lanterns to see anything, Thadi patted the Iltech handcuffs that bound Simona's hands.

"You should hold onto these cuffs too," she said to Caden. Simona herself was sitting limply on a crate, propped up against the wall. "If the Betrayer is out there, then she can sense our ANGEL weapons. Touching this turns them off. I'll be doing it as well."

Caden wasn't enthusiastic about the idea of powering down with the Guardians right there, even if one of them was barely alive, but she did have a point. Thadi laid one of her palms on top of the handcuffs, and Caden did too. As soon as he did, the same soul-sucking feeling from before rippled through him, as if the cuffs were yanking out his innards through his hand. But he grit his teeth and dealt with it. Even in their horrible circumstances, even with them running for their lives, there was one thing that would make it all worth it.

"Barron," Caden said. "Tell me about my dad."

Barron sat down across from Caden. He was supposed to have gone with the Reactors to Jadice, but with Helmut's disappearance the plan had fallen apart. If Barron didn't have backup when he confronted Jadice to order her to stop the attack, there was a chance she would "accidentally" crush him, so he'd stayed with the group.

Barron adjusted the sleeves of his jacket and heaved a sigh.

"Well, what do you want to know?" he asked.

Caden's heart leaped into his throat. Where to even begin?

"Um, how did you know my dad?" Caden asked. "Were you friends?"

"I guess you could say that," Barron said with a smile. "We worked together. I was one of his assistants."

Caden waited for more, but nothing came.

“So, what did you do together?” he asked.

Barron rocked his head from side to side. “Well ... we made things. Iltech. Research. Experiments. Lots of things.”

Caden had a feeling that Barron was being vague on purpose, but he didn't know why. It was time to get more specific.

“You said you helped make me. Were you there when I was created? When I was born or made or whatever?”

Caden didn't get an answer. From upstairs, the sliding glass door opened and slammed shut. Annika came stomping down the stairs to the cellar.

“Thanks for all your help,” she spat at Caden as she slid down against the wall. Caden groaned. He did not want to deal with this right now.

“So you didn't find Wilhelm?” he said, sneering. “At night with a million people who want to kill you running around outside? Wow, what a surprise.”

“Yeah, because I was alone!” she snapped. “Maybe if I'd had some help for once.”

“For *once*?” Caden couldn't believe what he was hearing. “You seem to be forgetting all those times I saved your life.”

Annika scoffed. “Please. Don't get me started on ‘saving lives.’ You'd be dead at the bottom of the Basement, the ocean, and the church in Salem if it wasn't for me.”

“And you'd be dead from that butcher in Salem if it wasn't for me!” Caden said, a little too loudly. The magnet-cuffs were making him nauseous, and Annika wasn't helping. She just laughed.

“Yeah, I've stuck by you through all your crazy ideas,

haven't I? And yet the one time I needed your help the most, you didn't do anything. If it was your dad out there, you can bet I'd be helping you!"

Caden was about to shout back something terrible, but next to him, Simona moaned. Her eyes fluttered back to consciousness. She winced in pain, looked around the room, then sat up straight at attention.

"Where am I?" she demanded, darting her eyes. "What happened?"

Thadi put her free hand on Simona's shoulder. "Hey, it's okay. We're safe."

Simona was not convinced. Her eyes met Caden and cooled to ice cubes. "You, boy. What have you done?" She looked down at the magnet-cuffs and rattled her hands weakly. "Why am I cuffed? Get these off me at once!"

The magnet-cuffs didn't seem to be making her sick like Caden, maybe because she didn't have Planck particles running through her entire body like he did. But they still kept her bound and powerless, which Caden was glad to see.

Holly stepped toward Simona. "You're not doing anything unless I say so."

"You've been a very bad girl, Holly," Simona said, glaring. "You're going to be—"

She stopped. Rosemary was peeking in through the cellar door. She squeaked in horror and disappeared. A smile curled up Simona's face.

"Oh. I see where we are. Perfect. It's time for me to finish your punishment that I began all those years ago, Holly."

Simona made a move to stand, but Holly shoved her back down. Simona's mouth fell open in shock. Holly looked

down at her, eyes blazing hotter than any ANGEL weapon.

“You’re never hurting anyone in this town again.”

Simona snickered. “Oh really? Says the girl who helped bring the Reactors and the Betrayer to our town! Do you know how many lives have been destroyed because of you? Far more than I’ve ever hurt, that’s for certain!”

“The Reactors are only here *because of you!*” Holly yelled back. “Because you’ve been so horrible that we had no other choice! If you just didn’t make everyone work every day, or if you’d just granted Grandpa’s Wish, then everything would’ve been fine!”

“I did what I had to do,” Simona hissed. “To keep our town safe.”

Holly said something back, but Caden couldn’t even hear what it was. At this point, between arguing with Annika, and Holly arguing with Simona, and Barron not telling him anything, and the magnet-cuffs making him sick, he’d had enough. It was time for everyone to just ... stop!

Caden let go of the Iltech handcuffs and aimed his palms at Simona. The only thing she ever responded to was force, so he was going to force her to shut up. He envisioned his particles clamping her mouth closed and holding it that way. All the frustration inside him summoned them with ease.

But something felt wrong. The particles didn’t go around Simona’s lips. Some of them went into her nose. Her ears. Her open mouth.

Paralysis and dizziness writhed through Caden. The world’s color drained away, gray and foggy. He could hear the dirt walls wailing. He could taste Simona’s thoughts like boiling ice.

SCOTT WILSON

Air. Cracked. Then. Broken. Crash.

S t a tic. Bl ur.

He was MoDifiCationNNNnNN

hE Was cADen

NO *eRRRRRRor*

hE wAS

siMOnA



## Chapter 16

### Simona and Thadi

Sixteen-year-old Simona sat in the hall of New Darien's Church, lazily brushing her long blond hair out of her eyes and turning the pages in the Book of Metl. She'd been studying to become a Mother for the past year now, and she'd memorized every line. She didn't even have to look at the words anymore. Her eyes were no more than tools to confirm what her heart already knew.

Simona was told that she was progressing very well in her Mother training. That gave her hope. She couldn't help but smile as she leafed through the pages, thinking about how she'd soon be able to leave New Darien and move on to more exciting things.

A hand on Simona's shoulder broke her daydreaming.

"How goes the study, Ms. Rime?"

Simona turned to see Mother Andrea, New Darien's Head Mother, smiling at her. Mother Andrea had taken the entire town by surprise when she'd arrived as the new Head Mother last year. Her strange name—pronounced Ahn-dray-uh—and her even stranger appearance made her an immediate town fascination. Pink poofy pigtails, pink tutu,

pink gloves, black cloak, and two silent, shadowy figures that were with her at all times, including now. They stood behind her, perfectly still, waiting to help with whatever she needed, which was surprisingly very little considering she was only twelve years old.

While the rest of town gossiped about Mother Andrea, Simona was filled with awe. Seeing her, it was as if Gotama had laid out her purpose on a diamond platter. If such a young girl like Mother Andrea could become a Mother, then surely Simona could do it too.

“I ... I think I’ve memorized it all, Mother Andrea,” Simona said. Her face reddened and she had trouble looking Mother Andrea in the eye. It was hard to stay calm and collected in the presence of her idol. “I think I’m ready to move on with my training.”

“Oh really?” Mother Andrea said. “Tell me, what does the Book of Metl say is the most important Virtue?”

Simona’s body tingled. She didn’t want to show off to Mother Andrea, but with an invitation like that, she wasn’t going to hold back.

“The most important Virtue is work,” she answered immediately. “Chapter 3, verse 6. For while worshiping comes first, work is most important for Earthly needs. Without work there is no nourishment, and without nourishment nothing can follow. A starving leader cannot rule, a hungry servant cannot serve, a famished artist cannot create, a foodless family cannot love, and none of them can hope to worship Gotama.”

“Very good,” Mother Andrea said. “You are ready to move on to the next step of your training.”

Simona's mouth fell open. "But ... shouldn't you ask me some more questions? To make sure I know everything?"

Mother Andrea chuckled. "My dear Simona. The Great Gotama has other ways of confirming that you're ready. You do *not* know everything. But you know enough."

"What don't I know?" Simona asked. "I've memorized everything in the Book of Metl."

Mother Andrea raised her eyebrows, looking like a mischievous little girl, and spoke in a whisper. "I'll show you something that's not in the Book of Metl."

She put her hands out in front of her. As always, they were wrapped in pink gloves. Mother Andrea removed them, revealing bright, glowing pink Xs on each of her palms.

"These Xs are the marks of the Apostles, Gotama's greatest servants," Mother Andrea said. "It's a sign that we've been chosen to do his most important tasks. Perhaps, if you are a humble servant to Gotama, then you too will be lucky enough to be chosen someday."

Simona felt like the breath was sucked out of her body. There was so much about the world she didn't know. She wanted to learn it all.

"How do you get the Xs?" she asked. "And what do they do?"

Mother Andrea shook her head and slipped the pink gloves back on. "Those are stories for another time. You've worked hard enough for today. Go home and rest. And of course, say nothing about what I've shown you here. Most people are not ready to know Gotama as intimately as we do."

Simona thanked Mother Andrea and bid her goodbye. She managed to remain calm all the way until she was

outside, when she shook her fists for joy. She was going to become a Mother! All her hard work was finally paying off. She ran home, waving to everyone she passed, and shouting excited greetings.

Before long she reached her house, the biggest one in all New Darien. It stood four stories tall with curved columns and more than two acres of land all to itself. The pure white siding was immaculate, having just been re-painted, and the long asphalt path to the house led right into a stable with the family horses.

The house was yet another one of Gotama's blessings on Simona's family. Like many others in town, Simona's family had spent generations working in the Hole. Unlike many others though, her grandfather had survived fifty years to make a Wish. He didn't ask for something to benefit the town or all the Sparrows like most usually did though. He Wished for a million Rucks, the most money he could possibly imagine. And he got it.

Unfortunately, he didn't live long to enjoy it. Simona's grandfather died only a month after his Wish, but during that time he put the money to good use. He bought a bigger house and several businesses, ensuring that no one in his family would have to work in the Hole anymore. Simona's mother and father immediately took over the newly-acquired enterprises, though Simona's grandmother kept working in the Hole. She was only two years away from her own Wish, and she wanted to see it through to the end.

As for Simona, she saw the money as a blessing from Gotama, a reward for her grandfather working hard for fifty years. She was going to show Gotama how thankful she was

by becoming a Mother and devoting her life to him.

Although, she did have a bit of an ulterior motive. But for now, that was just between her and Gotama.

She skipped up to the front door, threw it open, and was met with an unfamiliar scene: her parents. Her mother and father were both in the entrance hall, her father a tall, proud man in an immaculate tailcoat and flat-top hat, her mother in an expensive multi-layered dress, hair done up in a tight bun. Ever since last year, they'd stopped working in the Hole and spent all day at their businesses, so Simona rarely saw them at home before sundown. There was also a chopping sound coming from the kitchen, meaning something was being cooked—another rare occurrence in the house.

“Simona dear,” her mother said. “We have a surprise for you. Say hello to our new hired help, Ms. McKay.”

The chopping sound stopped and a woman appeared in the hall. She was only as tall as Simona, but her arms and neck were gnarled like wood, the sign of someone who worked in the Hole. She brushed off her hands on her apron and nodded to Simona.

“Nice to meet you, Ms. Rime,” she said.

“Um, you too,” Simona said, not quite sure what was going on. Ms. McKay turned to Simona's father and mother.

“Should I get back to cooking?”

“Oh yes, thank you,” Simona's mother said. Ms. McKay disappeared back into the kitchen.

“Why do we have a servant?” Simona asked.

“It's necessary,” Simona's father said. “Your mother and I aren't home much anymore, and grandma is getting old. We don't have time to cook meals or do laundry. That's why we

hired Ms. McKay. Plus, it's important to give to those who are less fortunate."

"Less fortunate?" Simona asked.

"Oh dear, you've been so busy you probably didn't even know it happened," Simona's mother said. "But there was an accident in the Hole a week ago. Mr. McKay was ... well, he didn't make it. And without his income, his wife and daughter couldn't afford their home. So they've moved in with us, to live and help around."

Simona vaguely remembered Mother Andrea administering the funeral rites a few days back, but she'd been fully buried in the Book of Metl. Now she felt embarrassed.

"It's win-win," her father added. "The McKays get to save money by living here, and we get the help we need. Why don't you go in the backyard and say hi to her daughter. Thadi, I think her name is? She's only a year older than you. Maybe you remember her from school."

Simona didn't need any more encouragement. She felt so bad for Thadi. Her father passing away after devoting his life to serving Gotama in the Hole ... this was exactly what Simona had been training for as a Mother, to help people overcome their grief. Plus, the idea of having another girl her age in the house ... it was very exciting.

Simona marched into the backyard where Thadi was stuffing the hanging laundry into a basket. She had sunset-red hair, green eyes, freckled skin, and muscled arms that looked like they'd be more at home swinging stone axes than unpinning clothes. Her heart racing, Simona took a deep breath and walked up to her with a big, dumb smile.

"Hi!" she said. "I'm Simona. I heard about what happened

to your father. I'm so sorry. But at least you can rest assured that he's up in Metl in the sky with Gotama now."

Thadi's eyes widened as if Simona had punched her in the gut. She stomped up to Simona, laundry basket in hand, and shriveled her face into a scowl.

"You don't know what you're talking about," she said.

This was not the reaction Simona had expected. She struggled to speak.

"I ... I'm a Mother in training," she said. "I know a lot about Gotama."

Thadi grunted. "You only get to *be* a Mother because your family can afford to not have you work, because your grandfather got his Wish. I never even met my grandfather. He died in the Hole before I was born. And now my dad is gone too. So don't talk to me about Gotama."

Thadi shoved her way past Simona, back indoors. As Simona watched her disappear inside, a feeling of responsibility came over her. This was her first test as a Mother. She had to heal Thadi's aching soul. At the same time, a warmth spread through her too. Simona forced herself to wonder what it was about.

She had to force herself to wonder, because she already knew the answer.



A year later, seventeen-year-old Simona hadn't made much progress with Thadi. Even though they lived in the same house, they hardly ever saw each other. Thadi worked the

earliest shift at the Hole, so every day when Simona woke up, Thadi was already gone. When Simona came home from training at the church, Thadi would be fast asleep in her room for the night. Even though she was right next door to Simona, she felt miles away.

Despite that, Simona was flying through her training. Mother Andrea was giving her more and more responsibilities—having her give sermons, settle legal disputes, bless Iltech so it could be safely displayed. Mother Andrea didn't have time for it all herself anymore, because Erelim was almost complete.

Erelim. Finally, after a thousand years, the robot was almost rebuilt. The past months had been a flurry as the final preparations were made. Mother Andrea was busy meeting with Church representatives daily. Red-cloaked Holy Researchers would climb inside Erelim and make sure that everything was exactly as Gotama had originally built it.

Then finally, the fated day came. Erelim was complete. The mighty robot towered above the town at over a hundred feet tall, its Iltech body shimmering underneath Metl. The sins of the Sparrows' ancestors had been atoned for. Their generational debt to Gotama had been repaid.

New Darien celebrated as it never had before. A decade's worth of New Years and Sparrow Days rolled into one. Shops set up stands along the main road, bakeries selling cakes and pastries, butchers with hot turkey legs and sausages, the general store loaded with sweets of all kinds, the distillery packed with every intoxicating drink imaginable, and even farmers churning out bags of hot popcorn and roasted peanuts.



Simona and her grandmother walked together through the crowded street lined with bright, colorful lanterns. Simona's grandmother was a head shorter than her, but every inch of her body was hard as rock. The only thing stronger than her muscles was her heart.

All around them people shouted, cheered, laughed. There were so many faces Simona didn't recognize. Sparrows from all over the country had been pouring into New Darien the past month, filling up inns and setting up camp, anxiously awaiting the most important event of their lives. Many of them brought carts of their own merchandise: polished-rock jewelry, ancient clothes with wolves and words on them, and some even set up games where they charged five Pebbies to knock down wooden pins with a ball.

"Simona, dear," her grandmother said, patting her arm. "I'm getting tired."

"Okay, Grandma. Let's get you home."

Grandma shook her head and reached into her pocket, taking out a handful of round, shiny Quartzers, each of them a different shade of blue, pink or purple. She grabbed Simona's hand and dribbled them into her palm.

"Grandma, what are you doing?"

"You've been working so hard, dear. You deserve to have some fun."

"But Grandma, this is way too much."

"If you can't spend it all on yourself, then maybe you can share with someone else."

Grandma motioned her head to an alleyway off the main road. Standing alone inside it, cut off from the joyous masses, was Thadi. Her arms were crossed tightly, as if wanting

to squeeze herself hard enough to disappear. A flame of resolution burned hot within Simona.

“Okay, Grandma,” she said. “I’ll—”

But Grandma was already gone. Gripping her fistful of Quartzers, Simona strode over to Thadi.

“Hey!” she called. Thadi snapped to her, first horrified, then with a glare.

“What do you want?” she said.

Simona grinned and hoped she wasn’t sweating too much. “This is your night to celebrate. For everything that you and the other Hole workers have worked so hard for. I’m sure your father is up in Metl in the sky, looking down on you and—”

Thadi shook her head and pushed past Simona. Simona’s heart fell, but she wasn’t going to give up. She needed to do this. It was time to try something else.

She reached out and grabbed Thadi’s hand. The moment their fingers touched, a shock spread from Simona’s fingertips to her chest to her head. Thadi stopped in her tracks and turned back to Simona, her face red as a tomato. Before she could open her mouth to say anything, Simona held out her handful of Quartzers.

“Let’s go have some fun,” she said.

Thadi’s face softened, then cracked as if in pain. “I don’t want your money. I’m not a charity case.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Simona said. “All I know is that I’m going to buy two turkey legs, and if you don’t help me eat one of them, then I’m going to end up with a stomachache.”

Thadi smirked. She gripped Simona’s hand harder. “Fine. But just *two* turkey legs.”

Five turkey legs, two apple pastries, three pork sausages, and at least six mugfuls of spiced ale later, Simona and Thadi were stumbling back home together, their arms around each other's shoulders. Thadi was still swinging her wooden mug around, spilling the little liquid that remained. After Thadi's fifth helping, Simona had paid the vendor to fill it up with water and claim it was his "hardest drink." Thadi was very impressed with herself, able to swig it all with no problem.

"This is pretty good!" she yelled, her voice sloshing as much as her water. "That guy definitely brews a good one. My compliments ... to the chef!"

Simona was nothing but smiles. She'd finally broken through to Thadi. Sure, it'd taken a little greasing from Grandma's pocket money, but it was worth it.

They hobbled home up the asphalt path, and Simona pulled open the door to the silent, dark house. Everyone else was already long asleep. She held Thadi as they both stumbled up the stairs, and gently shrugged her off at the door to her bedroom. Thadi emptied the last bits of water from the mug into her mouth, smacked her lips, and slammed the cup down on the banister.

"Thank you, barkeep, I've had a wonderful time." Thadi took a light bow, then stumbled as she tried to stand up straight. Simona caught her, laughing and shaking her head.

"All right, why don't we get you to bed," she said. She held on gently to Thadi's sides, guiding her to the door. "Have a good night, Thadi. Maybe I'll see you tomorrow."

"Simona," Thadi said. Her voice was suddenly serious and sober. It felt like the real Thadi, speaking confidently, a layer of fear washed away.

“Uh, yes?” Simona asked.

Thadi clasped onto Simona’s hand. Warm. Wonderful. She beamed at Simona.

“There’s something I’ve been wanting to show you.”

Simona’s heart pounded as Thadi pulled her into her room. She hadn’t been in there ever since Thadi and her mother moved in. She’d never been invited. But now Thadi was tugging her inside as if they were sisters. Or maybe something more.

When she stepped in, Thadi lit a lantern on the table, bringing everything inside to light. Simona wasn’t sure what she’d expected, but it wasn’t this.

Thadi’s room was filled with paintings. The bed, the table, the dresser, every surface was covered in canvases as vibrant as a sunrise on a crisp fall morning. There were paintings of food, people, and landscapes that Simona recognized from all over New Darien. The Hole, the church, the shops, Erelin. Thadi had the entire town in her room.

But one painting caught her attention. It sat on a wooden easel, a work in progress, though it was so close to completion that it looked like it could leap right off the canvas.

It was a painting of Simona’s face.

The details were incredible. Every strand of blond hair, all shades of her pale skin, even her shimmering brown eyes. It was as if she were staring at her own reflection. How could someone who avoided her at all costs paint such a perfect portrait of her?

“It’s ... beautiful,” Simona whispered. She didn’t have to specify which painting she was talking about. Thadi was staring at it too, swaying nervously from side to side.

“It’s terrible,” she grumbled. “The colors are all wrong, and I messed up the ear. I couldn’t quite remember the right proportions for your neck too.”

Simona wrapped her fingers around Thadi’s, gripping harder than she had all night.

“It’s beautiful,” Simona said. Thadi looked away from Simona and lowered her head but didn’t let go of her hand.

“My dad used to buy me all my paint supplies,” she said. “He’d spend every extra Pebbie we had on canvases, paints, and brushes. I begged him not to, since we didn’t have much money, but he didn’t care. He loved my paintings. He said my talent was a gift from Gotama, and I needed to let it breathe. If I didn’t, it would suffocate and die, and he wasn’t going to let that happen.”

Simona didn’t say anything. Between her fingers, Thadi’s hand trembled.

“All he wanted . . . all he wanted for his Wish was for us to go on a trip as a family. Me, him, and Mom to go somewhere together. Far away from here, to see a new sight, and for me to paint it, so he could bring it back and show everyone. He said all he’d ever need was one trip, because the pictures I’d paint would be so good he could just look at them and remember the smells and sounds and tastes whenever he wanted.”

Thadi bit her quivering lip and shook her head. She turned to Simona, her face heavy with shame.

“So when Mom and I first moved in to your house, and I saw your family, with your grandfather getting his Wish for a million Rucks, and your grandmother right behind, when my dad didn’t even get to make his Wish for a small trip, I . . . I couldn’t take it. Not a single member of my family has ever

lived long enough to make a Wish, and here you were blessed with two.

“And now, with Erelim complete and the digging over, I won’t even get to make the Wish for my dad. I still wanted to, after I’d worked in the Hole for fifty years myself. I wanted to go on our trip. I wanted to paint the pictures of places he’d never seen. I know it sounds stupid, but I felt like if I painted them, he could still see them, up in Metl in the sky. But now when the Hole digging stops, I’ll just have to get some other stupid job in town because I don’t have enough money and there’s never enough money and—”

“Let’s do it,” Simona said.

Thadi stared at her, blinking. “Do what?”

“Let’s make your dad’s Wish come true.” She reached out and gripped Thadi’s other hand with her own, dangling both their entwined arms between them. “That’s the reason I wanted to become a Mother. I don’t want to stay here and preach every week like Mother Andrea. I want to get out of New Darien and see the world, spreading the word of Gotama as a missionary.”

Thadi blinked in confusion. “What do you mean?”

“We’re Sparrows, aren’t we?” Simona said. “‘Scavenge wide, soar high.’ That’s our motto. Well I say we’ve been cooped up in New Darien for long enough. Our generation is lucky; we’re the ones who finally put Erelim back together. And now it’s time for us to move on and spread Gotama’s love. I want to travel out west, leading at the head of a flock of Sparrows. And I want you to come with me.”

Thadi looked away. “But I can’t help with any of that. All I can do is paint.”

“And that’s exactly why I need you,” Simona said. “I’m not going to convert anyone to Metlism with just the boring Book of Metl. I need you to paint some beautiful artwork for me. And I’m not going to let you off easy! I’ll need paintings of Erelim, Metl, and even Gotama himself that will dazzle anyone into becoming a believer.”

Thadi spoke in a whisper. “Do you really mean it?”

“Of course! We need to show off all Six Virtues. I can handle worshiping, working, ruling, and serving myself, but I need you to show them the value of creating.”

“What about the last virtue?” Thadi asked. “What about loving?”

Simona’s face flushed and she looked off to the side. “Well, I’m going to need someone else to show them that virtue too.”

Before Simona could react, Thadi swooped in for a kiss. Maybe it was because of the ale, or maybe it was because she was too busy thinking about other things, but she missed Simona’s lips *and* cheeks and planted a sloppy kiss awkwardly in between. For Simona, it felt like the splash of a big, wet raindrop.

“Oh!” came a voice from outside the room. Simona’s grandmother shuffled by, awkwardly waving her palms in front of her face. “Don’t mind me. Just going downstairs for a snack. Carry on!”

Embarrassed, Simona and Thadi detached themselves from one another, hands and lips alike.

“Is she going to tell our parents?” Thadi whispered.

“I don’t know. Let me find out.” Simona cleared her throat and yelled as quietly as she could down the hallway, to

not wake anyone up. “Hey, Grandma! Are you going to tell our parents?”

“Tell them what, dear?” came Grandma’s voice. “I didn’t see anything!”

Simona nodded to Thadi. “It can be our secret for now.”

Thadi breathed a sigh of relief. “Good. My mom would probably freak out. But anytime you want to talk about our, uh, *secret*, my door is open.”

“I’d like that,” Simona said. She grinned so wide it hurt. In a good way.



Every day that passed after Erelim was completed, all of New Darien waited for a sign from Gotama that their work in the Hole was finished. The first week was tense with excitement, everyone expecting a miracle anytime. Most Hole workers moved on to other jobs, especially the younger ones. Even those who still showed up for their shifts spent most of their time talking about what they would do once Gotama officially proclaimed that it was okay to move on.

Simona and Thadi were no exception. They spent their evenings together in Thadi’s room, Simona looking at old maps of places they’d travel to once she was a Mother, and Thadi painting them based on their mysterious names alone. “Ohio” was a giant rainbow canyon that echoed forever, and “Canada” was spiky icicle grass that sparkled in the winter sun.

The weeks passed with still no sign from Gotama. Then a



month. Finally, a whole year went by with nothing. Mother Andrea thought the lack of a sign was a sign itself, that Gotama was telling them to keep digging, but everyone else disagreed. Simona's grandmother was the one who suggested an alternative.

"I'm tired of waiting around!" she said during a town meeting at the church. "I'll put a stop to this dilly-dallying myself. I'll Wish for us to not have to work in the Hole anymore."

Just days after Simona turned eighteen and was finally ordained an official Mother on the Sparrow Stage in front of the town, her grandmother was up there too, making her Wish for the Hole digging to stop.

"And if Gotama has a problem with us stopping," she bellowed to Metl in the sky, "then by all means he is welcome to finally give us a sign!"

But the sky stayed blue and the birds kept chirping and the crowd applauded, finally bringing the era of Hole-digging to an end.

That night, Simona and Thadi lay together on the grass of the common in front of the church, staring at the stars just starting to come out. The two of them were alone. Everyone else had gone home after celebrating the Wish, including Simona's parents, grandmother, and Thadi's mom. Simona had expected to meet with Mother Andrea afterward to discuss what to do with all the newly-unemployed Hole workers, but she was nowhere to be found. Not that Simona was complaining about extra time alone and undisturbed with Thadi.

"What do you think about adopting a kid?" she asked

Thadi out of the blue.

Thadi snorted. "I think we're a bit young to be parents."

"You know what I mean," Simona said. "Not now, but maybe someday. Either while we're out traveling or if we find a place to settle down."

Thadi turned to her and leaned on her hand. "That sounds nice."

Simona's heart swelled. Over the past year she and Thadi had only talked about their immediate future, not further down the road. Just thinking about it now made her want to get going already.

"I think I'd like to adopt a Nobody," Simona said. "A child from an unclean family, to give them another chance at—"

*BOOM!*

An explosion rocked the whole town. Thadi gripped Simona tight. In the distance, a giant pillar of fire shot up like a flaming tornado in the darkening sky. It roared and howled, billowing out thick clouds of ash. Screams, cries, and bellrock clangs rang out from everywhere.

"What is that?" Thadi yelled over the chaos.

"I don't know!" Simona said. "It looked like it came from ..."

Thadi seemed to realize it as soon as Simona did. She leaped to her feet and started running. Simona's insides turned to ice. The flames and smoke, they were coming from her home.

"Mom!" Thadi screamed as she sprinted away. Simona couldn't even process what was going on. Her parents. Her grandmother. She struggled to her feet and chased after

Thadi. All over town people were in the streets staring in horror, covering their mouths, peeking out from windows. What had caused this? What was going on?

“THE DIGGING WILL CONTINUE!” boomed a deep voice.  
“UNTIL THE RED X IS FOUND!”

Everything stopped. The screams. The bellrocks. Even Simona and Thadi froze dead in their tracks. All eyes were on it.

Ereim had hatched.

The gigantic robot was moving, its eyes bright white, stomping through buildings as if crashing through eggshells. It raised its massive metallic foot and slammed it down on top of a shop, smashing it to pieces.

“THE DIGGING WILL CONTINUE!” Ereim thundered.  
“UNTIL THE RED X IS FOUND!”

Simona couldn't move. The sight of Ereim had paralyzed her. How could this be happening? This was not the sign they'd been waiting for!

Thadi ran off toward the raging inferno that was their home. Simona yelled after her.

“Thadi! Wait!”

*BOOM!*

A wave of heat and flames erupted in front of Simona. Steaming hot particles pelted her all over. Another shop had burst into a fire twister, heaving smoke and glowing ash into the sky. Lying on the ground silhouetted by the burning chaos was Thadi, unconscious.

Simona ran to her, turning her over, shaking her, but there was no response. Her eyes stayed closed, her limbs limp. She was barely breathing.

“THE DIGGING WILL CONTINUE! UNTIL THE RED X IS FOUND!”

Simona craned her neck to Erelim as it crushed its Iltech foot through another building, spraying wood and dirt. Where was Mother Andrea? She was the only one who could stop this!

No. There was one other. The only other Mother in town. Simona herself.

Using every ounce of strength she didn't know that she had, Simona scooped up Thadi in her arms. The impossible was made possible by the adrenaline pumping through her. She ran toward the main street Erelim was crashing through, all around her throngs of people stampeding and screaming in the opposite direction.

She pushed her way through the chaotic mob, finally breaking through to the other side, where she could see Erelim in its entirety. The robot behemoth lifted its metallic foot up from a smashed house, chunks of wood and brick spilling off it to the ground. Simona collapsed to her knees on the asphalt, laid Thadi in front of her, and put her hands together in Sparrow prayer position as she took in a giant breath.

“Please stop, Erelim!” she yelled with all her might. “Please have mercy on our town!”

Erelim stood still. Its white-hot eyes stared down at Simona, as if looking only at her. Amid the yells, fires, and bellrocks, a voice popped into Simona's head. It was not the same bellowing monotone of Erelim. It was softer, gentler. It was Mother Andrea.

“*My poor Simona,*” her voice trickled inside her brain.

*“I’m sorry it had to come to this. But you see, the Church has grown awfully fond of all the relics of Gotama your town has found over the years, and we don’t want it to stop.”*

Simona had no idea what was happening. How was Mother Andrea speaking to her? Where was she? What was going on?

Then she saw something that made her gasp, as if an icicle had lodged itself in her spine. Erelim spread out its fingers, revealing a pink *X* crossed over each of its palms, just like Mother Andrea had shown her those years ago in the church. Simona didn’t know how, or why, but it had to be.

Mother Andrea was controlling Erelim.

“THE DIGGING WILL CONTINUE!” Erelim spoke again.  
“UNTIL THE RED *X* IS FOUND!”

“Please stop!” Simona’s yells were like sandpaper against her throat. “Please stop! Please stop! Please stop!”

*“I’m sorry, my dear,”* came Mother Andrea’s voice again inside her head. *“But I have my orders. The digging must continue, the red *X* must be found, and the first step to ensuring that is by eliminating your trouble-making family. Along with a few hundred others to set an example.”* Erelim marched down the street toward Simona, its legs rumbling the ground with every step. It stopped right in front of her and raised its metal foot. *“Goodbye, Simona. I do hope you know that I will miss you.”*

Simona stared up at the Iltech foot about to crush her. She didn’t know what to do. She didn’t understand. So she did the only thing she could. She gripped Thadi’s unmoving body and yelled as loudly as she could.

“I’ll ... I’ll do whatever you want!” she cried. “We’ll keep

digging. We'll find the ... the red X! Whatever relic it is, we'll find it! We'll have ... we'll have *everyone* in town dig! Day and night! We'll dig more than ever before. I promise. Just please stop!"

Erelim didn't move. Simona stared up at its foot, expecting any second for it to come down on top of her.

*BOOM!*

Another swirl of fire right next to Simona lit up the night. She huddled over Thadi to shield her from the heat, and pried her own eyes open, looking up to Erelim. The massive robot was still there, but both its feet were back on the ground. The white lights in its eyes were off. The pink Xs on its palms were gone. Now Erelim stood as it always had, tall and menacing, but lifeless.

"Simona!" came a voice, this time *not* in Simona's head. "Simona, you stopped Erelim!"

Mother Andrea walked out from a cloud of smoke, her two shadowy servants following behind. She stopped in front of Simona, hands behind her back, grinning from ear to ear.

"Gotama listened to your prayer, Simona," she said. "Your promise of everyone working in the Hole, day and night, that's what it took to appease him. And now, as a sign of good faith, he has stopped his attack. Your brilliant idea is what saved our town!"

Screams of terror still filled the air. Fires burned all around Simona. Her family ... was gone. Mother Andrea held out her hand to Simona, the pink X on her palm glowing bright. Simona knew what it would mean to grasp that hand. She would have to keep the truth of what had happened tonight hidden inside of her. Hidden from Thadi. From everyone.

The Church ... Mother Andrea was right. Simona *did* know nothing. She had no idea how strong they were. How terrible they were. She had to protect her town from them.

If the Church wanted them to keep digging, then they would. If the Church wanted everyone to dig, then they would. If the Church wanted them to work all day and night, then they would. Anything was better than being slaughtered like livestock.

New Darien had been given a taste of what happened to those who defied the Church. Simona would do everything in her power to stop it from happening again. She would keep the Church happy with New Darien. No matter the cost.

Simona clasped Mother Andrea's hand. A sheet of ice wrapped itself around her heart.

"Thank you, Mother Andrea," she said. "Our town is saved."

## Chapter 17

### The Backup Plan

Caden stumbled backward. Head throbbing. Ears ringing. Vision blurry. He was vaguely aware of people around him talking, but they sounded like they were underwater.

Then, as sharply as going from full gallop to an abrupt stop, the world flashed into focus. Holly was gripping Caden's arm, giving him the same concerned look as Barron and Thadi. Annika raised an eyebrow and Simona snarled.

"What's wrong, boy?" she asked. "Did the little magnet-cuffs make you sick again?"

She was trying to be intimidating, but even in Caden's dizzied state it didn't affect him. Somehow, he'd seen into Simona's past, like he'd done with Rosemary. In front of him he no longer saw a terrifying killer, but a scared girl. And something else was now perfectly clear too.

"You knew ..." Caden said, catching his breath. "All this time, you knew."

Simona sniffed an airy laugh. "Well I didn't know *how* sick the magnet-cuffs would make you, but I certainly won't argue with the results."

"No!" Caden shouted. "You knew that the Church was



behind Erelim attacking your town forty years ago!”

Simona narrowed her eyes at him, curling her lips in disgust.

“You’re lucky I’m bound by these magnet-cuffs, boy. An accusation like that and I’d—”

“It’s true!” Caden said. “You met Thadi when she and her mom came to work as servants in your house. You found out she liked you when you saw her painting of you. And you ... you were the only one who knew it was the town Mother controlling Erelim the night of the Hatching, not Gotama.”

Simona snarled as her entire face twitched. It looked like Caden’s words had hit her harder than any weapon, piercing through her heart and right into her insecurities. She shriveled away from him.

“Lies,” she muttered. “Nothing but lies.”

Thadi leaned in closer to Caden, hanging onto his every word.

“How do you know all that?” she asked. Simona snapped at her.

“Thadi! Don’t humor this boy. If rumors start spreading then—”

“Then what?” Thadi shot back. “We’ll be kicked out of the Church? We’ll lose our town? It’s already happening, Simona! We have nothing to lose anymore ... except each other.” She crossed her arms. “What the boy said about the Church controlling Erelim, is it true?”

All eyes were on Simona. For the first time in what must have been decades, she was the one under attack, desperately looking for a way out.

“You’re going to believe this boy over me?” Simona growled. “Our enemy? He’s trying to pit us against each other, Thadi! Don’t listen to him.”

Thadi slowly turned her suspicious glare to Caden. “How did you find out all that about us? Did you use your ANGEL weapon?”

Caden nodded. “I saw everything. Simona training to become a Mother. The first time you met as teenagers when Thadi was taking down laundry. Both of you sharing your dream to travel the world. I saw everything, Thadi McKay and Simona Rime.” Caden looked right at Simona, straight through her strong facade. “And just as clearly as I saw any of that, I saw you talking to the person controlling Erelim: Mother Andrea.”

Simona was trying to hold herself together, but Caden had cracked through her. Her confident scowl was gone. She just stared at him in silence.

Barron stepped forward and cleared his throat. “I don’t know exactly what’s going on here, but if Caden is referring to the previous time that Erelim was activated, then he’s correct. Only someone with an ANGEL weapon can power Erelim and control it.”

“And there was only one person in town who had an ANGEL weapon back then,” Caden said. “Mother Andrea. She was the one controlling Erelim, she was the one who destroyed your town, and you did nothing about it.”

Thadi pivoted her smoldering gaze back to Simona. All Simona could do was whimper. Her lip trembled as she spoke.

“I ... I had no choice!” she blubbered. “What was I going to do? Fight against Mother Andrea? The whole Church?”

I did what was best for our town. It's thanks to me there haven't been *more* casualties!"

Simona was a sniveling mess. The terrified eighteen-year-old she'd locked away came pouring out in a flood of tears.

"I did what I had to do!" she wailed. "I made sure we gave the Church everything they wanted, so they'd have no reason to hurt us again. I did what I had to do to keep everyone safe."

"But you just ended up hurting your town even more," Caden said. "New Darien is at the lowest point it's ever been, thanks to you."

Tears spilled from Simona's eyes. She gripped the sides of her head. "It's not my fault. It's not my fault!"

"Erelin attacking wasn't your fault," Caden said. "But everything you've done since then is. Making everyone in town dig in the Hole every day. What you did to Holly's parents. What you did to Amar. You made an example out of them, just like the Church did with your family. You've done the same monstrous things to others that were done to you."

Simona didn't say anything. Her whole body quavered as she stared down at the ground, now wet with her tears. It was Thadi who spoke first.

"We talked about this, Simona," she said sharply. "You said Mother Andrea had nothing to do with it. That the Church had nothing to do with it. That it was Gotama punishing us."

Simona was a sniveling mess. "Thadi, I'm sorry. I didn't want you to have to bear this burden too. Can you ... can you forgive me?"

Thadi's lips were pursed. She stared past Simona.

“I don’t know,” she said, each word falling out of her mouth like a rock.

The cellar was quiet aside from Simona’s cries. The others watched in bewilderment, not having any idea what was going on. But Caden knew what he had to do next.

“You can never make up for what you’ve done,” he said to Simona. “But there is one thing you can do. Help us beat Jadice and Erelim. This is your chance to fight back. This is your chance to make the right decision.”

Simona shook her head. “It doesn’t matter. Even if we somehow defeat the Betrayer, we still have to turn you in to One. We’re enemies.”

“I’m not your enemy,” Caden said. “Your own group, the Apostles, is your enemy. All this time, both of you have been serving the group that was behind the worst night of your lives. But now you can make up for it. You can take back the decades that were stolen from you. We have the same enemy, and we need to fight together to defeat it!”

Both women stared at Caden. He wasn’t sure if he’d gotten through to them, but when they nodded, he felt the icy air between them thaw away.

“Fine,” Simona said, wiping her eyes. “If it’s to save our town, we’ll help.”

“But what can we do?” Thadi asked. “You saw what we did before. We gave it everything we had, and we didn’t even land a scratch on Erelim.”

“Our ANGEL weapons might not do much against Erelim,” Caden said, renewed enthusiasm tingling through him. “But we have another weapon that’s much stronger.”

“What is it?” Simona asked.

Caden grinned. “Holly.”

He put his hand on Holly’s back and gently pushed her forward. She looked just as shocked as everyone else.

“She came up with the plan to sneak us into the church, and she came up with the plan to get us out. So what do you say, Holly? Can you come up with one more crazy plan to defeat Jadice?”

A smile curled up Holly’s face. “If you need a crazy plan, I’ve got one that’s been brewing.”

“Go for it,” Caden said.

Holly spun and pointed to Barron. “Barron, I know you usually work with Iltech, but can you make kites?”

“Kites?” Barron asked. “I, uh, believe so. Maybe we can use the paper from the books in the living room?”

Holly nodded. She spun and pointed to Annika. “Annika, I need your charge belt, and for you to bring down the books from upstairs.”

Annika nodded and started unbuckling the Iltech belt around her waist. Holly spun once more and pointed to Caden.

“Caden, I need you . . . to tell me the name of your horse.”

“Uh, Deber,” Caden said, not sure what was going on. Holly nodded. She spun and pointed to Deber, who stared back at her with strands of hay sticking out of her mouth.

“Deber!” Holly said. “Listen up, because you have the most important job of all.”



Everyone went to work following Holly's orders. Annika brought down books from upstairs, Caden carefully tore the pages out with one hand still on Simona's magnet-cuffs, Simona mixed adhesive powder with water to make paste and glue the pages together, and Thadi cut wooden crates into planks. Barron and Holly huddled in a corner, working together with his black bag of tools to create more explosives out of Annika's charge packs. Barron walked Holly through each step as she nodded along.

When Annika brought down another armful of books, Rosemary followed behind, carefully wobbling down the steps as she carried a book of her own in her mouth. When she locked eyes with Simona, no longer unconscious, she froze in horror. The book dropped from her mouth, and she dashed back up the stairs.

"Wait!" Simona called out. Rosemary stopped in her tracks. "I ... I'm sorry for what I did. To your husband. And to your father. I know I can't take it back, but ... I'm sorry."

Rosemary took one fearful glance behind her at Simona, then hurried away. Simona sighed and went back to gluing. It wasn't easy for her to dip the brush into the paste and move it around with the magnet-cuffs still locked around her wrists. Holly walked up to her, but Simona looked away.

"I don't deserve your forgiveness," she grumbled. "Or your pity."

"No, it's not that," Holly said. "I just ... had a question. I don't know what Caden saw in your head, or how he saw it or whatever, but he said you were teenagers when Erelim attacked. How is that possible? You should be as old as Grandpa then."

Simona looked like she couldn't believe Holly was talking to her. Caden had a hard time believing it too.

"Well, uh, that's due to a different ANGEL weapon," Simona said. "From a different Apostle. Two is his name. He uses his time weapon to reverse us Apostles back to whatever age we want. One of the perks of the position."

Caden remembered who'd had that ANGEL weapon: Father Yohan in Salem. He figured he should tell them the bad news.

"Well it's a good thing you're leaving the Apostles then," he said. "Two is dead. Jadice killed him. So it looks like no one's getting any age reversals anymore."

Simona grunted in annoyance. "First of all, I never said I'm quitting the Apostles. I need to protect my town, and the best way to do that is within the Church, not outside of it. Second of all, we know what happened to the old Two. But it doesn't matter. There's a new Two already."

Caden briefly wondered who the replacement Two could be. Was it someone from Salem? Maybe one of the Holy Police got promoted.

"I have another question," Holly said. "It's important for our planning. How high can you make your ice snakes go? Can you get to the top of Erelim?"

Simona looked even more taken aback by this question. Caden felt the same. Holly was asking about the weapon that had ruined her family as calmly as if she were asking Simona's shoe size.

"Yeah, I can get to the top of the robot," Simona said. "As long as I'm on top of my ice, I can go up as high up as I want. It's just when my ice gets too far away from my Xs that

it's hard to control. So don't expect me to blast the thing from across town if that's what you're planning."

Caden remembered earlier when he'd maneuvered the explosive from the church into the forest. The farther away it got, the harder it was to control. It seemed like that was something that applied to all ANGEL weapons.

Holly nodded, seemingly satisfied with Simona's response. She turned to go back to Barron.

"Holly!" Simona called. Holly stopped. "I just wanted to say that ... part of the reason we adopted you was because I felt guilty about what I did to your parents. I did what I did because I thought it was best for our town, but I also believed that I should be the one to bear the burden of the consequences. So rather than ship you off to some other town's Home, I took you in."

Simona fiddled with the paste brush in her hand. "I was wrong. Now I know that. But back then, and even up to now, I always thought that ..." Her face tightened, heavy with regret, and she lowered her gaze to the ground. "Never mind."

Holly gave the smallest nod, then walked away and didn't look back. She sat with Barron as the two of them continued transforming the charge packs into explosives. Simona mumbled to herself and flipped through the torn-out pages with her cuffed hands.

"Ow!" she cried. One of the book pages had cut her thumb. She stuck it into her mouth to suck away the blood. Thadi shuffled over and grabbed the paper and glue brush out of her hands.

"I'll do it for you," she said, effortlessly brushing away. "But don't think I've forgiven you."



Simona opened her mouth to protest, then closed it and said nothing. She silently watched Thadi work. Caden went back to tearing out book pages, stifling a laugh at seeing the bloodthirsty tyrant taken down by a paper cut.



Everyone worked tirelessly through the night. It was quiet inside the cellar and out. No sounds of yelling crowds or Erelim stomping. Caden wondered if it was because Jadice had left town to terrorize somewhere else, or if it was because she was still human enough to need sleep.

After a few hours of rest, made worse for Caden by having to hold onto Simona's magnet-cuffs, he got his answer. They all woke to the sound of Erelim smashing through town. Jadice was still here, and they were ready to face her. They grabbed what they'd built, dashed upstairs, and went outside, prepared to fight.

Using kites as their weapons.

Caden had thought Holly was out of her mind when she'd first suggested it, but once she'd explained her three points, he realized that she was absolutely right. First, they had no chance of defeating Erelim in a fair fight; they had to somehow take Jadice by surprise. Second, they wouldn't be able to surprise Jadice unless she was distracted. Third, they needed a new distraction; they couldn't just set off another explosion.

That meant their only option was to distract Jadice using something else she desperately cared about: *herself*. Barron

had constructed three kites, and Thadi had used her painting skills and some buckets of dark brown paint to write short but effective phrases on each of them. All three kites were attached to Deber's saddle with string, each as tall and wide as she was, ready for her to sprint and send them into the sky.

With Jadice distracted, the plan was for Caden, Simona, and Thadi to fly up using their ANGEL weapons and each plant an explosive on Erelim's head. Holly and the rest of the group would stay hidden, ready to detonate the bombs. The explosives should at least disable the robot enough to take down Jadice at the helm inside. Of course, there was a chance that the bombs wouldn't work, or that they'd go off too early or too late or ... Caden tried not to think of all the ways the plan could go wrong.

"You sure about all this?" he asked Holly as they stood outside.

"Don't worry, I have backup plans," she said with a wink. "Besides, I'm much more worried about *this*."

Holly walked up to Simona and unclasped the magnet-cuffs around her arms. Caden could feel everyone's hearts skip a beat as they watched Simona rub her newly-freed wrists. The Xs on her palms glowed bright turquoise. She looked around at all of them.

"What?" she snapped. "I want that monster gone as much as all of you. Let's go blow it up!"

Everyone breathed a collective sigh of relief. Caden looked toward Erelim. It wasn't hard to spot. The massive robot towered over everything, its Iltech body rattling as it lumbered down the road a few streets over. Caden rubbed Deber's mane. She turned her head to lick his hand.

“You ready, girl?” he asked. Deber whinnied in response. Caden brought his hand to her rear and gave her a pat. “Go, girl! Go! As fast as you can. And don’t stop!”

Deber neighed and burst forward. The three kites soared up high. Each of them had a different phrase painted in big, brown letters:

*Steel for legs! Steel for brains!*

*More like the Betrayer of bath time!*

*You smell bad!*

With Deber’s speed the kites caught the wind and rose higher and higher. Caden couldn’t help but snicker as he watched. Hopefully Jadice would be distracted enough by the kites to not notice Deber, and she’d be okay. All they needed was to blind her with rage for a minute, and then it would all be over.

“Let’s go!” Holly yelled. She led them behind the houses to stay hidden as Deber galloped on the main road toward Erelim. Caden wondered if Jadice would even notice the kites, until her voice boomed through town.

“Oh I smell bad, do I?” she roared. “We’ll see who stinks when I leave your rotting corpses out to bake in the sun!”

Erelim was facing the kites, turned away from Caden and the rest. The backs of the robot’s legs were right in view. This was their chance. Caden, Simona, and Thadi each gripped their explosive, ready to fly up and plant them on the robot’s head.

“... is what I *would* say,” Jadice’s voice thundered, “if I was actually tricked by some idiotic kites!”

Erelim spun around to the group in the alleyway. Caden’s heart dropped. Their plan had failed.

“Long time no see, Blondie!” Jadice screeched. “Our dear Commander wants to study your ANGEL weapon. I’ll gladly send it back to him in pieces after I stomp you into a million tiny bits!”

Caden readied himself to fly up and plant the explosive anyway. Holly put her hand on his shoulder to stop him.

“Annika,” Holly said way too calmly for their situation. “It’s time for Plan B.”

Annika grinned from ear to ear as she took out her magnetizer. She pointed it at Erelim, powered it on, and hit the button for “nine.” Maximum power.

“Ooh I’ve been waiting for this,” she said. She pressed “enter.”

*PSHEW!*

A blinding yellow and blue electric blast spewed out of the magnetizer, right into Erelim’s leg. The impact sent crashing booms and sizzling static through town. Caden shielded his eyes from the waves, but he could still feel it crackling through him. When he looked back at Erelim, the robot’s left leg was sparking and splotted with char marks. It still hobbled toward them, limping on its damaged leg.

“Is that your big plan?” Jadice cackled. “A couple of kites and a remote control from Clops? I expected more from you, Blondie!”

Annika grit her teeth as she gripped her magnetizer. “Shouldn’t that have blasted it to pieces?”

“Erelim is too big,” Barron said. “One blast by itself isn’t going to do it.”

“I’ll fire it again,” Annika said, reaching for her charge packs. “Just give me a minute.”

“No,” Holly said. “One at a time isn’t going to work. We need to go bigger. Caden! Call Deber back here.”

“What?” Caden asked, not knowing what she was talking about.

“Just do it, quick!”

Caden put his fingers into his mouth and whistled as loudly as he could. The high-pitched sound pierced the air, just like back at the Home in Salem when he’d call for Deber after she’d grazed in the fields.

“Deber!” Caden called, still having no idea why he was doing this. “Come back, girl!”

There was a faraway whinny, and Deber came galloping toward them. Behind her, the kites soared up high, until she ran underneath Erelim between its legs and the kites tangled around the giant robot’s body.

The kite strings got caught in the Iltech mishmash of Erelim’s legs and snapped off as Deber made it through. The three kites billowed around Erelim’s head, knocking against it.

“What the steel is this?” Jadice growled. “You think your toys are going to stop me?”

Caden was as confused as Jadice. Next to him, Holly took out the red-button detonator.

“Perfect,” she said. “The bombs are in place.”

“Wait,” Caden said. “You don’t mean ... there are explosives on the kites?”

Holly grinned at him. “Of course there are explosives on the kites.”

“But I thought the Guardians and I were going to plant them!”

“That was Plan A. But now it’s time for Plan C.”

Caden felt like he’d been tricked. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because then you would’ve wanted to ride out there with Deber. I needed you here, ready to try Plan A first.”

Caden had to admit, she had a point. Holly rested her finger over the red button.

“Cover your ears, everyone!”

Caden clamped his hands over the sides of his head in preparation for an even bigger, ear-shattering blast. Holly pressed the button down.

But there was nothing. She pressed again. And again. Still nothing.

“What’s wrong?” Caden asked.

“It’s Erelim itself,” Barron said. “All the electricity inside of it, it’s interfering with the wireless signal to detonate.”

The hope that had fluttered in Caden’s heart was snuffed out like a candle. Erelim, still tangled in the three kites, aimed the blue *X* on its palm at itself.

“I don’t know what your plan is with these stupid kites,” Jadice said, “but I’ll wash them away, along with the rest of this Gotama-forsaken town!”

A torrent of water sprayed out of Erelim’s *X* right onto itself, shredding the kites to scrap and sending a raging river soaring over the town. The jet of water plunged to the asphalt roads and grass below, slamming into houses and sending people running and screaming in all directions, Sparrows and Reactors alike. Water burst back up from the impact, raining down over the town like a sudden hurricane shower, drenching Caden and everyone else.

Annika pushed back her sopping wet hair and groaned. “Great. So now what do we do?”

All eyes were on Holly. She stared ahead, dripping wet, seeming to be thinking intensely about something. Just when Caden was about to ask her if she had a Plan D, she shot him a look with eyes harder than stone.

“Caden,” she said. “I have one more backup plan. There’s another way I can set off the explosives, but I can only do them one at a time. I need you to bring me up to Erelim’s head. Can you do that?”

“Uh, yeah,” Caden said.

“No, Holly!” Barron protested. “You can’t! You’ll—”

“Simona, Thadi,” Holly called, ignoring Barron. “Give me your explosives. You two go out there and distract Erelim. When its head gets blown off, take down Jadice inside of it.”

Simona and Thadi nodded as obediently as if they’d taken orders from Holly their entire lives. The two of them placed their metallic cylinders into Holly’s hand.

“Annika,” Holly said. “You replace the charge in your magnetizer and stand by, so we have a backup just in case.”

“Aye aye,” Annika said, tapping the magnetizer against her forehead in salute.

Barron protested again. “Holly, you—”

“We don’t have time!” she yelled. “Simona, Thadi, go!”

Simona pointed her turquoise *Xs* to the ground. The familiar ice snake erupted out of it, bringing her and Thadi up on its head, slithering right in front of Erelim. The robot’s body was free of the kites and its arms were out, ready to attack.

“Hey, Betrayer!” Simona yelled from the top of the snake.

“You hit yourself with your own water! I knew you were a bad shot, but try a little harder!”

Holly didn't waste a second. “Caden, let's go!” she ordered.

Caden slipped his own explosive into his overalls pocket, wrapped one arm around Holly, and thrust the other to the ground. Just thinking about the joy he would feel when they brought down Jadice was more than enough to send them soaring. As they rose higher, Caden watched Simona maneuver the ice snake to the other side of Erelim, forcing the giant robot to turn around. Its back was to Caden and Holly as they ascended higher and higher behind it.

Up in the air, he could see the dire state of the Reactors. They were easy to spot in their bright green uniforms, sprawled over town, drenched and writhing on the ground. Jadice's water blast had hit them all head on, not that she seemed to care.

“So you think I'm a bad shot, huh?” came Jadice's voice again. “Well this time I won't miss. Because I'm aiming for the entire town and everyone in it!”

Erelim's arms flew out to the sides. The Xs on both palms glowed bright.

“I'll flood this entire town with electrified water,” Jadice bellowed. “Then when it clears I'll take all your ANGEL weapons as my personal trophies.”

“You'll kill all of the Reactors too!” Thadi yelled from the top of the snake. “Your allies!”

“A sacrifice I'm willing to make,” Jadice said.

Caden wasn't sure if Jadice could actually flood all of New Darien, but he didn't want to find out. He and Holly



landed on Erelim's shoulder. It was bulky with metal sticking out like the jagged side of an Iltech cliff.

"Caden!" Holly said. "Give me your explosive!"

Caden fumbled for it out of his overalls pocket and handed it over. Holly slammed both of her explosives and Caden's against Erelim's neck, making the three of them stick like magnets, then opened them up, revealing wires and buttons inside. Meanwhile the Xs on Erelim's palms glowed brighter. Its shoulder started trembling underneath Caden and Holly's feet. Something bad was coming.

"Holly!" Caden said. "If you're going to do something, do it now!"

Holly stopped, turned to Caden, and looked at him with a sad smile. "Caden, remember when I said I can only detonate the bombs one at a time?"

"Yeah, but—"

"Well I lied. I can only detonate them once. Period. I'm sorry I couldn't do more."

Before Caden could even ask what she meant, Holly shoved him hard in the chest, knocking him off Erelim's shoulder. Caden was in such shock as he fell that he saw everything in slow motion. Holly touched something on one of the explosives, then closed her eyes.

Caden was screaming so loud he didn't even hear the explosion. Three fiery tornadoes erupted out of the side of Erelim's neck with a triple sonic boom, blowing off its Iltech head and taking Holly with it.

## Chapter 18

### Redemption

Somewhere far away, Erelim's head crashed into a building. The robot's headless body stumbled backward, struggling to stay balanced. Black smoke plumed from between its shoulders as it swayed, one step from falling over.

And then Caden remembered that he was falling too.

He tried to use his ANGEL weapon to stop himself, but it was too late. Caden's back smacked hard on the asphalt road. Stars exploded across his vision and the wind was knocked out of him. He gasped for breath, but no air came in or out. He just lay there, unable to move, staring at the sky.

Despite the pain ringing through every nerve ending, Caden could still see just fine. And he saw something he couldn't believe.

A giant hand, made entirely of ice, had caught Holly in mid-air.

The sparkling hand wrapped Holly in its fingers. She was unconscious and bleeding. Bleeding a lot. Red streaks stained the ice like paint.

From far away atop the ice snake, Simona held out a turquoise *X* on her palm, controlling the ice hand. She had it

slowly bring Holly down to the ground, then disappear into mist. Now Caden could see what was wrong with Holly: both her arms were missing. They'd been blown off in the explosion.

Barron ran over to Holly and knelt beside her, quickly going to work with his bag of Iltech. Caden couldn't see what he was doing, he couldn't even tell if Holly was alive. But there was one thing he could see clearly: the person who had caused all of this.

The smoke had cleared from the top of Erelim and Jadice was there, exposed. She was coughing, her black cloak singed, her blue and yellow hair frazzled. Her hands were inserted into Iltech podiums on either side, and her feet were dug into Erelim's Iltech neck. The rest of her was out in the open, surrounded by charred metal scraps, vulnerable to any attack. Caden tried to force himself to move, to fly, to even stand up, but he couldn't budge. The impact from falling to the ground, which would've killed any normal human, had paralyzed him. Just thinking about moving sent searing pain through his immobile limbs.

But Caden wasn't the only one who noticed Jadice out in the open. From the top of the ice snake, Thadi unleashed a pillar of fire straight at Jadice. It was thicker than a house and radiated such heat that Caden felt it from the ground.

Jadice immediately braced herself. She had Erelim blast out a waterfall from its palm right into the fire. The inferno fizzled away into smoke, not a single flame hitting her.

Before the water even crashed to the ground, Jadice thrust out Erelim's other hand. The yellow X on its palm discharged lighting into the ice snake, blasting it to shards. Simona and Thadi tumbled to the ground, but Jadice didn't

stop. She relentlessly thrust out Erelim's lightning palm again and again, unleashing ear-pounding blast after blast. When she finally stopped, there were no more ice snakes or flame pillars. Only the thick, sour smell of scorched earth.

Erelim turned to face Caden. From the top of the robot, Jadice stared down at Holly and Barron.

"I have to say," she said, her voice not as loud without Erelim's head but just as powerful. "You packed quite a punch for one little girl. I'm impressed. As a reward, I'll put you out of your misery."

Jadice extended her blue palm toward Holly and Barron. It glowed bright, ready to unleash a rampaging river that would crush both of them.

Something snapped inside Caden. Holly was about to become another name on the list, the ever-growing list of people who had helped him and ended up paying with their lives. Amar. Mikaela. Remi. Mr. Linden. Father Yohan. Clops. Everyone in Salem's Basement. And Tooby, the Iltech spider who had helped so much at the beginning of his journey.

No! Caden wasn't going to let Holly become just another name on that horrible list!

From somewhere deep inside him, Caden heard a voice:  
"*DEVIL mode activated.*"

His vision cleared. His body cleared. All pain was gone. All anger was gone. Funny how difficult and urgent everything had felt moments ago. Caden lay on the ground, staring up at Erelim's extended arm. He could sense the water flowing through it, ready to blast out of the glowing X. But he wasn't worried. Why should he be worried when he could easily dispose of it?



Caden didn't stand up from the ground, he leaped as if pulled by invisible strings. He was up in the air, palms out and aimed at Erelim's arm. This robot was aiming to destroy one of his allies. It had to be eliminated.

Millions of tiny Planck particles erupted out of Caden's palms, colliding with Erelim's Iltech arm. They coated it like grains of sand, waiting for Caden's command. So he gave it.

With a twist of his fingers, Caden ripped Erelim's arm off its body, just as the water shot out of its palm. The massive arm spun through the sky, raining down drops of water until it crashed outside of town.

The threat against his ally had been neutralized. It was time to finish it off. Caden turned his attention to Jadice.

But Jadice was one step ahead.

Her hand that had been controlling Erelim's torn-off arm was out of the Iltech podium and holding a magnet-bow, its silver tip pointed right at Caden. She unleashed a magnetic blast that collided right into him.

Caden didn't feel anything. The magnetic field that hit him was less than a gentle breeze. And yet, he'd been hurt. It was harder to stay flying. Millions of Planck particles that had been holding him up fell to the ground, no longer under his control. He couldn't afford to take another hit.

"I came prepared this time, Blondie!" she shouted. "This thing won't destroy you by itself, but it'll turn you into a rag doll. Then we can see how *you* like having your limbs torn off!"

Jadice aimed the magnet-bow and shot another blast. Caden dodged it using the Planck particles he had left. He needed to completely neutralize this threat before it put him

and his allies in further danger. Caden extended his palms. He didn't have enough Planck particles left to rip off the robot's other arm, but he had more than enough to deal with the human piloting it.

"Seems you don't like it when I aim for your friends, Blondie," Jadice yelled. "So what are you gonna do about *this*?"

Erelim raised its good leg, then slammed it down, sending a tremor through town. Everything shook, the roads, the buildings, even the air vibrated in fear. Erelim thrust out its palm with the yellow *X*, aiming it at the ground. At Annika.

She was knocked over on her side from Erelim's quake, her magnetizer lying on the asphalt. Even if she made a grab for it, it'd be too late. Caden could feel the electricity flowing through Erelim's arm, ready to burst out and fry her to a crisp.

Caden's mind quickly did the calculations. If he took down Jadice now, then Annika would be killed, but everyone else would be saved. If he saved Annika, then Jadice would still be active ...

He swerved the particles he'd been planning to use on Jadice toward Annika instead, sweeping her off the ground. Just in time. Jagged bolts of lightning cracked against the asphalt, leaving a smoking crater right where Annika had been.

Caden hovered Annika over to Barron and Holly, but at the last second, she slipped out of his Planck particle grip. Caden wobbled in the air. Something was wrong. His head snapped to Jadice. She was unleashing blast after blast from the magnet-bow right at him, each one a direct hit, sucking away what little remained of his energy.

“How pathetic,” Jadice sneered as she kept up her relentless barrage of shots. “You could’ve beaten me if you didn’t worry about your little friends! It’s high time you learned the truth, Blondie. There’s only one person who matters: yourself. Anyone else will just end up betraying you in the end.”

Caden was powerless. More and more Planck particles slipped out of his control as he floated down to the ground. As soon as his feet touched the asphalt, he collapsed, the remaining particles that had been holding up his paralyzed body finally gone. Only then did Jadice stop blasting him. Erelim stomped up to him, still limping on its charred leg, as Jadice stared down victoriously.

“We all die alone, Blondie!” she yelled down. “Caring about someone only makes their eventual betrayal more painful. It’s a lesson I’ve learned many times, but it seems like you learned it too late. Just like your father before he died. And now you get to pay the price, as all your useless friends helplessly watch you get crushed!”

Caden knew in his heart that Jadice was lying about his father being dead, just like last time they’d faced off in Salem. But she wasn’t lying about crushing him. Erelim’s Iltech foot rose up, its shadow looming over Caden. Metal scraps spilled down from it, clanging to the ground. Caden couldn’t move. He was surprised he was still functioning after taking so many magnet-bow blasts.

“Goodbye, Blondie!” Jadice said. “I look forward to scattering your metallic ashes to the wind!”

Erelim’s foot rushed down, aiming right for Caden. He didn’t close his eyes. He hoped that, at least, his friends would find a way to defeat Jadice without him.



*PSHEW!*

Electricity sizzled through the street, and a static wave erupted out of Erelim's blackened leg, cracking it in half. The foot that had been raised above Caden stumbled to the ground, bringing with it the rest of the giant robot. Erelim's body crashed into three houses, hurling wood, brick, and Iltech debris everywhere. Sparrows and Reactors ran away as the robot flailed its remaining arm and leg, desperately trying and failing to stand back up.

Caden looked over to find the cause of the explosion. A chunk of Erelim's damaged leg had fallen over, threatening to crush a group of Reactors. It was only being stopped by Helmut, holding out his golden cape against it, struggling to keep it propped up as the Reactors ran to safety. In his other hand he was holding Annika's magnetizer, still sparking with electricity. He'd shot the blast that had finished off Erelim's leg and brought it to the ground.

But he wasn't looking good. He was shaking and breathing hard as he pressed his cape against Erelim's heavy Iltech leg. With a heaving grunt, he thrust against it, pushing it away just enough to dash off to the side before it crashed, banging up a cloud of dust and dirt. Helmut crumbled to the ground, lying on his back, coughing and breathing raspy.

Caden needed to take advantage of the opening Helmut had bought them. He had to eliminate the threat once and for all. Only there was one problem: he was out of Planck particles. Jadice's magnet-bow blasts had rendered nearly all of them useless. Caden quickly calculated that it would take six hours and fifty-seven minutes before their charges came back. He didn't have time to wait. He needed to do something now.

Using the few particles that remained, Caden raised his hand up, aiming it at Erelim. He tried to sever the robot's other remaining arm, but it was impossible. He barely had enough particles to keep his hand up.

Then a voice came from inside Caden. It was deep and tinny, as if it hadn't been used in a very long time.

*"Mother?"* it asked. *"Is that you?"*

Suddenly Caden sensed the presence of new Planck particles under his control. Millions and millions of them. They weren't his own; they were inside Erelim. He didn't know why he could control them, but he wasn't going to waste the opportunity.

His hand outstretched, Caden clamped his fingers into a fist. The Planck particles inside Erelim's arm obeyed his command. From the outside in, Erelim's arm crumpled in on itself as easily as a piece of paper squeezed into a ball. Sparks and wires shot out as it shriveled. The yellow *X* on its palm flickered, dimmed, then snapped in half and fell off. The entire arm was now useless. The threat had been neutralized.

Erelim lay on the ground, one leg missing, one arm missing, and its other arm little more than a withered stump. Reactors started coming out from their hiding spots. Some of them had magnet-bows poised and ready as they cautiously approached the fallen robot. They didn't need to do that. The threat had been defeated.

No. Caden sensed another threat.

Annika was running over to Helmut. He was still lying on the ground, groaning out pained breaths. The magnetizer lay beside him. In his current state, Annika could easily grab it and blast him, finally getting her revenge. Caden couldn't

let that happen. Helmut had helped them. He was an ally.

Caden channeled the Planck particles inside Erelim, summoning a long Iltech pipe from the robot's mishmash of metal. He ripped it out, shot it over to Annika, and slammed it into her leg. She tripped and fell to the ground, but that wasn't enough. Caden controlled the particles inside the pipe to contort it around Annika's ankles, wrapping it around her as effortlessly as rope. She was rendered immobile on the ground, screaming in anger as she crawled toward Helmut.

Even though Helmut could barely move, he'd seen Annika running toward him. He slowly rose to his feet and hobbled away, disappearing through a building as hundreds of Reactors and Sparrows now appeared on the street.

"Caden!" Annika screamed. Her face was red. Her finger shook as she pointed at his glowing Xs. "You did this! You stopped me! I'll never—"

*"DEVIL mode deactivated."*

Caden didn't hear the rest. Everything he should have been feeling finally caught up with him, hitting him harder than a charging stallion. Snapped muscles, broken bones, a pounding headache like a stone hammer right to the forehead. Caden couldn't do anything except lie on the ground, twitching involuntarily.

Sparrows and Reactors cautiously approached Erelim. If Jadice was still alive, she was hidden under the cloud of dust and mess of rubble between the robot's shoulders. Barron was tending to Holly. Annika was still crawling toward her magnetizer. Someone else was running over to Caden, but he couldn't make out who. Everything was a blur. Everything hurt.

"Can you stand up?" came a familiar voice.

“Of course he can’t,” said another. “Here, grab his other side.”

Suddenly Caden was rising up from the ground. The pain shot from his head to his feet. All he could do was whimper as he focused to see who was helping him.

It was Simona and Thadi. Both of them were covered in dirt, ash, and burns. They helped carry Caden toward Erelim.

“I don’t think he’s in any condition to fight,” Thadi said.

“Better safe than sorry,” Simona said. “You saw what he did to Erelim. I’d rather have him close by if things go wrong with the Betrayer.”

Caden was only vaguely aware of their words. Erelim? Betrayer? Did they win?

Simona and Thadi stopped at the side of Erelim’s chest. The dust had cleared, and the neck-stump where its head had been was buried in a pile of wood and Iltech rubble. All around them, Reactors stood fearfully, their eyes darting back and forth between Erelim and the Guardians. They probably weren’t sure if they should be helping their ally who had tried to kill them, or helping their enemies who had saved them.

A voice blared out from Erelim. It wasn’t Jadice’s voice. It was the same deep, metallic voice that Caden had heard in his head when he’d summoned Erelim’s Planck particles.

*“Five minutes.”*

The pile of debris rumbled, followed by a cough and groan as Jadice pulled herself out of it. Immediately the Reactors pointed their crossbows and magnet-bows at her. Simona and Thadi each raised their palms at her too. Jadice laughed through a cough and held her hands up in surrender.

“We should’ve known not to trust you!” one of the Reactors yelled.

“What were you thinking?” another said. “You could’ve killed us all!”

Jadice rolled her eyes. “Yes, and that would’ve been a *terrible* loss.”

“The Commander should’ve never recruited you!” shouted another Reactor.

“We’re taking you in. You’re under arrest.”

Jadice looked around at all the Reactors, Sparrows, Simona, Thadi, and Caden. She was clearly outnumbered, but it didn’t look like she cared. A thin, Iltech snake wrapped around Jadice’s arm peeked its head out of her sleeve and hissed at the crowd.

From inside Erelim, the same deep metallic voice boomed. “*Four minutes.*”

“Did you hear that?” Jadice said. “You know what that sound is? It’s the sound of you having way bigger problems right now.”

Murmurs of confusion spread through the crowd.

“What did you do?” Thadi demanded.

Jadice gazed over the crowd with a wide, sadistic grin. “Did you know that this robot can be set to have all its energy released at once in a gigantic explosion? Well, what a coincidence! Neither did I until a minute ago. And you know what else I didn’t know until a minute ago? How to set the timer. Oh, actually one minute and fifteen seconds ago now, to be exact.”

There were gasps from the Reactors and Sparrows. Some of them lowered their weapons. A few started running away as fast as possible.

“Yes, run!” Jadice laughed. “Can you escape the mile-wide

blast of this thing? I'd love to see you try! I'll come back and check your remains once this town has been blown to bits. Five points if you get far enough for something interesting to survive in your ashes. Ten points if it's a weapon I can add to my collection."

With everyone momentarily paralyzed, Jadice thrust her palms to the ground and blasted into the air on water jets. The Reactors snapped to their senses, firing arrows and magnet-bow blasts at her, but she kicked lightning from the Xs on her Iltech legs and skipped away as if walking on thunder clouds.

"Save yourselves, Guardians!" Jadice cackled as she ran away. "The rest of your town is doomed, but you can get away in time, just like the cowards you are!"

Jadice disappeared into the distance. But she didn't matter anymore. All that mattered was Erelim and the ticking time bomb inside of it.

"*Three minutes,*" the deep voice announced. The crowd panicked.

"Did she say everything in a mile would be destroyed?"

"What do we do?"

"We have to run!"

"Mother Thadi! Mother Simona! Save us!"

Thadi grit her teeth in helplessness. "What can I do? Burn it? For all I know that would set it off even faster." She turned to Caden. "Can you fly the bomb out of here? A mile away or more?"

Caden couldn't even raise his hand, much less control the Planck particles inside of Erelim like he'd done in DEVIL mode. Just thinking about it sent shocks of weakness through him. All he could manage was to shake his head.

“Simona!” Thadi said. “Use your ice to get it out of here. Send it as high up as you can.”

Simona looked at the ground. “I can’t.”

“What do you mean you can’t? Just make an ice snake! One that’s a mile tall.”

“Impossible,” Simona said. “I could send it up a hundred feet, two hundred maybe, but I couldn’t control it any higher than that. The ice would be too far away from my Xs. The only way I’d be able to bring it up a mile is if ...”

Simona stopped herself. A smile spread across her face. A smile that was warm and soft, as if the teenager she’d locked away for so long, the young woman full of love and caring, had finally broken free.

“You don’t paint pictures anymore, Thadi,” Simona said. “The painting you did on the kites, that was the first time in years.”

Thadi blinked at her, confused. “Simona, this isn’t the time for—”

“And Holly,” Simona continued. “She’s so smart. Much more than I could ever hope to be.”

Thadi looked at Simona as though she were speaking a foreign language. “Simona, that bomb is going to go off if we don’t—”

Simona let go of Caden, making him buckle to the side. She leaned into Thadi’s ear, whispered something that made Thadi’s eyes go wide, and grabbed her shoulders. Simona kissed her hard on the lips, then pulled back, grinning at her shocked face.

“I never got to scavenge wide,” Simona said. “But now, at least I get to soar high.”

She let go of Thadi and walked over to Erelim. She thrust out her hands to the side, making the crowd step back in fear.

“Everyone!” Simona said. “Get as far away as you can!”

They didn’t need to be told twice. The Reactors and Sparrows ran from Erelim. Thadi scooped up Caden and carried him away with the crowd. He looked back to see what was happening as Thadi and everyone else ran away.

“*Two minutes,*” Erelim’s voice rang out.

Simona slammed her palm onto the ground, instantly forming an ice sheet underneath Erelim’s body. The ice slowly rose up from the asphalt, turning into the head of a massive ice snake, bringing Erelim and Simona up with it. Then, without warning, the ice snake shot up, pushing Erelim and Simona high into the sky at speeds Caden didn’t even know were possible. The ice creaked and frozen clouds of white plumed out as the thick pillar zoomed higher and higher, faster than a horse, faster than the truck they’d ridden in. After a minute it was so high up Caden couldn’t even see the top without craning his neck. It looked like it was high enough to touch Metl.

Caden thought he saw something sparkle from the top of the ice snake. He wondered how much longer they had. He wondered if the bomb was far away enough to protect them. He wondered if Jadice had just been bluffing and—

*KA-BOOM!*

The explosion was so loud Caden only heard it for a second before it blasted out his eardrums. A painful ringing clanged in his head as a mile-wide cloud of fire and smoke erupted in the sky, unfurling into a blackened thunderhead looming over the Earth. The ice pillar shattered into millions



of tiny pieces, shimmering to the ground like snowflakes.

Thadi stopped running, as did the Reactors and Sparrows. Everyone stood and stared at the explosion, like a giant fireworks display had just gone off above town. As the smoke cleared, there was no sign of Erelim or Simona.

Caden smiled. His vision went dark. He collapsed.

## Chapter 19

### Goodbye

Caden's eyes creaked open. He felt like he was being crushed by a giant stone slab. Aches burned all over and a piercing headache blurred his vision. He blinked and tried to move but couldn't. Where was he? Was everyone okay?

Summoning all of his energy, Caden rolled onto his side. That was a mistake. The sudden movement knocked the wind out of him, sending him coughing nonstop. He tried to cover his mouth, but he couldn't. He was bound. Trapped. Every cough brought his vision a little clearer, until he finally saw where he was. Rosemary's living room.

He was lying on a straw mattress, tightly tucked underneath several layers of sheets and blankets. Soreness made him cringe with each movement as he struggled to slowly twist his arms up. He crept his fingers outside the covering, grabbed it, and pulled it away enough to stretch his chest. Released from his cloth prison, he sat up, wincing in pain as his body screamed for him to stop moving. His vision was still fuzzy. He rubbed his eyes and sighed.

The door to the living room opened. Rosemary appeared in the doorway, and she gasped when she saw him.

“You’re awake!” she said. “I’ll go get the others.”

She dashed away. There was something different about her, but everything was still out of focus. Caden blinked again and again, as if using his eyes for the first time in years.

Now that he was sitting, his headache began to drain away. The sunlight pouring in through the windows felt warm and wonderful. The fog inside his head was clearing, and the memories came rushing back. Was Holly okay? What about Annika? And why was he so thirsty?

Footsteps and hooves clopped on hardwood. Four beaming faces popped into the room: Thadi, Barron, Rosemary, and of course, Deber.

Deber whinnied when she saw Caden. She trotted up to him and bent down to lick his cheeks. Her wet tongue was like fire on Caden’s skin, but he couldn’t help but smile.

“Okay, girl,” he said, gently pushing her away. “I’m happy you’re all right.”

Thadi crossed her arms and leaned in close to Caden. “Glad you decided to finally wake up, sleepyhead.”

“What do you mean?” Caden asked.

“You’ve been out for three days,” Barron said. “Not that I blame you of course.”

Caden’s mouth fell open. “Three days?”

“After all that you’ve been through, we’re glad you’re waking up at all. That ANGEL weapon of yours has been doing serious work keeping you alive. Here, drink this.”

Barron brought a cup of water to Caden’s lips. As soon as the liquid touched his mouth, an explosive thirst tore through him. He needed more water, now! He reached up to grab the cup and chug the rest, but Barron gently pulled it away.

“That’s enough for now,” he said.

Reluctantly, Caden obeyed. He tried to remember everything that had happened before he’d blacked out. Battling Jadice, being hit by her magnet-bow over and over. And then before that, falling off Erelim after Holly had shoved him.

Holly. The image of her flashed in his mind. Arms missing, blood spilled over ice.

“Where’s Holly?” he asked. Barron, Rosemary and Thadi exchanged glances. Caden’s heart sank. No, it couldn’t be.

“I’m here!” came Holly’s voice. She slowly walked into the living room, half smiling and half clenching her teeth in pain, but as far as Caden could tell there was nothing wrong with her. She was standing, breathing, and looked like both arms were intact. For some reason she was wearing her mother’s long sky-blue gloves, the ones that extended from fingertip to shoulder, which Caden just realized Rosemary didn’t have on. The sleeves of Holly’s gray mining uniform were ripped off at the shoulders and singed at the edges, but her arms were moving normally and definitely not stuffed with straw.

“You’re okay,” Caden said. Holly gave him an awkward glance.

“Well, yes and no,” she said. She removed her gloves and let them fall to the ground. What was left behind made Caden’s jaw drop.

Holly’s arms were made of ice. They moved like normal, but they glittered in the sunlight like freshly fallen snow.

Before Caden could ask what had happened, Holly turned to the side. The ice arms were coming out of glowing

turquoise Xs installed into the sides of her shoulders, where her arms had once been. The Xs were surrounded by white bandages. Finally, Caden understood.

“You have Simona’s ANGEL weapon,” he said. Holly nodded. Her expression was unreadable. A mixture of joy, pain, and years of misery finally over, though it had cost her dearly.

“Simona removed the weapon from herself and dropped it down before the explosion,” Thadi said. “It was Simona’s last wish for Holly to have it. She told me before she ... went up. Despite everything, she still felt like she was Holly’s mother. And this was her way of trying to make up for the anguish she’d caused.”

Caden remembered the sparkle he’d seen before the explosion. Had that been Simona’s ANGEL weapon? And for her to remove it from her own body ... Caden couldn’t imagine what that must’ve been like.

“Wait a minute,” Caden said. “If Simona’s ANGEL weapon is okay, then does that mean ...?”

“No,” Barron said. “She’s gone. In fact, her ANGEL weapon barely survived the fall. It crashed to the ground and broke, but luckily there’s someone in town who has plenty of experience working on ANGEL weapons.” He gave a wink. “I fixed it, and after Holly left her own bed yesterday, I installed it on her.”

“I’m still getting used to it,” Holly said. “But I’ve learned a few tricks.”

She raised her ice arms, squinted her eyes, and the hands at the ends grew ten times their size. She swung her massive icy fists like a boxing giant, but one of them crashed into

the other. It cracked in half and fell to the floor with a thud, spraying ice shards all over.

“Whoops,” Holly said, blushing. “I’ve still got some learning to do.”

Her ice hands shrank back to normal size. She picked up the gloves and slid them on.

Caden was glad that Holly still had a way to use her arms. And it was nice to know that there was someone else with an ANGEL weapon who wasn’t trying to kill him. But at the same time, something didn’t feel right.

“Are you okay with this, Holly?” he asked. “I mean, that weapon has done so many horrible things to your town. And to you. Are you okay having it?”

Rosemary stepped forward. Even though she was missing her gloves, and her arms, she had something that Caden had never seen on her before: a smile.

“Mother Simona did terrible things with that weapon. But she’s gone. Now it’s time for Holly to do some good with it.” She nudged herself up next to her daughter. “Holly, your father and grandfather are watching you from up in Metl in the sky. And they’re just as proud of you as I am.”

Holly wrapped her gloved arms around her mother. Rosemary leaned in and kissed her forehead. The woman who had run away in fear at seeing Simona in the cellar seemed to be no more. Caden didn’t know exactly what had caused the change in Rosemary. Maybe it was Simona’s death, finally bringing closure to the horrors she’d been through. Or maybe it was just being able to be with her daughter again.

Caden’s pain was fading. He could see everything around him clearly now. And he realized there was someone missing.

“Where’s Annika?” he asked.

The four of them looked around uncomfortably.

“We don’t know,” Holly admitted. “Nobody’s seen her or Helmut since the explosion.”

Caden immediately thought of the worst. “The explosion didn’t get her, did it?”

Barron shook his head. “No. No one was hurt.”

So Annika was okay, but she was choosing not to be here with him. Caden didn’t blame her. He’d stopped her from killing her dad, from fulfilling her purpose. Hopefully she’d come around soon, and Caden could apologize.

“What about Jadice?” he asked. “Has she been back?”

“Not while I’m around,” Barron said with a hint of pride. “As Vice Commander, I have officially discharged General Jadice from the Reactor Army. Now that everyone knows she’s an enemy and not an ally, we’ve been on high alert with magnet-bow-armed guards around town. If she takes one step into New Darien, she’ll be disabled in seconds. But I think she’s smarter than that. She’s likely already moved on to whatever group she wants to try to take advantage of next.”

Caden was glad to hear she was gone, but just thinking about Jadice reminded him of something he needed to ask.

“Barron,” Caden said. “I want you to tell me about my father.”

The time had finally come. No more distractions. Caden was going to squeeze every last drop of information out of Barron that he could.

Thadi and Rosemary left the living room. Holly led Deber by the reins into the backyard, leaving Caden and Barron alone. Barron sat on the floor next to Caden’s mattress.

“Well,” he asked, “what do you want to know?”

Caden had to stop himself from spitting out a barrage of questions. He no longer felt any pain or thirst, just a burning intensity to know everything. But he had to start with the most important one.

“Is my dad alive?” he asked.

“Yes,” Barron answered immediately. “If there’s one thing I can tell you, it’s that.”

Caden knew it. Jadice was wrong. As usual.

“What kind of person is he?” Caden continued.

Barron leaned back and stared at the ceiling, deep in thought. “Let’s see . . . well, he’s smart. That’s for sure. Maybe so smart that sometimes he doesn’t even realize what he’s doing and how it will affect others.”

Caden didn’t know what to make of that. But he didn’t want to linger on it. There were so many other things he wanted to know.

“Where is my dad?” he asked.

Barron rocked his head. “And there it is. The first question I can’t answer. I’m sorry, but I can’t tell you that right now.”

Caden was disappointed, but he didn’t let it get to him. He’d expected there to be a few things that Barron couldn’t tell him, and he had plenty more to ask.

“Why was I created?” he asked. “You helped make me, right? Why did you make me?”

Barron let out a sigh. “Again, I can’t answer that. I’m sorry.”

Anger flared up in Caden. Two questions already shot down. Why? He and Barron were supposed to be on the same side!

“Why can’t you tell me?” Caden asked, gritting his teeth



in frustration. “He’s my dad, for Gotama’s sake!”

Barron leaned back and gave Caden a look of pity. “The reason I can’t tell you is simple. Your dad made me promise that I wouldn’t tell you.”

That was not the response Caden had expected. “Why would he do that?”

“Before you get upset,” Barron said, “and believe me when I say you have every right to be upset, please consider this: could I tell you everything, right here, right now? Everything about your dad, why you were created, the meaning of life itself? Yes, I could. But that would be dangerous. Just hearing it from me, it’s only words. You need to fully experience the answers for yourself. Otherwise you may jump to some very dangerous conclusions. Nothing is more dangerous than someone who only knows the beginning of the story and wants to skip to the end.”

Caden wasn’t sure he understood, but one thing was clear: he wasn’t going to get any more information out of Barron about his dad. It was disappointing, but maybe he had a point. Maybe the answers that Caden wanted so badly would just end up hurting him more than helping right now—like when Annika had met her father when she hadn’t expected to. Either way, he had one more question, one that had been burning deep within him.

“Am I the legendary ANGEL weapon?” Caden asked. “Am I what everyone in New Darien has been forced to dig for?”

Baron stared at Caden for an uncomfortable moment before he finally answered. “Yes.”

His blunt response made Caden sit up straight. Barron continued.

“However, you are not the *original* legendary ANGEL weapon. The one inside of you was built by your father, myself, and our team. The original, the one that caused the Iltech Apocalypse and that the Sparrows have been searching for, was built hundreds of years ago. That one has been lost to time.”

“But then how is mine the same?” Caden asked.

Barron reached into his black bag and pulled out a thin Iltech tablet. He pressed a button and the screen flashed on, displaying a moving picture of a rotating metal sphere with a small, red glow.

“See this?” Barron asked, pointing to the sphere. “This is one of the millions of Planck particles inside of your body. Now, take a look at this.” He touched the screen and it divided into two. Both sides had the same red-glowing Planck particle rotating around. “This is a particle I took from Ereliim.”

Caden leaned in for a closer look. “They look the same.”

Barron nodded. “Exactly. Because the particles inside of you and Ereliim *are* the same. Ereliim was created long ago using the legendary ANGEL weapon, a copy of which now resides inside of you.”

“My ANGEL weapon created Ereliim ...” Caden said, trailing off in thought. His brain started making connections. “When I was fighting Jadice, I used Ereliim’s particles. I even heard it speak inside my head. Is that because my weapon is the same as the one that created it?”

“Most likely,” Barron said, though he didn’t sound as sure of it as his other explanations.

“Ereliim called me ‘mother’ too,” Caden continued. “Do

you know anything about that? Do I have a mother? I mean, I must, but I've never really thought about her before."

Barron took a moment to think before speaking. "Yet again, I apologize. I cannot answer that."

Caden groaned. For every question Barron answered, five new ones popped up. It felt like he had even less of an idea of who, or what, he was anymore. He gripped the sides of his head, trying not to cry out.

"I don't understand," he said. "What does my ANGEL weapon even do? I can move things with my mind, it gives me super healing, it lets me see into other people's memories, and it can even create giant robots like Erelim, apparently! It doesn't make sense."

Barron's eyes turned dark and serious. "I can't go into too much detail, but I can tell you this. Long ago, when the ANGEL weapons were first created, there was one among them said to be a 'devil' weapon. It belonged to Gotama's most faithful servant, until it was cast away from the others. That weapon was the legendary ANGEL weapon.

"What does it do, you ask? You'll find out eventually. When you're ready. And I hope you don't destroy us all when that day comes."



The next days passed slowly. Caden spent three more lying inside the living room. Barron or Thadi would sit and chat whenever they had a chance, which unfortunately wasn't often. Everyone in New Darien was busy rebuilding the

town, patching up buildings, and clearing away pieces of Erelim strewn everywhere.

Barron turned Rosemary's house into his personal storage area. The living room, kitchen, hallway, upstairs, and cellar were filled with scraps of Erelim that everyone brought in. All of the books had been cleared away and organized into piles. Erelim's massive head, the size of a barn, had taken ten men to drag to the front yard. Caden watched from the window as Barron tinkered with it day in and day out. He didn't hear any more words from Erelim, nor could he sense any Planck particles inside it.

But he could feel something far more important. A new wave of energy spread over New Darien. Sparrows and Reactors worked together to rebuild. People in gray mining suits and green uniforms were cleaning up streets, eating and sleeping in homes that they rebuilt together. Caden would love nothing more than to go outside and help, but Thadi didn't allow it. She said she'd already contacted the Church and told them what had happened, but she'd conveniently left out any mention of Caden. Church officials would be by to inspect eventually, but if word got out that Caden was still here, they'd be overrun by Holy Police and other Apostles within hours.

Plus, Caden wasn't the only one who needed rest. While Holly had acted fine when Caden first woke up, she was still feeling the impact of her lost arms. She spent most of the day resting on her own mattress, with Rosemary tending to her.

The two of them were inseparable. They cooked together, read together so Holly could practice turning the pages using her ice-hands, and even made terrible puns together. When

Barron was struggling to move a piece of Erelim out of the living room, Holly said, “I’m sorry we can’t help, Barron. We’d totally lend you a *hand*, but ... you know.” Rosemary then added, “Yes, we’re simply not *armed* with the right tools.”

During the periods when no one else was around, Caden told Holly what he’d seen in Simona’s mind. She deserved to know. It was her town’s history, and technically her parents’ history too. She sat in silent attention for most of it, except when Caden got to the part about Mother Andrea controlling Erelim during the Hatching. She clenched her gloved hands into shaking fists, and her entire face sharpened with fury.

“If I ever meet her,” she seethed, the room chilling around her. “I’ll make her pay for what she did.”

Caden worried that Holly would hate him, since he had the weapon inside of him that had created Erelim, the weapon that generations of Sparrows had been forced to search for. But far from it, when he told her everything that Barron had explained, she was ecstatic.

“If you have the weapon we’ve been digging for, then that means no one has to work in the Hole anymore!” she said. “Everyone in New Darien is free. Grandpa’s Wish came true.”

“Yeah, I suppose,” Caden said. Despite the happiness around him, one painful thought remained lodged in the back of his mind like a bee sting: where was Annika?



A week after Caden had woken up, it was time to leave New Darien. Thadi informed Caden that Church officials would be arriving the next day, and he needed to put as much distance as possible between himself and New Darien. Even though Caden knew she was right, at the same time he'd kept hoping that Annika would come back before he had to go.

Now it was too late. Caden and Deber stood in the backyard of Rosemary's house, ready to leave. Deber's satchel overflowed with food, supplies, money, and map books provided by Rosemary. Even though they were a couple hundred years outdated, they still might be helpful.

Holly, Barron, Thadi, and Rosemary were all there to send him off. Annika was nowhere to be seen. Before Caden could dwell on it, Holly spoke up.

"Caden," she said, fidgeting with the fingers of her blue gloves. "I'd like to ask if ... would it be okay if I came with you?"

Caden allowed himself a half grin. He'd been expecting this. As soon as he'd seen Holly with an ANGEL weapon, he figured she wouldn't be able to stay around town any longer.

"Of course you can come," he said. Then he looked at Rosemary. "I mean, as long as your mom says it's okay."

Rosemary chuckled. "Holly and I have been talking about it the past week. It's what she wants. I'll miss her, but I'm not going to stop her. This town is way too small to contain how big my little Holly has grown."

Holly choked back tears and wrapped her gloved arms around her mother's neck. Rosemary leaned down and closed her eyes, embracing her daughter with her own invisible arms.

"I got to be your mother again for this wonderful week.

And I'll be here waiting to do it again when you come back home. After you do what you need to do."

That last bit caught Caden's attention. "What do you need to do?"

All of Holly's sadness vanished. She stood straight, tall, and serious.

"I'm going to make my mother and grandmother's Wish come true," she said. "I want to find out the true history of Gotama. I want to uncover what really happened during the Iltech Apocalypse, and why the Church has been keeping it secret. And then I'm going to write a book about it, and it's going to be the first one available at New Darien's library. Just like Mom wanted."

"How did you know that's what I wanted?" Rosemary asked.

Holly grinned at her. "Because you used to tell me, when you read to me at night."

"But you were so little," Rosemary said. "You remembered?"

Holly shook her head. "No. I didn't need to remember. I never forgot."

Rosemary pressed herself against Holly once more, then moved back. Holly strode over to Deber and gave her a pat on the side. Caden was glad to have a traveling companion, though Holly was much more than that. She was no longer the scared girl he'd met in the woods. She was a fighter. A researcher. A partner on his journey to find his dad, and the truth of their world.

"What about you?" Caden asked, turning to Barron. "Can you come with us?"

"As much as I'd love to join you, I can't," he said. "The

Reactors are waiting for their Vice Commander. I'm leaving with them right after you go."

Caden hated hearing that. He'd begged Barron to let him join the Reactors, but Barron refused. He said that he didn't know what the Commander wanted to do with Caden, and until he did, Caden coming with him would be too dangerous. Barron would talk to the Commander, and if things changed then maybe they could meet up again.

As if sensing Caden's disappointment, Barron sighed and reached one hand up his sleeve. After fiddling with something, he pulled out an Iltech wristband and held it in front of Caden. It was silver with a round face and seven little legs protruding off the sides.

"I shouldn't be doing this," Barron grumbled with a smile. "But if you want some help finding your father, then take this. It belonged to him, and I've kept it for far too long."

Caden gently took the device in his hands as if it were a newborn child. The metallic strap dangled loose over his palm, and the face stared up at him, displaying the time as bright boxy numbers. Just above that was a needle, gray on one end and red on the other, shaking as if trying to hold steady in one direction.

"What is it?" Caden asked. He wasn't sure if he was more entranced by the Iltech or the fact that he was holding something his dad used to own, but he couldn't take his eyes off it.

"It's a compass watch," Barron said. "Your dad called it his Weaver Watch. Just Weaver for short. Kind of looks like a spider, right? It tells the time, but more importantly it can point you in the direction you need to go."



Caden didn't understand, but then realization took hold of him. "You mean it points to my dad?"

Barron smiled. Caden gazed at the vibrating needle with newfound awe. Somewhere, whether it was ten miles away or ten thousand, the needle was pointing toward his father.

"How does it work?" Caden asked, tearing his eyes away from the Weaver for the first time. Barron didn't answer. He took the Weaver straps in his fingers, clasped them around Caden's wrist, tightened them, then stood back and gripped his shoulder.

"Follow the direction the needle is pointing," he said. "You'll know when you've found what it's leading you to. Trust me. And then, perhaps, you'll find some answers that I can't give you."

Caden couldn't hold back. With the Weaver around his arm, he ran up to Barron and hugged him, causing the big bearded man to let out a guffaw of surprise. He patted Caden on the back.

"As long as you keep moving, and keep learning, you will find all the answers you seek."

Caden thanked Barron and released him. With another look at the Weaver, and a little adjustment of the round face, he turned to Thadi. She immediately put her hands out defensively.

"No hugs for me," she said. "I don't deserve it."

Caden thought of running in for one anyway, but decided against it. He had something else he wanted to ask her.

"Are you going to be okay? I mean, I know you kept me being here a secret but ..."

"The worst-kept secret New Darien has ever had," Thadi

said with a snicker. "There's not a single Sparrow or Reactor in town who doesn't know you've been staying in this house. They've just been keeping away out of respect for King Caden, the boy who saved them. Again."

The thought of the Church finding out Thadi had helped him brought back the rock of guilt in Caden's stomach.

"What are you going to do? You'll get in trouble, won't you?"

Thadi waved away his worries. "I have a plan. I'll talk with One myself. And Mother Andrea. There's a lot that needs to be aired out between us. I think that, if anything, this whole incident has shown us that we Apostles need to rethink what we're doing." She crossed her arms and smiled sadly. "Then maybe if things go well, the next time we meet it will be as friends."

"No," Caden said, shaking his head. "We already are."

Thadi pursed her lips together. "Anyway," she said, her voice breaking. "You should get going. The sooner the better."

Caden agreed. He walked over to Deber. Holly was already sitting on top. She shifted toward the back, patted Deber's saddle in front of her, and Caden hopped on. It felt good to be gripping reins again. And even better now that he wasn't just stumbling into the unknown. He looked down at the Weaver; the needle pointed south. It was time to search for electric signals.

"King Caden!"

Voices rang out behind them. It was a group of at least forty Sparrows running toward them. They stopped when they reached Deber, all of them out of breath but looking ecstatic to be near Caden.

“We want to thank you for defeating Erelim,” one of them said.

“You saved our town.”

“Thanks to you, we Sparrows can scavenge wide and soar high again.”

“King Caden! King Caden!”

Caden grumbled as they continued cheering his name. He needed to set these people straight.

“Stop calling me that. I’m not the king of anything. If anything, you should be thanking Holly. If it wasn’t for her, then—”

“Queen Holly!” the crowd suddenly started to chant. “Queen Holly! Queen Holly!”

Holly stifled a laugh. Caden rolled his eyes and gripped the reins. He waved farewell to the crowd, but one man pushed his way to the front, yelling for Caden’s attention.

It was Castor.

“King Caden!” he called. As soon as Caden made eye contact with him, Castor looked away, rubbing his bald head nervously. “I ... I’m sorry. About everything. I was ... I was wrong.”

Caden glared down at him, not wanting anything to do with the man who had hurt him and Holly so much. Castor didn’t bother with any more apologies. He reached into his pocket and held up a sealed envelope.

“I was ordered to give you this,” he said. “Your friend left it with me just after the explosion. I was told to give it to you right before you left.”

Caden’s blood froze. Annika. He grabbed the letter from Castor.

“Thanks,” he muttered quickly. Castor took one last look at Holly. When she didn’t return it, he receded back into the crowd.

Caden tore off the red wax seal and ripped open the envelope, yanking out the letter. It was written hastily in ink, but it was clearly Annika’s handwriting.

*Caden, if you’re reading this, then I’m already long gone.*

*I told the deliverer not to give this to you until right before you left New Darien, so that there’s no way you could catch up to me and find me.*

*I know you’re a little naive sometimes, Caden. So let me spell it out for you: we’re done. The time has come for us to part ways.*

*Your goal is finding your father. My goal is killing mine. Now that you’ve shown you’re not going to help me accomplish my goal, I have no more reason to help you accomplish yours. I’d understand if you did the same to me.*

*Don’t come after me.*

*Don’t come looking for me.*

*We’re no longer friends.*

*If you ever get in my way again, I won’t hesitate to fulfill the promise that I made to you back in Salem.*

*Goodbye.*

*—Annika*

Caden silently folded the letter and put it away in his overalls pocket with his father's photo. Behind him, Holly gently placed a gloved hand on his shoulder. Caden gripped Deber's reins weakly, gave her a light kick, and started off on a trot.

Behind Caden was nothing but beaming faces. Sparrows hollering for joy and cheering him on, jumping and calling his name as they waved him off. Deber galloped down the road, headed in the direction that the Weaver was pointing.

Caden didn't look back. He didn't want anyone to see the tears pouring down his face.

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