

# MET!

THE ANGEL WEAPON

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Month9Books

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*To all the Cadens out there, searching.*







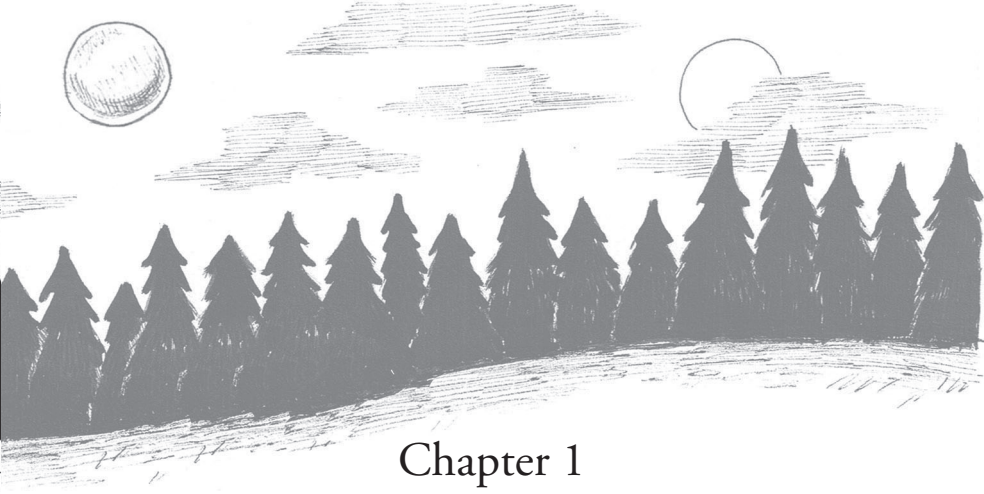


# MET!

THE ANGEL WEAPON







## Chapter 1

### Adoption Day

Caden lined up with the Nobodies outside. All the other children were dressed in their best outfits—boys in clean trousers and button-down shirts, girls in long dresses and bonnets—but Caden wore the only clothes he had, his stable-cleaning uniform. Thick boots, a stained shirt, and a heavy pair of denim overalls all fit loose on his wiry frame. He could never quite get the stench of horse manure out of them, no matter how hard he scrubbed.

The Nobodies formed an orderly row in the grassy front yard of the Home, a long cottage built from a mishmash of wood donated by the town carpenters. Behind the Home rolled one hundred acres of farmland that the Nobodies tended, bursting with corn, potatoes, hay, grain, and apples, along with pens for chickens and pigs, a barn for cows, and a stable for horses. It was only noon, but the Nobodies had already spent a full day working the fields. Up at five, prayer at five ten, breakfast of boiled eggs and potatoes at five

fifteen, and then outside to work by five thirty wasn't an easy schedule, but it was better than starving alone in the streets.

Above them Earth's metallic second moon Metl shimmered bright in the clear blue sky.

Today was adoption day, the first in months. As soon as it was announced, Caden heard the same whispers that always preceded adoption days: everyone hoping they'd be picked. As usual, Caden wanted to join the excitement, but he couldn't. He'd been through more adoption days than any of the Nobodies, and each one had ended with him still at the Home.

The children stood shoulder to shoulder in order of how long they'd lived at the Home. At one end was a little girl no older than five in daffodil bows and pigtails. She'd been brought in just a few weeks ago; she was still soft and pale. At the other end was Caden with shaggy blond hair, gray eyes, and a tan face hardened from working outdoors all day every day. Between them stood twenty-two other children of varying ages and heights, their heads forming peaks and valleys in a mountain range of Nobodies.

Mother Mildred was limping down the line, giving everyone one last look over. She was the oldest Mother at the Home and was in charge of the Nobodies. She had ashen curls, dark wrinkled skin, and stone-colored robes from shoulders to ankle like the other Mothers, but she was the only one with a warm smile that could thaw you out of bed on a cold winter morning, or soothe a frightened newcomer to sleep during a summer storm. A wooden pendant in the shape of an ant dangled around her neck as she crouched in front of each Nobody, making some final adjustments to get everyone looking their best.



“Dominic, pull up your pants,” she ordered gently. “Hoyt, wipe that dirt off your cheek. No, your other cheek. Annika, dear, please do try to smile. You’re so pretty when you smile.”

Mother Mildred was always stressed during adoption days, even more than the Nobodies. She was like a real mother to them all, and an adoption meant saying goodbye to one of them. She put on a brave face, but Caden had seen enough adoptions to know that she missed every Nobody who left. Vacancies never lasted more than a few days. The Home was almost always full, and Mother Mildred liked it that way.

Honestly, living at the Home wasn’t bad. Sometimes the Nobodies didn’t even want to leave after being adopted. But they didn’t have a choice. They had to save their souls.

“Here they come!” shrieked one of the Nobodies. From the clearing in the woods at the far end of the property, three figures appeared: the Home’s other two Mothers and today’s adopter, all slowly trotting in on horseback. Everyone squinted, trying to see who it was, but it was impossible to tell from so far away.

Caden felt a pang of jealousy. Even though caring for the horses was his job, he’d never ridden one into town. He could only ride them when collecting crops, or hauling around cartfuls of manure to fertilize the fields. The Nobodies weren’t allowed to leave the Home, not until they’d been given a new purpose. That was half the reason Caden wanted to be adopted so badly, just for a change of scenery. The Home was nice, but he’d give anything to see the ocean, or a bakery, or even a stone street.

But as soon as Caden saw the adopter, he knew that he

wouldn't be leaving today. The man rode in on a massive red stallion that dwarfed the Mothers' horses next to it. He was a rich merchant—Caden could tell by the way he dressed. He had a flowing fur cloak, puffy shorts with stockings, and a droopy black hat flopping over his bald head. But the biggest tell of all was his face scrunched up in judgment as he gazed down at the Nobodies. He was probably looking for someone to mold as an apprentice, or someone smart to help with bookkeeping. Caden had seen his kind before—he'd seen every kind of adult at adoption day. Lumberjacks looking for strong ax-swinging arms, mothers looking for a nanny, stonemasons looking for precise hands. No one was ever looking for a kid whose only skill was shoveling horse poop.

The Nobodies fidgeted in line, flicking their fingernails to rid any last bits of dirt, girls running their hands through their hair and smoothing their dresses, boys sniffing the air around them, probably wishing they'd taken up Mother Mildred's offer of an extra bath. All of them except Caden. There was something else dirty about him, something that no amount of washing or flicking could ever clean off. It would follow him forever, even long after the horse stench eventually went away, and it would ensure that he was never adopted.

Despite the merchant's old age, he dismounted the horse in one smooth movement, sliding down from the stallion five feet above the ground right onto the grass. He brushed himself off and Mother Mildred hobbled over to exchange bows. The other two Mothers led the Home's horses back to the stable, and Mother Mildred cleared her throat and turned to the Nobodies with warm, loving eyes.

It was time to begin.

“All right children,” she announced. “This is Mr. Stercus. He runs Stercus Imports in Salem, and he’s looking to adopt an assistant. So stand up straight, answer any questions he has, and if the Great Gotama up in Metl in the sky deems that you and Mr. Stercus are meant to be family, then perhaps you’ll leave us for a new home.”

The line of Nobodies grew by about two inches as everyone stood at attention and stuck their chins high in the air. Caden followed suit, out of habit, like he’d been trained to ever since he’d arrived at the Home. Mr. Stercus surveyed them like livestock. He walked down the line, scrutinizing each child, leaning in with glaring eyes and flared nostrils to get a close look and a good, deep sniff. With each step he took, Caden watched the heads of the children he passed slowly lower, their hopes deflating, while the next ones in line straightened up with excitement. It was like watching the sun rise, then set, over and over again.

Then, five Nobodies in, he stopped.

“You girl,” Mr. Stercus barked. “What is your purpose?”

She was a girl about Caden’s age with brown skin and long black braided hair. As soon as Mr. Stercus opened his mouth, her face flushed. She looked past the merchant to Mother Mildred.

“Go ahead, dear,” she said in a calm but authoritative tone.

“My ... my purpose is to work the fields,” the girl stuttered. Mr. Stercus waited for more, but nothing came.

“My purpose is to work the fields ... *sir*,” he corrected.

“Yes. Yes, sir. Sorry. Sir.”

“And what *was* your name?” he asked.

Whenever someone new was brought to the Home, they lost their name. They became a Nobody; that's it. The Nobodies and Mothers still used their first names among themselves, but last names were never allowed to be mentioned. And during adoption days everything had to be done by the book—your name was Nobody unless told otherwise. Not that Caden really minded. As far as he knew he'd never had a last name.

"Annika Crane," she said.

Annika. Caden felt like he'd heard the name before, but aside from one other boy—who Caden would give anything *not* to know—he didn't interact with many others at the Home. Spending all day and every night with the horses will do that.

"Ah yes, the Cranes," Mr. Stercus said. "I remember them. Very sad, very sad indeed. Now, Annika, tell me. How old are you?"

Annika balled her hands into fists, squeezing so hard they turned white.

"I'm thirteen," she said through clenched teeth.

"You mean, I'm thirteen, *sir*," Mr. Stercus corrected lazily. He was losing interest.

"Yes. Sorry. Sir."

"And what else can you do?" he asked with a bored look. "Besides working the fields?"

"Well, I can ... or, I mean, I think I can—"

"All right, that's enough," he groaned, waving his hand. "I have no use for someone who can't even spit out a full sentence."

And just like that, he moved on. The faces of the children

left in line lit up as they stood back at attention. Caden felt bad for Annika; she'd messed up her chance at adoption. Although, maybe it was his imagination, but he thought he saw a look of relief in her eyes.

Mr. Stercus continued down the line in silence. He passed over five, ten, fifteen more Nobodies. Most adopters didn't bother to come down this far. The Nobodies toward the end had spent years and years at the Home, and there was usually a reason for it. The ten-year-old girl next to Caden had been missing her right hand ever since she showed up as a toddler. The boy next to her was deaf and mute; he could only perform simple tasks. Maybe the merchant coming down this far meant that no one would be adopted today. It was rare, but it happened.

But then Mr. Stercus stopped. In front of Caden.

"You boy," he said. "What is your purpose?"

Caden's heart leaped into his throat. No adopter had spoken to him in years.

"My purpose is to care for the horses, sir," he said, trying to stay calm.

"How old are you?"

"Thirteen, sir."

"You smell like a hard worker. What else can you do?"

Caden racked his brain for something to say. This was his chance at a life. A real life. He needed to speak up before—

"Mr. Stercus, sir," came a voice from midway down the line. All heads turned. It was Dom, a boy with messy, ginger hair who was a foot taller and wider than Caden. He had a smirk on his potato-shaped face, an expression Caden had seen many times before.

“Excuse me!” Mother Mildred cried. “Nobodies are not permitted to speak unless spoken to!”

“It’s okay,” Mr. Stercus said. “What is it, boy?”

Dom bowed politely. “Pardon me, sir. I just wanted to say that you probably shouldn’t even consider Caden down there. He sleeps in the stable, and he’s not even a Nobody. He’s just no one.”

There were gasps and murmurs among the children at hearing Caden’s name used during an adoption. But Dom was right—Caden wasn’t a Nobody, so it didn’t matter if they said his name. Caden felt the buzz of their words cover him like bees. Embarrassment fumed off his face.

“What do you mean he’s no one?” Mr. Stercus asked.

Mother Mildred stepped forward. “Caden is a little different than the others. He never knew his parents. He was dropped off here as an infant.”

Caden knew the story. He’d heard it a thousand times. All the other Nobodies at the Home were sent here by the Church after their parents had been taken away for committing the ultimate crime: using Iltech, evil technology from the past. Anything metallic, mechanic, or—Gotama forbid!—electric was forbidden in Metlism.

No one knew what happened to the parents after they were taken away, but their children lost their names and became Nobodies. Adopting a Nobody with a tainted soul and giving them a second chance at salvation was seen as a great act of kindness, something that would be rewarded by the Great Gotama in the afterlife inside Metl in the sky. But adopting someone who just happened to live at the Home their entire life—like Caden—wasn’t anything special.



“I see,” said Mr. Stercus. He gave Caden one last look then marched away. Caden was furious with himself for even thinking he might be adopted, but his anger turned to shock when Mr. Stercus walked to the middle of the line right up to Dom.

“You boy,” he said. “What is your purpose?”

“I fulfill all Six Virtues, sir!” Dom announced like a soldier. “My purpose is to worship Gotama daily, to work hard with the crops and animals, to rule—”

“Yes, yes, Six Virtues, great,” Mr. Stercus said. “What was your name?”

“Dominic Lurcher, sir,” Dom said, chin up and shoulders straight.

“And how old are you?”

“Fourteen, sir.”

“Can you lift heavy objects? I need someone who can unload ships.”

“I can lift over one hundred pounds, sir. I carry the feed buckets to the pigs twice a day, no problem. Any other Nobody would take two trips to do what I do in one. Sir.”

Mr. Stercus nodded in approval. “Excellent. Then I suppose you wouldn’t mind if I asked for a little demonstration?”

“Sir?” Dom asked, confused.

“I don’t have time to watch you go carrying pig slop, so let’s just make do with what we have here. The girl standing there, the stutterer. Can you pick her up?”

Dom looked at Annika. She froze.

“Sure,” Dom said. “That’s easy.”

Without wasting a second, Dom walked over, squatted down, scooped up Annika in his beefy arms, and hoisted her

above his head, eliciting a scream from her and gasps from the rest of the Nobodies. Annika pounded against Dom's arms but he stood as solid as a rock with a proud smile on his face. Caden didn't know what to think. Nothing like this had ever happened at an adoption before. Mother Mildred's mouth hung open and Mr. Stercus crossed his arms in satisfaction.

"Perfect," he said. "Now, the easiest way to unload a ship is by throwing the crates onto the docks. So if you wouldn't mind, could you demonstrate a little ... toss?"

"Mr. Stercus, please!" Mother Mildred begged. "This is too much!"

"Oh, come on," he growled. "Worst it'll do is knock a little sense into her. Come on then, show me what you've got, boy!"

All eyes were on Dom. Caden couldn't believe what was happening. Even Dom seemed a little disturbed with the idea of throwing Annika, who was still struggling and screaming above his head. But he only hesitated for a second, and then with every ounce of strength in his body, he tossed her as far as he could.

At that moment the world around Caden went into slow motion. Annika shot into the air, her dress flapping in the breeze, and something inside Caden clicked. He knew no one else was going to do anything; they were too worried about getting in trouble. He was too, but at that moment, he didn't care. Without thinking he sprinted out of line, past Mother Mildred and Mr. Stercus, right underneath Annika who was now slowly crashing toward the ground. He extended his hands and braced for impact, not quite sure how he was going to even catch her.

And then he got a pair of leather shoes right in the face.

The world came back to full speed. Annika slammed into Caden like a bag of bricks, sending him crashing to the ground. He'd managed to break her fall, but she'd knocked the wind out of him. All he could feel was a sharp pain in his face and stomach. Caden wanted to say something cool or heroic, but the only thing that came out of his mouth was:

“Unnnngghhh.”

Everyone rushed over to Caden and Annika. Mother Mildred helped Annika to her feet, then knelt on the ground next to Caden.

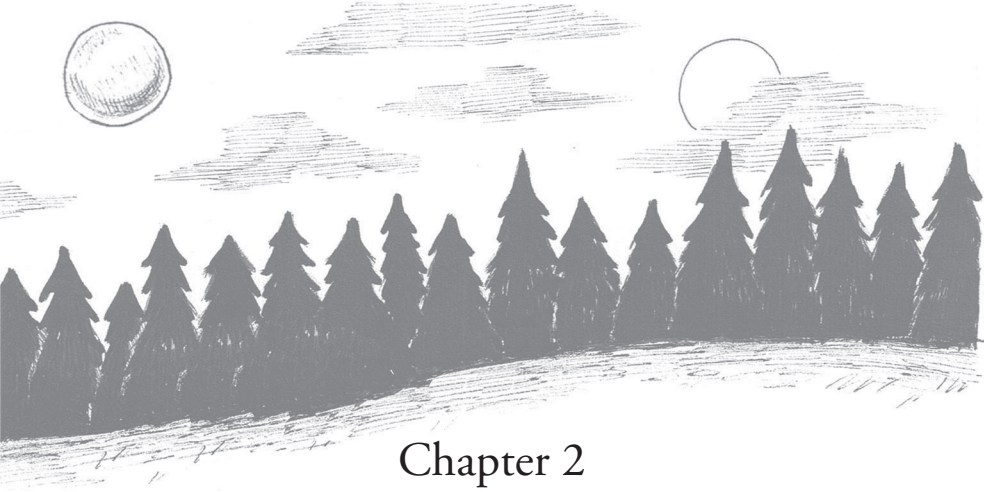
“Caden!” Mother Mildred said. “Are you all right?”

Before Caden could reply, Mr. Stercus let out a laugh.

“What a catch, boy!” he bellowed. “Great Gotama, that speed! I'd be a fool not to take you too. Mother Mildred, I'll come back tomorrow for the lot of them, the thrower and the catcher both, if you please.”

Caden was pretty sure the words he was hearing meant that he was adopted, but he couldn't be sure. He just lay there on the grass, throbbing in pain, looking up at the noontime sky. It was perfectly clear. Caden could even see the moon.

And next to it—just as large—the metallic moon Metl stared back at him from far away.



## Chapter 2

### Last Night at the Home

Mother Mildred ordered Caden to spend the rest of the afternoon lying down indoors. The Home wasn't big enough to have an infirmary, so she had him lie on a burlap mattress in the boys' bedroom, a room Caden hadn't been in for years. He lay there alone in the cramped space surrounded by eleven empty mattresses, the light from the open window in the wall slowly fading as the day went on.

The whole time Caden could only think about one thing: he'd been adopted. He'd been dreaming of this day his entire life, but now that it was finally here he'd give anything to stay at the Home. Even being a stable boy for the rest of his life would be better than living with Dom and working for a man who thought throwing people around was a good idea.

Mother Mildred had given Caden an emergency checkup when she and the other Mothers first brought him indoors, but to her surprise he was perfectly fine. She'd used her

hardened, scarred hands to feel around for signs of broken bones but had found nothing. Now, hours later, she was back giving Caden another inspection. She placed six heated stones on his bare chest and stomach, tapping and listening closely to each one to see if anything sounded out of place. But still, there was nothing. Even the pain Caden had felt when Annika landed on him was now like a faraway memory.

“You are one very lucky boy,” Mother Mildred said. “She must have hit you just the right way. I would’ve expected at least a cracked rib or two.”

She placed a wooden cone over Caden’s heart and leaned in to give one last listen to his insides. After a few nods and a sigh, she finally seemed satisfied that there was nothing wrong, and she packed away the cone and stones into her black bag of medical tools. Caden was relieved that she didn’t have to break out the bone sewing needles or leeches. There were only two things Nobodies were afraid of at the Home: never being adopted, and Mother Mildred’s medical bag.

But right now, Caden would rather take on an army of leeches than go to live with Mr. Stercus and Dom. He had to do something to get out of it.

“Mother Mildred?” Caden asked.

“Yes?” she said, giving him a quick smile.

Caden tensed, but he had to try. “Is there any way that, well, you could just tell Mr. Stercus I *do* have a broken rib or something? And that I have to stay in bed for a few weeks? I won’t tell anyone the truth, I swear by Gotama’s Ant.”

Mother Mildred looked at him confused. “And why on Earth would I do that?”

“It’s just ... I don’t think I want to be adopted right now.”

Mother Mildred's puzzled look turned to understanding. "Oh, is that all? Don't you worry. Plenty of Nobodies feel the same way when they're adopted. It's a big change. You're going to feel nervous."

"No, it's not that," Caden said, sitting up and fastening his overalls. "I know I'm supposed to be happy about being adopted, and I mean, I wouldn't mind being adopted someday. By someone else. Maybe even by ... well, just not with Mr. Stercus and Dom."

Mother Mildred took a deep breath and readjusted herself on top of the neighboring mattress. She sat knees knelt and legs folded under her thighs. Caden knew what this meant: serious talk.

"Caden. Adoption is the greatest thing any Nobody could hope for. It's the only way for your soul to be saved, so that you can join Gotama inside Metl in the sky after you die. Otherwise you'll just ... turn to dust."

"But I'm not a Nobody," Caden protested. "For all I know my soul is already fine."

Mother Mildred gave a patient smile then shook her head. "The Great Gotama instructs us all to find our purpose, Nobody or not. And now he has put you on this path to find yours. He wanted you to be adopted, and now all you can do is trust that he knows best."

Caden expected this. The Mothers said the same thing every day during daily meals and classes. "Find your purpose" and "trust Gotama" were as common as cockroaches. But this was no dinnertime prayer. This was the rest of Caden's life.

"Yeah but you saw what Mr. Stercus did. He ordered Dom to throw that girl, Annika. Something just doesn't feel



right about him.”

Mother Mildred pursed her lips. “I will admit, that was excessive. But look at what came from it. Annika is perfectly fine, and it is because of Dominic throwing her that you were adopted. It was fated by Gotama all along. Perhaps he wants you to help Mr. Stercus become a better person and embrace more of the Six Virtues.”

“But what if my—”

Mother Mildred put a finger to Caden’s lips. “You’ve been here a long time. But Gotama has decided it’s time for you to move on. The adoption is a holy binding contact, and there is nothing anyone can do.”

Frustration burned through Caden, but he knew arguing with Mother Mildred wouldn’t get him anywhere. He had to try something else.

“I mean, is Dom at least going to be punished for speaking out of line? Maybe he shouldn’t be adopted or something.”

Mother Mildred laughed. She stood up on her unsteady legs, brushed off her robes, and picked up her heavy medical bag with both hands.

“Dominic, and you, are no longer mine to punish. You’re both Mr. Stercus’s sons. You’re brothers now.” Caden winced at the thought. Mother Mildred didn’t give him a chance to speak. “Now, let’s go to the hall. It’s dinnertime.”



The Home was divided into four rooms: the boys' room, the girls' room, the Mothers' quarters, and the hall. Close by outside were the kitchen shack and washroom shack, where each Nobody had to take a bath once a month, sometimes twice if there was an adoption scheduled. The outhouse was farther away, a huge pain to walk to in the wintertime through deep drifts of snow. The Home's roof was topped by a steeple housing the bellrock—a massive, hollow stone that rang out for miles with a piercing crash when hit with a rock hammer. It was used to signal when fieldwork was done for the day, and if there was an emergency. In Caden's thirteen years at the Home there hadn't been an emergency worthy of the bellrock.

Inside the Home, with twenty-four children and three Mothers crammed into such little space, the hall's long, bark-covered pine tables and tree-stump chairs had to serve multiple purposes. During mealtimes it was a dining area, during prayer times it was a church, and in the afternoon and evenings after fieldwork, it was a classroom where the Mothers taught reading, writing, religion, and math to the Nobodies.

Caden's favorite subject was religion, not for the boring readings out of the Book of Metl that the Mothers would torture them with, but for the ancient artifacts. Every now and then the Mothers would bring in some Iltech from the town church that had been safely blessed, to show the Nobodies what to be careful of.

The first time Caden laid eyes on Iltech, he was in awe. He was four years old and only permitted to look at it through a glass covering, but it was still unlike anything he'd ever seen.

It was a spoon. Made of *metal*.

It reflected light like water, but also looked as tough as rock. Caden couldn't stop thinking about it—or talking about it—so much that the older Nobodies dared him to go into the hall at night and touch it. Back then Caden slept in the boys' room, so he crept out with the others to the hall where the spoon lay protected under a glass box. The oldest boy carefully removed the glass, revealing the naked spoon underneath. Caden reached out with a single shaking finger and touched it.

He let out a yelp of surprise that woke up the entire Home.

The metal was like nothing Caden had expected. It was cold as ice, lacking the warmth of wood, and it was unnaturally smooth, much more than anything made of stone. Caden felt like he was touching the corpse of something that had once been alive.

If Caden's scream wasn't enough to get them in trouble, the spoon clanging to the floor and the other boy dropping the glass case and sending it crashing into a hundred pieces was plenty. The girls and Mothers came rushing in, and after that night all Iltech was hidden away for safekeeping inside the Mothers' bedroom. Caden was also sentenced to bathroom-cleaning duty for the next year.

But he didn't care. If anything, Caden's fascination with Iltech only grew stronger. Whenever the Mothers brought in something new to show them—whether it was an impossibly thin disc called a “CD,” or an ancient book-box called a “computer”—Caden couldn't get enough. When he was younger, he'd ask the Mothers how the Iltech worked, or how it was made, but he quickly learned to keep his mouth shut. That wasn't the point, the Mothers insisted. Caden and the

rest of the Nobodies were supposed to learn to fear the Iltech, not be curious about it.

Caden had even less success talking about Iltech with the other Nobodies. He'd thought they might know something about it, since their parents had been taken away for using it. But at the mere mention of Iltech, the Nobodies would turn pale and run in the opposite direction. It took a long time for Caden to understand that they didn't want to relive the memories of the Holy Police ripping them from their parents. It took him even longer to realize that he was so fascinated by Iltech because he didn't have any horrible memories of his own to relive. But that didn't stop Caden's curiosity, and he kept asking them questions. Eventually the Nobodies stopped talking to him, and then even acknowledging his existence. When it came to Iltech, Caden was a fertile field ripe for sowing, but he was the only one, and that made him an outcast.

Now that Caden was leaving the Home, he could understand how the Nobodies felt. He was being forced to go live somewhere else, with people he didn't know, or even like. He wouldn't want to be reminded of that either.

Caden walked to the hall. The Nobodies were busy getting dinner, back in their normal, stained clothes, the boys in patched-up pants and shirts and the girls in faded dresses and bandanas. They were walking through the hall door to the kitchen shack outside, coming back in with steamed corn and bread soup in wooden bowls, buzzing with laughter and conversation. But when Caden—who they usually pretended didn't exist—walked by, they turned silent. They took their seats at the three long tables, and even though the hall was only illuminated by the setting sun and glass candle lanterns,

Caden could clearly make out their glares of jealousy. He could practically hear them thinking: “Why was he adopted? He’s not even a Nobody.” If only they knew he’d trade places with them in a heartbeat.

Not wanting to hold up dinner, Caden dashed out the door to the kitchen shack, a small shed with a massive stone cauldron inside. Heated stones in the cauldron boiled the soup, and the steam it gave off cooked the corn laid over top on thin hickory wood beams. Caden grabbed the last available bowl—the smallest one—scooped out a ladle of pork-bone soup with bread dumplings, and grabbed a hot ear of corn.

When Caden got back inside, everyone was waiting for him, their own steaming bowls of soup untouched, and their faces varying levels of envy. He sat down, and Mother Mildred and the other two Mothers at the head of the hall stood up to begin the dinner prayer.

“Tonight, we have a special blessing,” Mother Mildred said to them. “As you all know, Dominic and Caden were adopted today. They will be leaving us tomorrow, to seek out their new purpose in life. Though we may be sad to see them go, we must remember that the Great Gotama instructs us all to find our own purpose, and we must have faith that he knows best.”

Mother Mildred smiled first at Caden, then at Dom who was sitting at another table as far away from Caden as possible. She motioned to them both with outstretched hands.

“Dominic. Caden. Both of you, please stand up. I’d like you to lead us in your final dinnertime prayer at the Home.”

Begrudgingly, Caden stood. Across the room, Dom didn’t look too happy either. The shadows from the lanterns

showed off his freckled face twitching with misery at the idea of living with Caden.

Caden couldn't believe this was happening. Every other time a Nobody had been adopted, he'd imagined himself being the one asked to stand up, to lead the final dinnertime prayer. That would mean he'd be leaving the Home, starting a new life, maybe even finally meeting ... someone. But now it only meant living with Dom and Mr. Stercus, which was nothing to look forward to.

"Metal things are not meant for this world," Mother Mildred spoke, starting the prayer. "Metal things are permanent, imbued with eternal life. They belong to the Great Gotama, who resides up in Metl in the sky. Any metal in our world was stolen from him, and the thieves must be punished. Gotama cleansed our world a thousand years ago, and your parents have paid for their crimes against him. But your souls are not yet clean. Your chance at redemption will come when, like Dominic and Caden, you are adopted into a pure household, and given a new name and purpose. Continue to fulfill your duties here and uphold the Six Virtues, and you too will be rewarded by Gotama."

The three Mothers turned to face the cloth tapestry on the wall behind them. It was the only decoration in the entire Home, a common fixture in every Metlist household: Gotama's Ant.

It was a large square piece of white fabric with a giant black ant sewn in the middle. The ant's six legs represented the Six Virtues that gave purpose to life: worshiping, working, ruling, creating, serving, and loving. *Unfortunately*, Caden thought, *running away from terrible adopters was not one of them.*



The Mothers closed their eyes, bowed slightly, and put their hands in prayer position: the tips of the three center fingers pressed together, pinkies and thumbs folded away underneath. All the Nobodies, Caden included, followed suit. Now it was his and Dom's turn to say the prayer. They recited it together:

*“Please have mercy on us all, O Great Gotama in the sky.  
And guide our souls to Metl, on the day when we do die.  
We beg of you to please forgive the sinners of the past,  
In return we will devote our lives to everything you've asked.  
To worship, work, and rule using legs that we are granted,  
To create, serve, and love using arms with purpose planted.”*

The three Mothers turned back to the Nobodies. “We are his Ants,” they said in unison. Everyone repeated after them, completing the prayer. The Mothers sat, and immediately the hall erupted in clattering and conversation. Everyone started drinking, chatting, and ripping the husks off their corn. Caden took one last glance at Dom, who was already busy eating and ignoring Caden. The only one not stuffing their face was Annika, a few seats down. As soon as she saw Caden looking at her, she turned her attention back to her meal.

Caden sat down, sighed, and brought the bowl of soup to his mouth. Bread dumpling soup was his favorite. Today it tasted like dirt.



After dinner when the Nobodies and Mothers retired to their bedrooms, Caden did what he did every night: grabbed a lantern from the hall to light his walk to the horse stable. But as soon as he took his first step into the dark outside, something gripped his shoulder. Caden spun around. It was Dom. And his fist was already coming at him.

Before Caden could react, Dom slammed a beefy punch right into Caden's stomach. He doubled over in pain, his hand shaking as he struggled to keep a grip on the lantern. Dom grabbed a handful of Caden's hair and ripped him back up to standing.

"Listen to me, no one," Dom seethed, inches from Caden's face. "If you really think you got adopted today, then you're even dumber than I thought."

Caden used his free arm to whack Dom's hand off his head. Finally free, Caden stumbled back, wishing he could just thrust out his palms and send Dom flying away. Caden steadied himself and prepared to fight, but to his surprise Dom just stood there, his massive form silhouetted against the shadowy light of the hall.

"You'd better find a way to make sure that when Mr. Stercus comes tomorrow, I'll be the only one leaving with him," Dom said.

"Believe me, I'd love for that to happen," Caden said through heavy breaths. "But I already asked Mother Mildred. There's nothing anyone can do."

Caden expected Dom to come out and deliver another punch, but he didn't. He just crossed his arms and looked down on Caden like a bug.

"I don't care what you have to do. Get sick. Break one

of your legs. Break both. Because if you don't, I'll pick what happens to you. And I promise you won't like it."

"Dom, listen to me," Caden said. "I want to be your brother even less than you do, but—"

Something set Dom off. He stuck out a single finger and shoved Caden in the chest, sending him stumbling back. Caden knew that Dom could've hurt him more if he wanted to, but he didn't. He just wanted to make a point: Caden was at his mercy.

"Don't you ever call me 'brother,'" Dom hissed. "You're no one. And you have until tomorrow before I make you into nothing." With that he left Caden alone in the dark. Up until now Caden wasn't sure if being adopted was the absolute worst thing that had ever happened to him. Now he knew.

Caden waited until Dom was gone for good then started his walk to the stable. The pain from the punch was already gone, but Dom's words still burned deep. Caden usually enjoyed the walk from the Home to the stable; it gave him time to think. But tonight, all he could do was dread tomorrow. At best, he'd be leaving the Home with Dom. At worst, he'd be leaving the Home dead. Or maybe it was the other way around.

The worst part was, Caden knew that despite Dom's threats, nothing was going to change. Like Mother Mildred said, the adoption was a holy binding contract. Mr. Stercus had to adopt Caden no matter what, even if he had all broken arms and legs, or else he'd risk upsetting Gotama and losing his afterlife. Dom's threat only meant was one thing: living with him was going to be a nightmare.

Caden sighed. He tried not to think about it and took in his surroundings, one last time. The crickets chirping, the soft crunch of grass underneath his boots, the stars and moon

shimmering like sand poured across the night sky. As usual, Metl stole the show. Its perfectly spherical body, without any blemishes, gave off a ghostly gray glow. No matter where you were, it always felt like it was staring directly at you. Caden felt reassured knowing that, no matter where he went, at least Metl would be the same.

After the Home itself, the stable was the largest building on the property. It was built out of dark oak wood with a pointed roof, and it had a gaping door large enough for the horses to be led in and out. Parked outside were three carts, one for Caden to fill with manure and spread in the fields, and two for the Mothers to bring animals and crops to sell in Salem. The Mothers had promised Caden that if he was still at the Home by age fourteen, then he could ride into town with them. Now that would never happen.

Inside the stable were four stalls; three of them had a horse inside. Two of the horses, pale Mara and black Reabon, were standing with their eyes closed, heads resting over the short compartment doors, trying to sleep. When Caden walked in, the sudden light from his lantern made Mara snort in disapproval.

“Sorry,” Caden whispered. He opened the gate to his own compartment and attached the lantern to a peg on the wall. Then there was a knock. A hoof against wood.

From the stall next door Deber, the third horse, poked her head over the wall. Her long, milky-white face was full of excitement, and her tongue was sticking out to the side. She looked like an overgrown puppy who had been waiting all day for Caden to come back, just like she did every night.

Caden forced a smile. He pet Deber’s warm, velvety nose, and she gave a happy neigh. Unlike Mara and Reabon who had

been at the Home since before Caden arrived, Deber had only been there for eight years, ever since Caden started living in and running the stable. As far as Deber was concerned, Caden was her mom, master, and best friend all rolled into one.

“I’m gonna miss you, girl,” Caden said. “Here, I brought something for you.”

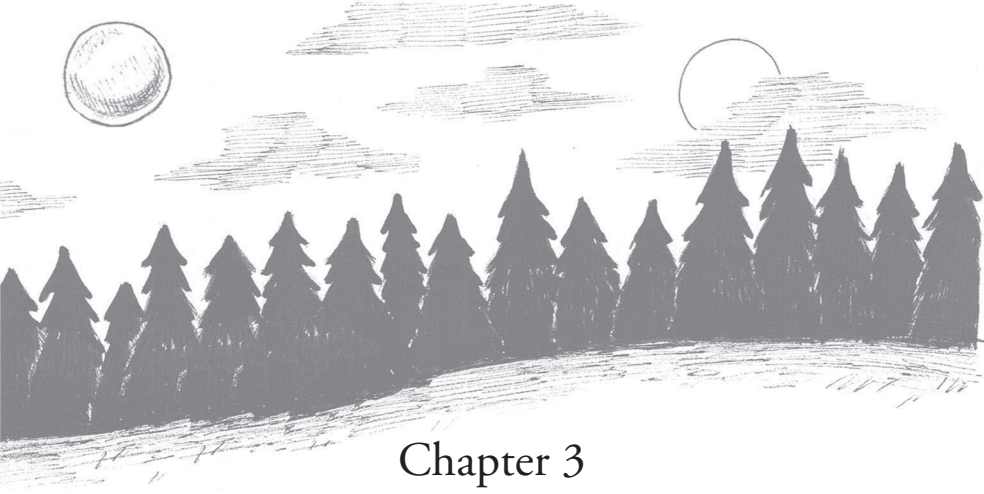
He reached into his overalls pocket and pulled out the ear of corn from dinner. He couldn’t eat it. He didn’t have any appetite. When Deber saw it, she whinnied with joy. Caden could hear her hooves dancing in the hay. He held up the corn, husk and all, to Deber’s mouth, and she happily gnawed on it with her massive teeth, enjoying every last kernel.

Caden watched her with a smile, but gradually it faded away. After tomorrow, he was never going to see Deber again. And now, being adopted meant that there was one other person he had no chance of ever meeting either.

With Deber still busy grinding her teeth on the cob, Caden pushed away the bed of hay behind him, exposing the stable’s brick foundation. He stuck his fingers into the cracks around a loose brick toward the bottom, wiggled it back and forth, and pulled it out, revealing a small wooden box hidden inside. Caden set the box in his lap and opened it. Inside were his treasures: a pair of shattered glasses with metal frames he’d found in the fields, and a long black rectangle with colorful buttons all over it. One of them was labeled “mute.” He’d love to use that one on Dom.

But the last treasure in the box was by far the most important. Caden took out the small glossy piece of paper—his most prized possession.

It was a photograph of his dad.



## Chapter 3

### The Photo

Caden held the photo delicately in his fingers, as if it would disintegrate if he dropped it. The edges had grown yellow and warped from years of humidity, mildew, and finger oil. But Caden didn't care about the border of the picture, only the person in the center of it.

His dad looked exactly like him, only a few years older. He had the same shaggy blond hair, lanky body, and was even tanned all over, just like Caden. The only difference was his father's piercing blue eyes, which put Caden's gray ones to shame. He was wearing a simple white cloth shirt, and behind him was what Caden imagined the heavenly afterlife inside Metl looked like: a mountain of Iltech. It didn't seem like his dad was using any of it though. The Iltech was piled randomly, as if it were garbage. Caden could even recognize some of it—a computer there, a camera here, a CD there—but there was so much more he had no clue about.

The part that Caden found the strangest was his dad's expression. He didn't look happy. If Caden had been around all that Iltech, without any Mothers to hold him back from touching it, he'd be happier than Deber on apple day. But his dad simply looked surprised, eyes wide and brow furrowed, as if he was gazing outside the photograph, confused why Caden was still looking at him after all these years.

When Caden had turned five, Mother Mildred took him aside outdoors, far away from all the other Nobodies. Caden had assumed she was going to lengthen his punishment for touching the spoon. Instead she pulled out the wooden box and photograph from her robes and showed it to him. She told him that when he was dropped off as a baby, this was the only thing that had been left with him. The other Nobodies were usually brought in with nice clothes or money from their old families, which the Mothers held onto for adoption days and emergencies, but all Caden had was this—safely blessed—photograph.

Caden was mesmerized by the photo. Mother Mildred had shown off a camera in religion class a few days prior, so he kind of understood what a “photo” was. But it could've been a drawing of his dad made with charcoal and he would've loved it just the same.

Mother Mildred had intended only to show Caden the photo for a minute then put it back in the Mothers' room for safekeeping, but Caden didn't want to part with it. He held it close, refusing to let it go. Mother Mildred told him he couldn't keep it; Nobodies weren't allowed possessions. And even if he tried to hide it, the others would find it and destroy it. The picture may have been safely blessed, but it was still



Iltech, and the Nobodies would want it gone.

That was when Caden made a suggestion: what if he slept in the stable? He would be all alone and could hide the photo there so nobody would find it. Mother Mildred laughed at the idea, but Caden was serious. She let him try it, expecting him to give up and come back inside after a night or two. Eight years later Caden was still in the stable.

At first the other children pestered Caden about why he slept outside, and with him never explaining the reason, rumors spread. It was common knowledge that Caden wasn't a Nobody, so everyone assumed that was it. They didn't know the truth, that Caden was happy to spend every night in the drafty stable if it meant he could be alone with his dad.

Tonight was the last night. Caden wondered what would happen to his photo after tomorrow. He had to bring it with him. His overalls pockets were deep enough to hide it, and maybe he could find a loose brick somewhere at Mr. Stercus's house. But if he and Dom had to share a bedroom ...

Caden shuddered at the thought. All these years he'd been secretly hoping that his dad would come back for him, that he would take him away to his real family. But now Caden was adopted, forced into a new family, one he could never leave without forfeiting his soul and becoming a criminal. His dad had had thirteen years to show up, but he never did. Now Caden had to admit the truth that he'd been dreading all this time: his dad was either dead, too far away, or just didn't want anything to do with him.

But Caden knew the last one wasn't true. His dad had left him one other thing, a short message that showed he did care. Caden flipped the photo over. On the back, written in

thick black letters, was a simple but powerful phrase from his father.

*"I'll always love you."*

Suddenly there was a knock. This time it wasn't hooves.

Caden snapped back to the present. It was probably Dom, coming to get an early start on tomorrow. Caden shoved the photo, glasses, and "mute" button-thing back in the box, but as soon as he turned to put it away, the light from a lantern lit up the stable. Someone walked right in front of his stall.

It was Annika. She was dressed in a nightgown, and her eyes were darting all around. When she saw Caden sitting in the hay, she gave a little jump.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't see you there."

Caden hoped his face wasn't giving away that he was desperately trying to hide something. He didn't know how to act; he'd never had visitors at the stable before. He pushed the box into the hay next to him, hiding the photo out of view.

"It's fine," Caden said quickly. Annika shuffled awkwardly.

"I'm sorry for coming out this late. It's just, I really wanted to say thank you. For earlier today. I wanted to say something at dinner, but it was embarrassing with ... with Dom around."

Caden could sympathize. Whenever he'd been punched, tripped, or tossed into the manure cart by Dom, he'd always just taken it and avoided doing anything that could rile him up again. Caden wanted to commiserate with Annika, but instead his years of being ignored by the Nobodies and talking mostly to animals suddenly showed itself.

"Does Mother Mildred know you're out here?" he asked, realizing how stupid he sounded only after the words came

out. Annika had come to the stable at night to thank him, and all he could talk about was Mother Mildred? He tried to save himself. “I mean, you know. You don’t want to get in trouble or anything.”

“Oh. Yeah. It’s fine,” Annika said, not looking like she minded Caden’s terrible conversation skills. “I asked her if I could come, to make sure you were okay. How are you doing? She said you were fine, but I can’t believe it.”

“Don’t worry. It takes a lot more than that to hurt me,” Caden said, relieved he didn’t sound like an idiot. He pointed to the horses. “I’ve been kicked by these girls more times than I can remember and—”

“What’s that?” Annika asked. She was staring at the haystack. Half of Caden’s photo was sticking out of the wooden box. A jolt of panic ran through Caden. He yanked the photo away and threw his hands behind his back to hide it.

“It’s nothing.”

Annika came closer. “Can I see it?”

“No.”

“Is it a photograph?”

At hearing the word “photograph,” without any fear or hate in her voice, Caden’s worry vanished. Annika was looking at him with wide, curious eyes. No one ever talked about Iltech calmly like that.

“You know about photographs?” he asked. She nodded, and half a smile crept up her face.

“My mother used to have them, back at home. Her camera was the reason ...” Annika’s eyes darkened. “Well, you know.”

Caden couldn't believe it. A Nobody was talking to him about Iltech and not running away.

"She had a camera? Like, a real one?"

"Yeah, but she never used it. We mostly looked at old photos. She had a whole box of them, full of photos of people we didn't know. But we liked looking through them, making up stories about them."

Caden's brain was whirring so fast he couldn't keep up. There were so many questions he wanted to ask. How did the camera work? Where did she find it? But the only question that came out of his mouth was the stupidest one of all.

"How did your mother get caught?"

That's when Caden saw it, the same look of heartache that all the other Nobodies had whenever he talked about Iltech. Annika's face went dim and she looked down at the ground. Caden had gone too far, and he knew it. He stood up and held out the photo to her.

"I'm sorry. Don't worry about it. Here, you can have a look if you want."

Annika's face brightened. She set the lantern on the floor, shuffled into the cramped stall, and took Caden's photo in both hands, examining both the front and back.

"Do you know who it is?" she asked.

"It's my dad."

"Oh. Oh wow. But I thought, I mean, everyone says that you're not a Nobody. That you never knew your parents."

"It's true, I don't know them," Caden said with a shrug. "All I have is this photo. I don't even know his name."

Annika looked at the back of the photo, where the message was written, then handed it to Caden.

“Names aren’t important if there’s love,” she said, sounding more confident than Caden had heard her all evening. He waited for her to say something more, but she didn’t. He decided that meant it was his turn to speak.

“Well, it doesn’t really matter now,” Caden said with a sigh. “Starting tomorrow my dad is Mr. Stercus. And my brother is Dom.”

To his surprise, Annika narrowed her eyes and shook her head. “That’s not true.” She pointed to the photo in Caden’s hands. “That’s your dad, Caden, and he always will be. No matter what they say.”

Caden was taken aback. This did not sound like the same girl who had been thrown around like a sack of potatoes earlier today.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“Don’t give up on him.” Her face looked like it was on fire in the dancing glow of the lanterns. “Your dad is going to come back for you someday. Just like my mom is coming back for me.”

Caden had to hold back a laugh. He knew he shouldn’t think this was funny, but what Annika was saying was ridiculous. In the thirteen years Caden had spent at the Home, no one’s parents had ever come back for them. All the Nobodies, Caden included, wished for it, but it had never happened. Nor would it ever happen. Even if their parents were released from wherever they were being held, it didn’t matter; only a pure household could adopt a Nobody. And yet here was Annika, telling Caden that her mother was coming for her with as much conviction as if she were telling him water was wet and Metl was round.

“How do you know?” Caden asked, hiding his skepticism.

“My mom saved me once, and I know she’s going to do it again.”

Before Caden could ask Annika what she meant, she picked up the lantern and stepped outside the stall.

“I have to get back. Thanks again and good luck tomorrow, Caden.”

With that, she was off. Caden watched the lantern bounce toward the Home, and a moment later he was left alone with his fading light and the horses. Mara and Reabon gave gruff snorts, happy the late-night visitor had finally left. Deber nudged Caden’s shoulder. Caden patted her on the head, ruffled her snowy mane, and sat back down in his pile of hay. Figures. Just as he finally made a human friend at the Home, he had to leave.

Caden collapsed into his haystack, hoping sleep would come quickly. The last thing he wanted was to lie awake all night, tortured by thoughts of what tomorrow would bring. He closed his eyes, letting himself be soothed by the rhythm of the horses’ breathing one final time.

Just as Caden felt sleep coming on, the sound of something clanging brought his eyes back open. It wasn’t a sound he heard often in the stable. Scuttling bugs and mice were common enough, but not things that sounded heavy and made of stone.

The clang rang out again. And again. Caden sat up. There was something familiar about the sound. It sounded like ...

Caden’s heart stopped. It sounded like the Iltech spoon hitting the floor.

He grabbed his lantern and stood, ready to confront

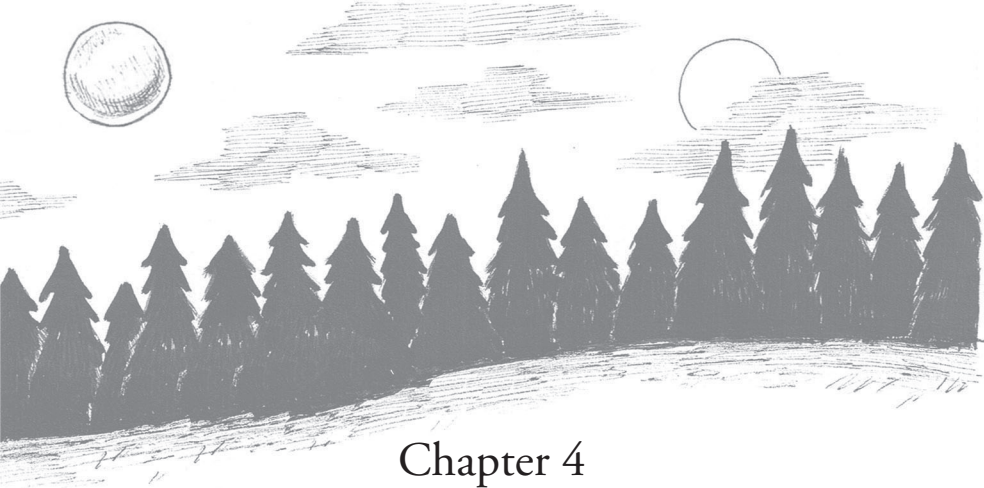
whatever was intruding into the stable. But he didn't even have to leave his compartment. The intruder walked right up in front of Caden ... on seven metal legs.

It was a spider. A metal spider with a spherical body the size of Caden's head, and legs as long as tree branches. It looked up at him with seven glowing red eyes and twitching mandibles.

"Hello, Caden," the spider said in a distorted voice. "I am here to inform you that you are going to destroy the world."







## Chapter 4

### Spyder Unit Model Number 20219-B

Terror gripped Caden. He could only think one thing: he had to smash the spider. He ripped off his boot and raised it above his head, ready to strike, when the spider spoke.

“Please do not crush me,” it said in a monotone, metallic voice. “It would be more difficult for me to convey information to you in a damaged state.”

Caden stopped, boot held in midair, eyes glued to the spider. The seven shiny legs protruding out of its spherical body fidgeted up and down, and its red eyes flashed on and off. Deber wasn’t sharp enough to realize the spider was out of the ordinary, and the other horses were still trying to sleep. Caden was alone with it, his heart pounding against his chest like a stone hammer.

“What are you?” Caden asked, his voice quavering. He was still ready to slam the boot at a moment’s notice.

“I am Spyder unit model number 20219-B.” As the spider spoke, its mandibles oscillated back and forth. That didn’t

help its case for not being smashed.

“What are you talking about?” Caden demanded. His mind raced. “What are you doing here? Why can you talk? And why do you have *seven* legs? What are you?”

The spider looked at Caden with all seven eyes lit up, as if carefully thinking about its response. As soon as Caden thought that finally bringing the boot down would be a good idea, it spoke.

“Question overload. Please try again. Also, I have already answered the question explaining what I am. Do you require me to repeat the answer?”

Caden stared at the spider. It was horrifying, like a monster out of a nightmare. But there was something about its calm voice and the way it looked like a confused animal that was disarming. Caden lowered the boot. He stepped closer and leaned in to get a better view. The spider watched him, its metallic fangs twitching.

That was when Caden realized what he was looking at.

“Gotama’s Ant,” he whispered in awe. “Are you Iltech? Real, working Iltech?”

The spider’s face rotated in confusion. “Terminology unclear. Define ‘Iltech.’”

“You know,” Caden said, feeling tingly with excitement. “Metal stuff. From the past.”

“Question still unclear. Everything is from the past. Including what I just said. And what I just said then. And what I just said then. And what I just—”

Caden couldn’t take it any longer. He needed to know. He reached out and touched the spider on one of its shiny legs and stroked it up and down. It was smooth, just like he

remembered the spoon feeling, but warmer. This Iltech was alive.

“I do not require maintenance,” the spider said, retracting its leg and shaking it. “There is no need for physical contact at this time.”

Caden gazed at the spider. There was no way it could be real. It had to be some sort of prank by Dom. Did he make Annika drop this thing off when she visited? Was he waiting outside, ready to pounce? Caden stood and peeked out of the stable, but there was no one. Outdoors was pitch black, lit up only by the moon and Metl in the sky. This was no prank; it was actually happening. Caden took a deep breath and sat down in front of the spider, both of them illuminated by the flickering candlelight.

“What are you?” Caden asked. The spider cocked its head.

“I have already answered that question. Do you require me to repeat—”

“That’s not what I mean. What I mean is ...” Caden decided to use a Metlist phrase. “What is your purpose?”

At hearing that, the spider’s legs went straight as if standing up at attention.

“My purpose is to escort Caden Aire to his father, in order to prevent him from destroying the world.”

Caden’s skin went cold and goosebumps burst onto his arms. His mouth dried up as he tried to speak.

“My ... my father?”

“Question unclear. Please elaborate.”

Caden tried to stay calm. “My father sent you here?”

The spider shook its metallic head. “Incorrect. I was not



sent specifically to this location.”

“That’s not what I mean,” Caden said. He reached into the hay for the photo of his dad and held it in front of the spider’s seven eyes. “Is this the man who built you? He probably looks older now.”

The spider’s eyes blinked wildly, scanning every inch of the photo.

“The probability is above ninety percent, but it is impossible to be certain.”

A smile grew across Caden’s face. He was talking to someone—or *something* anyway—that had met his father. In person.

“You know my dad? What’s his name?” Caden asked excitedly.

“I do not have access to that information, as it is not relevant to the mission.”

“Of course, it’s relevant!” Caden said a little too loudly, causing Reabon to grunt. He had to stay quiet. Only now did Caden realize what he was doing: he was using Iltech, the same thing that all the Nobodies’ parents had been taken away for. If anyone saw him, then he’d be erased by the Holy Police. He cleared his throat and tried again in a whisper. “I mean, you said my last name is Aire. Is that true?”

“I would not have said it if it was not true.”

Caden smiled. He *did* have a last name. He whispered it to himself: “Caden Aire.” Just saying it made him feel warm inside.

“And is ‘Aire’ my dad’s last name too?”

“The probability is above fifty percent. Human children often have the same last name as their parents.”

Caden sighed. He wasn't getting very far with this thing. It was like he'd found a treasure chest but had no way of opening it.

"Is there anything you can tell me about my dad?"

"Yes. My purpose is to escort Caden Aire to his father, in order to prevent him from—"

"All right, all right, I get it," Caden said impatiently. "So where *is* my father? Is he in Salem or something?"

"I do not have access to that information, as it is not relevant to the mission."

"What? You don't know where he is?"

"Correct. I do not know his current location."

Caden threw his hands up in frustration. The treasure chest was being sealed away tighter with every question he asked.

"If you don't know his name, or even where he is, then how are you supposed to lead me to him?"

"Incorrect. I will not lead you to him. You will lead the way."

This was getting more ridiculous by the second. "What? No way. Trust me, if I'd known how to get to my dad, then I would've left here a long time ago."

"You do know the way," the spider insisted. "It is programmed into you."

"Programmed?" Caden wasn't sure if he was more confused or angry. "What are you talking about? What does that even mean?"

"The path to your father has been written into your code. You are a robot. Like me."

Caden stared at the spider. A robot? Like they'd learned

about in religion class? Iltech that could walk, clean, and sometimes talk?

Caden laughed out loud.

“Listen,” he said, still smiling at the absurdity. “I’m not a robot. I think I’d know if I was.”

“You are partially correct,” the spider said. “You are only part robot.”

“Sorry, but I’m one-hundred percent human. I’d be the first to notice any Iltech on my body.”

“Incorrect. Your robot parts are not on your body. They are inside your body. I can sense them. They have not been fully powered on yet. I will correct that now.”

The spider’s eyes flashed red and scanned Caden. Caden shook his head and tried not to laugh, but then he felt a sharp pain in his palms. A burning sensation like he was too close to a candle. It got hotter and hotter. Suddenly he was sweating and clenching his teeth to stay silent through the pain. Caden flipped his hands over, palms up.

Two glowing red Xs stared back at him.

The Xs were thick, filling up his entire palms, and bright blood red. They had seared away a thin layer of flesh with a burst of steam and protruded out slightly from the skin. Caden looked at them, hands shaking. He was dreaming; he had to be. He slowly reached over with a trembling finger and touched the X on his left hand. It was warm and smooth, the same as the metal on the spider. This was no dream. It was Iltech. *He* was Iltech.

“What is this?” he gasped, hands still shaking.

“Those are your vents,” the spider said. “They are similar to mine. Observe.” The spider rotated its abdomen upward



and showed off the bottom of its metal body. Underneath glowed a red X, the same as on Caden's palms.

"This is impossible," Caden said, still holding his hands in front of him. "I'm not a robot."

"Correct," the spider said. "You are only part robot. There is a one-hundred percent probability that you are part robot."

Caden couldn't take his eyes off the Xs on his palms. They were glowing like flames, as if there was a fire inside himself that he'd had no idea was there.

"This is crazy," Caden said. "This doesn't make sense. How could I not have known?"

But then Caden realized, he had known. Maybe not exactly what it was, but he'd always known something was different about him. All these years he'd been kicked by horses and fallen from saddles, and he'd never had more than a little pain. When the same happened to other Nobodies, they were put in splints for weeks. Today was Caden's first encounter with Mother Mildred's medical bag, and even she was shocked at how little damage Annika had caused when she'd landed on him. Caden had never even gotten sick, despite spending every cold winter night in the drafty stable. He'd always just thought he was lucky. But no, it was because he was made of Iltech.

"What part of me is robot?" Caden asked, finally looking up from his hands.

"I do not have access to that information, as it is not relevant to the mission."

Caden had expected as much. He looked back at his glowing hands, then he remembered something else the spider had said.

“You said I was going to destroy the world?”

“Correct, I did say that.”

“How?”

“I said it by accessing my vocal programming and then—”

“No, I don’t mean how did you *say* it.” Caden was reaching the end of his patience. “How will I destroy the world?”

“I do not have access to that information, as it is not relevant to the mission.”

Caden finally hit his breaking point. His dad, the Xs, the spider, the Iltech, it was too much! He grabbed the spider, lifted it into the air, and shook it ferociously. The spider’s legs flailed and its eyes flashed red as Caden yelled at it.

“How is that not relevant? How did my dad make me? And why did he make me? And you! What about you? Where did you even come from? And why do you have *seven* legs?”

Caden stopped shaking the spider, ready to finally get some answers. But the spider didn’t say anything. Its eyes dimmed then flickered on and off.

“Question overload. System ... slowdown. Recharge required.”

“What?” Caden asked, suddenly worried he’d broken it.

“I am a ... solar powered unit.”

“You’re a what?”

“I receive energy from ... the sun.”

“You mean like a plant? I thought you were Iltech!”

The spider’s eyes were all off now except for one. Its legs went limp in Caden’s hands.

“I do not have ... the energy to explain. I need to ... go into low power mode for the night. Tomorrow we will leave to ... find your father.”

Caden's eyes darted all over the drooping spider, hoping to find answers somewhere, but there was nothing. At first frustration rippled through him, but then he realized something: he and the spider were leaving tomorrow to find his dad. That meant he wasn't going to be adopted.

The hairs on Caden's arms stood up with joyful prickles. Suddenly he didn't care about not getting all the answers immediately. It didn't matter. Soon enough he'd be able to ask his dad—in person!—anything he wanted. And he'd never have to see Dom or Mr. Stercus again. Caden looked at the spider, its weak legs dangling through his fingers, and felt guilty. He gently placed it down on the hay-covered floor and was relieved to see another eye light up and its fangs wobble.

"I'm sorry I shook you," Caden apologized.

"I am undamaged," the spider said. "But please refrain from further unsolicited shaking."

"Got it," Caden said. He looked again at the red Xs on his palms, glowing brightly as ever. Questions flooded his mind. But he could wait. Although there was one thing he had to know immediately. "Hey, sorry, but one last question. What's your name?"

The spider looked up at him and answered weakly. "I have already ... answered that question. I am Spyder unit model number 20219-B."

"Yeah, I know, but do you have a name that's easier to remember?"

"20219-B is only six digits. Do you have ... difficulty remembering six digits?"

"No, it's just ..." Caden thought for a moment. "Here, how about I call you 2-B? Or Tooby? Does that sound good?"

“If you have difficulty ... remembering six digits ... then that is fine.”

Caden smiled. Then another thought crossed his mind.

“Hey Tooby, if I’m part robot, then that means my dad ... is he not really my dad? Did he create me? Or just my robot parts?”

Tooby was silent. Caden felt bad for asking more questions even though he knew Tooby had to rest. Just as he was about to tell Tooby not to worry about it, he heard his faint metallic voice.

“There are many ... definitions of father,” Tooby said tiredly. “There is a ninety-five percent probability that yours ... fits one of them.”

Caden nodded. Just as he was about to thank Tooby, Reabon let out a wild whinny, as if she’d seen a ghost. That woke up Mara and Deber, and suddenly the stable was filled with three screaming horses leaping in their stalls. Caden rose to his feet.

“Hey there, girls, what’s wrong?” Caden turned to Deber. There was no sign of her usual silly face; her eyes were wide with terror. Caden reached out to console her, but she swatted away his hand with the side of her head. Caden went to the other two, but they were even worse, braying in panic as if the stable were on fire.

Caden grabbed the rope off the shelf in the tack room, ready to wrap the horses and force them to be calm. But then a loud ringing echoed through the night. Caden knew that sound: it was the Home’s bellrock. It rang six times every day to signal the end of fieldwork. But this was no friendly signal. This was an emergency alarm being struck at full force, over

and over and over, nonstop.

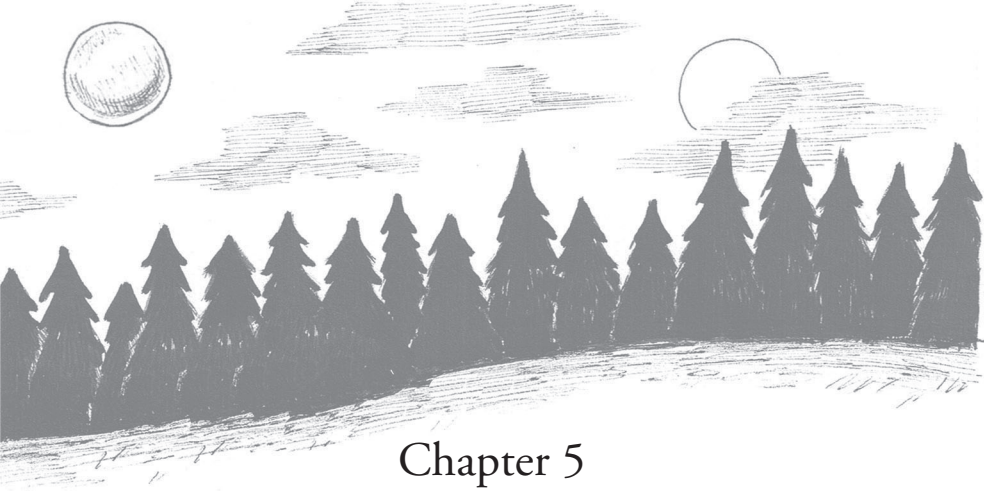
Caden dropped the rope and ran outside, the sound of the bellrock getting louder. It wasn't the only one ringing. Bellrocks from Salem and other faraway towns joined in as loudly as the Home's, turning the night into a thunderstorm of clanging stones. Lights appeared on the horizon as warning fires were lit. Something bad was happening. Caden looked around desperately for an answer. Was Salem being attacked? Was Mother Mildred okay?

Then Caden looked up. The terrifying answer was in the sky.

Metl was branded with a giant red *X*, the same as on Caden's palms. Even worse, the massive metallic sphere was twice its normal size, meaning only one thing—it was moving closer. All Caden could do was watch as the fiery *X* in the sky slowly grew bigger, heading toward Earth like a blazing fireball.

Somewhere in the background Tooby shambled up next to Caden, but it didn't register until he finally spoke.

"Caden," Tooby said, "I now know how ... you are going to destroy the world."



## Chapter 5

### Metl

Caden ran to the Home. Halfway there he stopped, rushed back to the stable, and threw on gloves to cover the glowing red Xs on his palms. He mumbled something quickly to Tooby about staying hidden then sped away. As he ran he couldn't take his eyes off Metl, its bright fiery X extinguishing the stars around it. Bellrocks kept clanging through the air so loudly Caden couldn't hear the screams and crying from the younger Nobodies until he arrived at the Home, breathing heavy and dripping with sweat.

Everyone was gathered in the hall. The older Nobodies, Dom and Annika included, were gathered by the wall, fighting for a view out the window. They were entranced by Metl but too scared to risk going outside underneath its blood-red glow. At the tables the two assistant Mothers led the youngest Nobodies in wide-eyed, unblinking prayer, while Mother Mildred stroked the heads of three little ones in her lap, trying to soothe them with a lullaby.

*“Metl in the sky,  
Up so high,  
You are so bright,  
You make it day at night.”*

It didn't seem real. Metl was a symbol of happiness and hope. Now it was just fear. And the worst part was Caden couldn't help but feel that it was his fault. When he stepped in, all eyes riveted toward him as if shocked to see him alive.

“Is it safe to go out?” asked one of the Nobodies by the window.

“Metl didn't light you on fire?” asked another.

Caden didn't speak. He didn't want to accidentally give anything away. He hoped that no one could see the glowing Xs hiding underneath his gloves. Dom crossed his arms and snorted.

“Well if *he* was okay going outside, then I think we'll be fine.” He dashed to the door, but Mother Mildred stood and asserted her authority.

“Dominic!” she yelled, halting Dom in his tracks. “No one may go out that door until we know it's safe. We must wait for a signal from the church.”

Dom scoffed and rolled his eyes but did as he was told, pushing through the other children and returning to the window. One of the younger Nobodies, the ten-year-old girl with no right hand, wrapped her arm and stub around Mother Mildred's legs and pressed her head against her waist.

“Mother Mildred,” she said, sounding on the verge of tears, “what did we do to make Gotama mad? I thought we were doing everything right.”

“It's going to be fine,” Mother Mildred said softly,

cupping her hand around the girl's head. The girl didn't say anything. She just stared out the window, holding onto Mother Mildred for dear life. Even she knew what Mother Mildred's lack of an answer meant: she didn't know what was going on. Mother Mildred knew everything—the best way to plant corn seeds, how to make a pork bone last for weeks in a soup, she could even recite the whole Book of Metl forward and backward. If she didn't know what was happening, then no one did.

Except Caden. He didn't know exactly how the *Xs* on his palms and the giant *X* on Metl were connected, but it couldn't be a coincidence.

For a second, Caden thought about telling Mother Mildred. Maybe he should show her his palms or tell her about Tooby. Maybe she would know something that could help. But just one look at her face and Caden realized that wasn't a good idea. Mother Mildred's smile hid her terror well, but it was still there, popping out in her eyes. If Caden told her about the Iltech, she'd call the Holy Police and he'd be taken away. He'd lose his chance to find his dad and escape adoption. Although ... would any of that matter if the world was ending?

Caden felt hot, like he was being cooked in a soup. Sweat dripped down his forehead and neck. He didn't want to stick around inside the Home any longer. Someone—namely Dom—might start to suspect something.

"I'm going back to the stable," Caden said to Mother Mildred. She furrowed her brow and shook her head.

"You stay here tonight, Caden," she said firmly. "We all need to be together right now."



“But what about the horses?” Caden tried. “Metl and the bellrocks scared them. I need to make sure they’re okay.”

“The horses will be fine. No one is going outside until we get a signal that everything is—”

Something exploded outside. Everyone tore over to the window. Dom and a few other brave Nobodies defied orders and ran out the door. Through the window a fountain of white light shot up into the sky from far away. It was like an upside-down waterfall of blinding white fire, screeching loud enough to drown out even the bellrocks. With some relief, Caden realized it was the church fireworks.

Every year the church in Salem set off fireworks on important holidays, like New Years in January and Ant Day in June. It was a way for everyone to send a grateful message up to Gotama, to thank him for another six months of prosperity. The church spent weeks creating the fireworks that only lasted as a one-minute explosion of color in the sky, but it was worth it. All Metlists looked forward to the fireworks shows. They were something to always count on. The shows made them feel safe. And that had to be why the church had set off fireworks now, to tell everyone it was okay, even if it looked like the world was ending.

Caden wondered if the church knew something, or if they were just setting off the fireworks to prevent a mass panic. Either way was trouble for Caden. He needed to get back to Tooby.

“I’m going to check on the horses,” he said to Mother Mildred. She turned to him, her face flush with relief from seeing the fireworks.

“All right. Mother Nadine, take a lantern and follow

Caden to the stable. Ride Reabon into town and ask Father Yohan what's going on with Metl. We need some answers."

The Mother who had been praying with the Nobodies came over from the window. She was the youngest Mother at the Home, only a few years older than Caden. She had the same stone-colored robes as Mother Mildred, and her long blond hair and fair skin made her look like a flower blooming out of a rock.

"Yes, Mother Mildred," she said. She grabbed a glass lantern from one of the corner shelves. "Come, Caden. Let's go."

"It's still getting closer," said one of the Nobodies by the window. The fireworks had ended and the bellrocks were silent. Only the sound of crickets echoed through the night as the flaming red X on Metl glowed in the sky.

"It definitely looks bigger than it was before."

"It's not going to hit us, is it, Mother Mildred?"

Every face in the room focused on Mother Mildred. For a moment, she tensed up like she was overwhelmed by it all. A second later she was back to pretending to be Mother Mildred who knew everything.

"Of course not," she said, forcing a smile. "The church set off fireworks to let us know we're safe. This is all just a message from the Great Gotama. He's trying to tell us something, and we need to figure out what it means. Mother Nadine will ride to town and talk to Father Yohan, then she'll come back to tell us what it's all about."

The Nobodies were not convinced. The lips on the young ones trembled, and the older ones had blank stares. Mother Mildred sighed.

“But for now, let’s not worry. Everyone, bring your mattresses into the hall. We’ll all spend the night together. Mother Laura, fetch the leftover honey cakes. We’ll share them and say some prayers together.”

That got all the children excited. The hall cleared out instantly as everyone dashed to their dormitories. The sound of bare feet pounding against wood floors filled the Home. When all the Nobodies were out of the hall, Mother Mildred turned to Mother Nadine. Her smile was gone, replaced with the drawn face and heavy eyes of a tired, old woman.

“Please bring back good news,” she said. Mother Nadine nodded, lips tight. As she and Caden walked to the stable, both staring at the flaming *X* on Metl, Caden had only one hope: that Tooby had found a hiding spot.



Thankfully, Tooby remained hidden while Mother Nadine was in the stable. The horses had calmed down, though Caden grabbed them each an apple out of the tack room just in case. He pat Deber on the head and held the apple to her mouth as she happily chomped away. She was back to her bouncy self, all trace of the horror gone in her eyes. Although she did seem to prefer not looking outside of the stable.

Caden helped Mother Nadine saddle up Reabon, fastening the leather straps around the horse’s lean black stomach, placing the rope bit into her mouth, and attaching the reins

behind her head. Caden set the stool for Mother Nadine next to Reabon, and with a small nod of thanks, she climbed on top and galloped into the night, leaving Caden alone.

As soon as her lantern disappeared into the blackness, Caden dashed to his stall and searched for Tooby through the hay pile. It didn't take long. Just like a good little piece of Iltech, Tooby had burrowed all the way to the bottom, completely out of sight. He was immobile, lying there like a rock with seven dangly legs. Caden tried poking him and whispering, but there was no response. Caden sighed, nudged Tooby to the side, fluffed up his hay pile, and tried to get some sleep.

Sleep did not happen. Caden's mind was reeling. His dad. The *Xs* on his palms. Metl. Especially Metl. What did it mean that it had the same red *X*? And why was it moving closer to Earth?

Caden gave up trying to sleep. With a heavy sigh he walked outside. Up in the sky the burning *X* on Metl glowed vividly against the black night. Across the yard the lights were on in the Home. Caden could hear laughter. He thought about joining everyone, for a second, but it wasn't worth the risk. He leaned against the side of the stable and slouched to the ground, alone, watching as the fiery horror in the sky inched ever closer.



A scratching sensation on Caden's leg woke him the next morning. With groggy eyes he looked over and nearly jumped in shock to see Tooby out in the early daylight, scratching his arm with the sharp tip of one of his mechanical legs.

"Tooby!" Caden yelled. Immediately realizing his mistake, he covered his mouth and looked toward the Home. It was still early; no one else was up yet. Good. He was safe. For now.

"I require charging," Tooby said, his seven red eyes blinking slowly.

"Okay. Go charge then," Caden said. He stood and brushed off his dirty bottom, expecting Tooby to scuttle away to the closest sunny area. But he just stayed put watching Caden.

"Will you please protect me?" Tooby asked.

"What? What do you mean?"

"Please come with me and alert me if another human is coming."

Caden looked back to the Home. The breakfast fire hadn't been lit in the kitchen shack yet. That was usually done a half hour before breakfast, to heat the rocks to boil the potatoes and eggs. Caden didn't know how long it would take Tooby to charge, but they probably had at least twenty minutes before anyone showed up asking what he was doing with an Iltech spider.

"All right," Caden said. "Where do you want to charge?"

"I sense an optimal spot nearby. Please follow me."

Tooby worked his metal legs through the grass at the speed of a crawling baby. After what felt like forever, they reached the wooden fence around the barn. The cows inside

were just waking up and peeking out, their moos filling the air as they waited to have their swollen udders milked. Next door the pigs were licking empty troughs, and the chickens were pecking each other for the best feeding spots.

Caden looked to the sky. Before he could even try to figure out what time it was from the sun, he saw Metl. It was even bigger than last night. Metl, usually the same size as the sun, was now three times as big. It looked like a spherical cloud, too close to Earth for comfort. And that red *X* still glowed menacingly as ever.

While Caden gazed at Metl, Tooby found a charging spot by the fence. He flipped over on his back, curled up his seven legs, and exposed the red *X* on his abdomen to the sun. It slowly radiated between black and red, like smoldering embers. Caden wondered if that was how all Iltech got their energy, but he didn't ask. He had far more pressing questions.

"Is Metl going to hit the Earth?" he asked.

Tooby didn't move from his upside-down charging position as he spoke. "If it maintains its current velocity, it will impact the Earth in two days, one hour, and sixteen minutes."

"So, it's going to hit us then?"

"Correct."

Caden tried to ignore that terrifying thought and moved on. "You said I was going to destroy the world. Is this ... is it my fault?"

"Unclear. I was not told the manner in which you would destroy the world, but the probability of a connection is above ninety-nine percent."

Caden looked up at Metl. If only he knew how he'd

triggered this to happen. Maybe there was some way to reverse it.

“Does my dad know how to stop this?” Caden asked. “Metl hitting us, that is.”

“There is a high probability. My mission is to bring you to him so that he can prevent you from destroying the world.”

Caden let out a sigh of relief. Good. There was a way out. He’d find his dad and save the world. He couldn’t imagine a better solution.

“When do we leave to find him?” Caden asked, rocking his arms with excitement. He was itching to get going. If they could manage to sneak away before anyone came outside, then they’d get a head start before the Mothers alerted the Holy Police. Caden still wasn’t sure exactly how they were going to escape, but Tooby probably had a plan.

“We will leave as soon as I have finished charging in four minutes and twenty-two seconds.”

Caden smiled. In four minutes he’d be leaving the Home for good, to find his father. He’d never imagined it would happen like this, being led away by an Iltech spider, but he wasn’t going to complain.

“Hey, Tooby,” Caden asked, another question popping into his head. “How did you find me anyway? Did you just get lucky, or what?”

But Caden didn’t get to hear the answer. Mother Mildred’s voice came flying from the Home.

“Caden!” she called. “Come inside! We have a surprise for you.”

Caden immediately crouched down, hiding Tooby underneath his body. Mother Mildred probably couldn’t see

the spider from the Home, but he didn't want to take any chances. He glanced back at her and shouted his response.

"Be there in a minute!"

Mother Mildred disappeared inside. Caden panicked. His heart raced, and the morning sun suddenly felt a lot hotter. He didn't have four minutes. He had to leave now, before everyone started coming out and found the Iltech spider by the cow barn.

"Tooby," Caden whispered. "We have to go. Now."

"Impossible," Tooby replied. "I am not fully charged. And you are blocking the sun, making it take even longer."

"It doesn't matter," Caden said. "If we don't leave now then we'll never get out of here without someone spotting us."

"If I do not finish charging, then we will not be able to leave at all. I will finish charging here, and we will meet back at the horse's house in three minutes and fifty-eight seconds."

"Tooby, I'm telling you, we have to leave—"

"Caden!" Mother Mildred called again. "Come here immediately! You are being rude to our guest."

Caden's stomach sank. Now he had no choice. He couldn't run away with Mother Mildred watching. He'd get as far as the cornfield by the time the Home bellrock starting ringing in emergency. He'd have to find a way to slip away later. Maybe at night. If he could somehow keep Tooby hidden all day, that could work. As if sensing Caden's inner conflict, Tooby spoke up.

"Go to the human calling you," he said. "We will meet back at the horse's house in three minutes and forty-nine seconds."

All Caden could do was comply and hope that the sunlight



reflecting off Tooby wasn't noticeable. Mother Mildred watched him the whole way, her eyes narrowed with concern.

"What were you doing by the fence?" she asked.

"I was just, uh, checking on the cows," Caden lied quickly. "I don't think they've been milked yet. They were getting kind of loud."

"Well don't worry about that. Mr. Stercus arrived a few minutes ago with a lovely breakfast for everyone, so we've postponed morning chores. He's waiting inside to leave with you and Dom."

Caden's blood froze. He hadn't planned on Mr. Stercus already being here. This was worse than the worst-case scenario. How was he going to run away with Tooby now?

His mind whirring, Caden followed Mother Mildred inside. Just like she'd said, breakfast had already been served. The Nobodies were seated at the tables in the hall, all thoughts of scary Metl evaporated from their minds. They were happily stuffing their faces with hot bacon, thick cheese, smoked cod, and loads of strawberries and blueberries bursting with color. Any one of them would have been an extravagant treat for the Nobodies, but all of them together was an unimaginable feast.

Standing at the front door was the supplier, Mr. Stercus, his arms crossed and smiling broadly as he watched everyone savor what he'd provided. Adopters often brought gifts to the Home in exchange for the Nobodies, to thank the Mothers and earn extra blessings from Gotama. With everything Mr. Stercus brought, either he really wanted to thank Mother Mildred, or he needed a lot of extra blessings to get on Gotama's good side.

Standing next to Mr. Stercus was Dom with a scowl on his face. Mr. Stercus showing up this early had probably taken him by surprise too; now he wasn't going to get a chance to beat Caden into an un-adoptable pulp. Caden had a hard time feeling bad for him.

"Where are your manners, Caden?" Mother Mildred said. She gave him a gentle push toward his adopter. "Say hello to Mr. Stercus and thank him for this lovely breakfast."

"Thanks," Caden said quickly. Dealing with Mr. Stercus and eating breakfast were the last things on his mind. Any other day he would be at the table stuffing himself like the others, but right now just the thought of food made his stomach lurch. He had to get back to Tooby immediately.

Mr. Stercus grunted at Caden's halfhearted thanks. "Eat up, son. We've got a long day ahead. I want to bring you around the shipyard, show off those fast legs of yours to the men. Have a feeling some of them are going to slow down with all that gossip in town about Metl, but you'll show 'em a little *X* in the sky shouldn't get in in the way of business."

"Come on, Caden," Mother Mildred urged. "Listen to your father. Sit down."

Hearing Mr. Stercus say "son" and Mother Mildred say "father" made Caden furious. This guy wasn't his dad. His real dad was out there, waiting for him. Caden's cheeks burned as hot as the *Xs* hidden under his gloves. At the other end of the tables, Annika looked over at him. She blended in with the other girls, wearing a lime-green dress and bonnet, but her face couldn't have stuck out more. Her lips were pressed together tightly as if she were enduring the same frustration as Caden. She'd told him not to give up on his dad, and she

was right. It was time to go find him.

"I'm not really hungry right now," Caden said as calmly as he could to Mother Mildred. "I'll just go say goodbye to the horses, then come back in a minute."

"I don't think that's such a good idea," Mother Mildred said coolly. "Your real father is here now, Caden. You should move on."

Caden knew what she was talking about. She thought he wanted to go back and get his photo from the stable. She was telling him to leave it behind, forget about his old dad, and move on to new his life with Mr. Stercus. If only she knew the truth.

"It'll just be a second," Caden said, making his way back to the door. "I need to say bye to Deber."

"Caden, you get back here right now!"

"Let him go," Mr. Stercus growled. "It'll be a good lesson to teach him what happens when you miss out on breakfast."

Mother Mildred relented with a shrug. Caden was almost thankful to Mr. Stercus for making this easier. He turned back to thank him, to try and make his betrayal less obvious, but just then Mr. Stercus adjusted his flowing fur coat, and for an instant Caden thought he saw a flash of something metallic inside. But the next moment it was gone, and Caden was back outside, now worrying about much more immediate things. Like running away with an Iltech spider.

Caden sprinted to the barn fence, not sure how long he had before Mother Mildred decided to peek outside. He arrived out of breath at the post he'd left Tooby, but there was no sign of him. Caden bent over and brushed through the grass, desperately searching, every panicked heartbeat ticking

away precious seconds. Tooby must've finished charging and gone back to the stable. Caden glanced back at the Home. No one was calling for him yet. He still had time.

Caden dashed to the stable, scouring each stall for any sign of Tooby. Mara snorted in disapproval at all the movement, and Deber started bouncing up and down excitedly. Caden didn't have time for them. He had to find Tooby now.

But the spider was nowhere. Caden checked the loose brick in the foundation, but it only had the box containing his treasures. He quickly slipped the photo of his dad inside his overalls and remembered Mother Mildred hinting at him to leave it behind. He felt bad for deceiving her, for running away without even saying goodbye. She'd always been so nice to him, even when she didn't have to. But he had no choice. Finding his father was his purpose. She would understand that. Maybe someday he could write her a letter explaining everything, or even send her a photo of himself with his dad when he found him.

Something entered the stable. Finally, Tooby was here! Caden jolted out of his stall ready to run away.

But it wasn't Tooby. It was Dom. He stood glaring at Caden, carrying a heavy stone sledgehammer with both hands. It was used to smash rocks apart when clearing fields, and it could crush human bones as easily as sticks.

"I warned you, no one," Dom said. "Now we do this my way."

"Dom, please," Caden pleaded. He looked around for any sign of Tooby but there was nothing. "I'm not even going to be adopted. I'm leaving, running away, right now!"

"You had your chance," Dom said. He flexed his muscles

and bobbed the wooden shaft of the thirty-pound mallet up and down as easily as a cornstalk. “Here’s what we’re going to do. I’m going to break your legs, then I’m going to scare one of these horses out of here, and then I’m going to tell everyone you fell off trying to run away. And if you say any different, you’ll lose your arms too.”

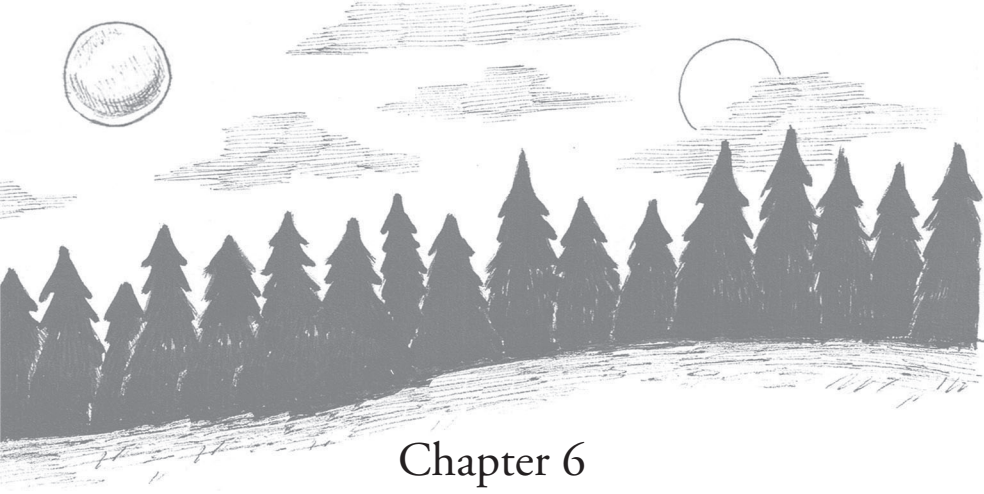
“Dom, you don’t understand. I *am* running away! You’ll never see me again.”

Caden’s words weren’t getting through. Dom stepped closer, his grip tightening around the hammer.

“Sorry, I can’t take that chance. Now, we can do this the easy way or the hard—”

Suddenly Dom dropped the mallet. It crashed against the wood floor with a thud that shook the stable and scared the horses. Dom’s body went rigid and shook and his red hair stood up straight like a flaming porcupine. After a second, he stopped shaking and collapsed on the ground with another thud. Behind him was Tooby, little sparks of electricity dancing around his fangs.

“Hello Caden,” he said, eyes flashing at full speed. “I am now fully charged. It’s time to go.”



## Chapter 6

### Five and Six

Dom lay twitching on the ground. Tooby stood next to him victoriously on all seven legs. Caden knew that in a matter of minutes the other Nobodies and Mother Mildred would be here. If they were going to run away, it was now or never.

“Let’s go, Tooby!” Caden called. Tooby gave a buzz of approval. Not daring to waste valuable seconds to grab anything to bring with him, Caden dashed right out of the stable. Tooby kept pace behind him, moving much faster than his slow crawl this morning. If they could just get to the woods surrounding the Home, then they might have enough of a head start to outrun the Mothers and Mr. Stercus.

But as soon as Caden took his first step outside, he saw that their plan had already failed. Up at the Home, Mother Mildred, Mr. Stercus, and all the Nobodies were filing outdoors, craning their necks and gazing at the stable in curiosity. They must have heard the crashing of the

sledgehammer and realized that Caden wasn't just saying goodbye to the horses.

Caden's heart sank. His last hope of leaving unnoticed was gone. If he tried to run now, he'd be seen and caught within minutes. He was a fast runner, but he couldn't outrun the Mothers and Mr. Stercus on horseback. He was trapped. Caden started thinking about what that meant. He'd have to explain what happened to Dom. Tooby would be found and destroyed, taking away any chance of him ever finding his dad. And, worst of all, he'd be forced to live with Mr. Stercus.

Caden's hopelessness turned to rage. He curled his fingers into shaking fists. No, he wasn't going to give up. There was one last hope.

"Tooby!" Caden called. "Can you hold onto my back?"

"Affirmative," Tooby said.

"Good. There's been a change of plans. We're not running anymore. We're *riding*."

Tooby turned his mechanical head to Deber as if scanning her. The horse had been patiently waiting in her stall, her head darting back and forth between Caden and the strange metal spider on the ground.

"Riding this creature will increase our chances of escape by approximately eighty-two percent."

"My thoughts exactly," Caden said. "Now get on my back and let's get out of here."

Tooby sprang onto Caden's shoulders, wrapping his legs around Caden's back. It felt strange, but Caden didn't care. He was already tearing open Deber's stall door and tossing on her saddle and reins faster than ever before. Deber could hardly stand the excitement, neighing and shaking her mane,

ready to ride. Caden hadn't planned on adding horse stealing to his list of crimes today, but he figured it couldn't make things any worse.

In ten seconds flat, Deber was saddled up. With Tooby on his back, Caden leaped on top of his horse, then gave her an order he'd never given before.

"Run, girl! As fast as you can!"

Caden squeezed Deber with his legs and she understood immediately. They'd done fast galloping before hidden away in the fields when no one was looking, but now Caden's squeeze was the strongest it'd ever been. Deber whinnied, tossed her mane, then burst through the open stable doors.

Right into Annika.

Caden yanked the reins just in the nick of time, stopping Deber from slamming into her by an inch. Annika covered her face with her hands, then looked up at Caden. She was out of breath from sprinting down to the stable ahead of everyone else.

"Get out of the way!" Caden demanded. Right behind Annika was the rest of the Home. This was no time for chit chat.

"What are you doing?" Annika asked sharply.

"I don't have time to explain," Caden said. "I'm leaving the Home. Now."

Annika stared at Caden. He didn't have time for this. Just as he was about to signal Deber to gallop around her, she spoke.

"Take me with you," she said. Caden wanted to ask why—or just leave without asking—but another voice, cracked and frazzled, broke out behind him.



“Don’t ... don’t trust him, Annika!” screamed Dom. He was covered in hay and dirt and his hair was sticking out straight in every direction. He pointed at Caden with an accusing finger. “I saw it! He’s using Iltech. I ... I knew it! I knew all along there was something evil about him.”

As if on cue, Tooby peeked over Caden’s shoulder into Annika’s view. She saw the seven blinking eyes, the wiggling metal fangs, and her jaw fell open.

“Caden Aire,” Tooby said in his metallic voice. “Our probability of escape is decreasing by approximately four percent every second we are not moving. I recommend leaving immediately.”

“Annika,” Caden said quickly. “If you want to leave, then get on. Now.”

Annika reached up to Caden. He leaned to grab her hand and—

Dom leaped from behind and grabbed Tooby.

“Come here, you Iltech monster!” Dom yelled. He wrapped his fingers around Tooby’s body and tugged as hard as he could. Tooby let out whirrs of anger and his legs clung to Caden’s sides even more tightly as Caden was yanked backwards, struggling to stay on the horse. The crowd of Nobodies and Mother Mildred was almost here. Caden had to leave now.

“Deber!” he yelled. “Kick, girl!”

Deber reeled back her hind leg and slammed it into Dom’s stomach. He crashed through a stall door, bringing it to the ground in a pile of splintered wood.

“If you’re coming then get on!” Caden said to Annika. She grabbed his arm and pulled herself up behind him. As soon as

her arms were wrapped around him just like Tooby's, Caden squeezed Deber with his legs and gave the command again.

"Let's go, go, go, girl! Go!"

But Deber didn't budge. It was too late. Everyone was outside the stable. The Nobodies, Mother Mildred, and Mr. Stercus were standing together as an impenetrable wall of shocked faces.

"Caden!" Mother Mildred shrieked. "What are you doing? Get off Deber right now!"

Deber fidgeted her hooves uncomfortably. She'd gotten Caden's signal to run, but she knew better than to gallop straight at a group of people. Caden closed his eyes and grit his teeth. He didn't want to do this any more than she did, but they had no choice.

"I ... I'm sorry!" he shouted. He squeezed Deber again and she let out a pained growl. This time she obeyed. She ran straight at the crowd full speed. There were screams as everyone scrambled to move out of the way of the rampaging horse, but the loudest came from the back of the stable.

"Caden has Iltech!" Dom boomed. "He has an Iltech spider!"

As Deber galloped away, Caden opened his eyes and looked behind at the terrified faces he and Annika were speeding away from. He had Iltech, he'd broken a holy contract, and he'd stolen a horse. He was a criminal now. Caden gripped the reins and turned his attention back to where they were headed, desperately trying to suppress the wringing feeling in his gut.

"Where are we running away to?" Annika asked from behind.

“I ... I don't know,” Caden admitted.

“You don't know?” She didn't sound as excited as before.

“Tooby, the spider thing, he knows where to go,” Caden said, trying to sound confident. “But first we've got to get to the woods. Once we do that, we're safe.”

Annika didn't reply. Caden tugged Deber's reins and steered her sprinting legs past the kitchen and bathroom shacks, then around the Home itself. Tied up to a post in the front yard was Mr. Stercus's red stallion, munching apathetically on some hay as Caden and Annika zoomed past. Caden took another look back at the group they'd left behind. Everyone was as small as ants in the distance, except for Mr. Stercus who was huffing and puffing in a feeble attempt at pursuit.

Caden allowed himself a smile. Somehow, even with everything going wrong, they had managed to escape. The only ones who could chase after him were Mother Mildred and Mother Laura riding Mara, and they wouldn't dare go as fast as Caden. And he couldn't imagine Mr. Stercus managing to wheeze his way to his stallion before they were out of sight. They were actually going to make it.

“Oh no,” Annika whimpered, pointing ahead. Three horses had emerged from the archway of trees around the entrance to the path to Salem. One of them was Reabon ridden by Mother Nadine. The other two riders—Caden didn't know them, but he recognized them immediately. They were Holy Police.

Caden had never seen the Holy Police himself, but he'd heard enough whispers from the Nobodies to know what they looked like. They wore a pure white uniform from head

to toe with Gotama's Ant emblazoned on the front. Only their faces cut out from the rest of the cloth showed that they were human. Their horses were tall and muscular, twice the size of Mara, with white saddles and reins.

But the scariest part was what they were carrying. Slung over each of the Holy Police's backs was a sheath containing their trademark weapon: the crossbow. There was no use running from the Holy Police; you'd just get an arrow in the back. Caden had heard stories told between Nobodies when they thought no one was listening. Tales of tears being spilled as they recounted how their parents had to choose between running away from the Police or surrendering. All the ones who had run didn't make it very far.

And now, Caden was going to have to make the same choice.

"Those are Holy Police," Annika said, her fingers digging into Caden's sides. "What are they doing here?"

"I don't know," Caden said. He had a sinking feeling that the Police had come for him. They needed to find a way to escape without being spotted before—

The Home bellrock started ringing. The clanging echoed as loudly as last night, like a pounding stone heart warning of danger. Mother Nadine and the Holy Police stopped, and their gaze immediately fell to Caden and Annika riding Deber. In unison, both Police reached behind and grabbed their crossbows, ready to fire.

"We've got to turn around!" Annika yelled. "They'll shoot us!"

"I know, I know!" Caden said. He yanked Deber's reins and skidded her off to the side, away from the path to Salem.

The Holy Police were only a few hundred feet away. They were peering into the sight of their crossbows. Any second, Caden and Annika would have an arrow through their heads.

“Go, girl! Go, go, go!” Caden shouted. He kicked Deber’s sides and cracked her reins. She whinnied out loud as she burst away even faster. As soon as she kicked up speed, two arrows pierced the air behind them, sticking deep into the grass like nails driven in by hammers.

Caden glanced behind, dreading what he was going to see. The reality was even worse. The two Holy Police were chasing them, masterfully riding their horses as they held their crossbows steady in front, taking their time to aim carefully. Caden knew that unless they did something, the next shots were not going to miss.

“They’re shooting at us!” Annika said. “We’ve got to get away!”

“I’m going as fast as I can!” Caden said. The Home was nothing but open fields and pasture. There was nowhere to escape or hide until they got to the woods.

“Tooby!” Caden shouted. “What do we do? Tell me where we should—”

An arrow sliced through the air behind Caden, ending in a piercing pop. He looked back to see where the arrow had hit him, but the Police hadn’t been aiming for him. The arrow had struck Deber right in the rear.

Deber cried out and nearly shook Caden and Annika right off. Caden pulled the reins to get her under control, and even though he knew she was in pain, kicked her to keep going. Deber gave a high-pitch shriek and slowed to a crawl, limping with her back leg. Caden felt horrible, but if she

didn't keep moving then pretty soon they'd all have arrows in them. Panicked, he looked back. The Holy Police were reloading their crossbows. In just a few seconds, they could shoot at point-blank range.

"Tooby!" Caden cried. "What do we do?"

Tooby rotated his head backward, then forward again, scanning their predicament. His red eyes flashed wildly.

"Caden Aire," Tooby said in his usual calm voice, "earlier today you asked me how I found you."

This was not the response Caden had expected.

"Tooby, I don't know if you noticed, but there's two Holy Police behind us ready to—"

"I sensed your electric signal," Tooby continued. "There are very few remaining in the world, and yours became stronger the closer I got to you. You must do the same to find your father. Follow the electric signals."

"What are you talking about?" Caden demanded. "I don't know how to sense anything!"

"I am sorry, Caden Aire," Tooby said. Caden felt the spider's metal legs detach from his back. "I will not be able to accompany you any farther. My life's purpose is complete, but yours is just beginning. It was a pleasure to finally meet you. Farewell."

Before Caden could say anything, Tooby scuttled around Annika and leaped off Deber toward the Holy Police. He soared through the air and latched onto one of their faces. The man screeched to a halt. He screamed and dropped his crossbow, grabbing at Tooby and trying to pry him off. His partner watched in horror as both their horses stumbled from shock, stopping in their tracks.

“Tooby!” Caden yelled. “What are you—”

Tooby exploded into a thick cloud of dirt and fire. Chunks of smoldering earth seared past Caden, smacking him and Annika as hot dust filled the air. Caden couldn't see. He could only cough into his gloves to ward off the burning in his throat. He squinted his itchy eyes and looked back to where the Holy Police and Tooby had been moments ago. Now there was just a scorched crater and plumes of black ash rising to the sky.

“Tooby!” Caden screamed. There was no sign of the spider. No reflection of any metal, no scuttling legs, no flashing eyes. Caden gave Deber a good squeeze with his legs. She growled in protest, still in pain from the arrow protruding out of her backside, but obediently hobbled toward the aftermath.

“Caden,” Annika said from behind, “we have to get out of here.”

“No! I'm not leaving without my friend!”

From not far away, Caden heard the unmistakable deep wail of a stallion. Mr. Stercus was coming after them, and Mother Mildred on Mara wouldn't be far behind.

“I don't know what that spider was,” Annika said, gripping Caden's shoulders, “but it ... it sacrificed itself, so we could escape. Don't let it go to waste by staying here and getting caught.”

Caden's chest felt like it was filled with ice. No matter how much he blinked, the stinging tears wouldn't stop. He closed his eyes and yanked Deber's reins to turn around.

“Thank you, Tooby,” Caden whispered. He gave Deber a light kick, and they staggered away into the cover of the woods.



Later that night at the Home, the bellrock had stopped ringing, and night covered the fields and forest like a thick, silencing blanket. Mother Mildred and the Nobodies were inside after a day of mourning. Everyone had spent the daylight hours searching for Caden and Annika. Mother Mildred had dispatched groups of younger Nobodies through the fields and orchards, and Mr. Stercus had led the older Nobodies into the forest, scouring for any sign of blood or tracks.

But all they found was the scorched crater by the woods. When more Holy Police arrived to investigate, they roped off the area and didn't allow anyone near it. Rumors spread. Some of the Nobodies claimed Caden was carrying an Iltech bomb when he escaped, others claimed Metl blasted him from the heavens. With Metl and its blood-red *X* now dwarfing the moon in the night sky, it seemed possible.

Once the sun had set, the search was called off. The Holy Police declared Caden, Annika and Deber dead, killed in the explosion along with the other two Police, and they told the Mothers to keep quiet about what had happened. It was a solemn time at the Home as Mr. Stercus left with just Dom—the only time an adopter had ever left without their adoptee. Mother Mildred led funeral prayers inside the Home and failed at holding back tears. At the front of the hall, where the bodies would normally be laid, there was only



a small wooden box. No one asked why the box was being used in place of Caden and Annika, and Mother Mildred didn't offer any explanation.

But hours later, once the Nobodies had been sent to their rooms for the night, someone else started searching for Caden. Someone who didn't belong at the Home.

There were two people. One of them was a tall figure shrouded in a black robe and hood. The image of a red double-tailed scorpion surrounded by a gray circle was imprinted on the back. Peering out of the hood was a white mask with two eye holes and a permanently smiling mouth. The other figure was much shorter, half the size of the tall one, but otherwise a copy in every way—same black robe, hood, and scorpion. But instead of a smile, the shorter one's white mask was twisted into a frown of agony.

The two figures emerged silently from the forest and walked as if hovering toward the roped-off crater. Burnt grass and pieces of the Holy Police's uniforms still littered the ground. The two figures stopped and the taller one bent down. He picked something off the ground and inspected it close to his eye holes. It was long, thin, and metal. It was part of one of Tooby's legs.

"Look here, Six. A Spyder unit," he said. His voice was deep and cold, spoken as if every word was chilled on the way out. Six came closer to look.

"You don't think it found him, do you, Five?" she asked. Six's voice was high-pitched and curious. It did not match the horrified look of the mask. Five placed the metal leg inside the pocket of his robe.

"Let's go find out," he said. They walked toward the

Home. The lamps in the hall were still lit. Aside from Metl's red X in the sky, the gentle glow coming from the windows was the only light in the darkness. The two figures stopped in front of the Home's wooden door and Five extended his hand. As if obeying his command, the door swung open, revealing Mother Mildred alone in the hall, caressing Caden's empty wooden box. She gasped and dropped it when she saw the two intruders in the doorway.

"How did you get in?" she demanded. "That door was locked."

Neither Five nor Six said anything. They stepped inside and Five waved his hand again, closing the door behind them. Mother Mildred watched in horror.

"There should be a boy named Caden here," Five said, his smiling mask unmoving as he spoke. "Where is he?"

Mother Mildred's eyes widened with terror. She gripped her legs. She wasn't going to let them get what they wanted without a fight.

"Caden is dead," she said. "He and another girl passed away in a terrible accident today. Now, in the name of Gotama, I ask of you to please leave this Home."

There was a moment of silence as the two figures absorbed her words, then a laugh escaped out of Five's smiling mask. It was loud like a clap of thunder, followed by rumbles of chuckles as he shook his head.

"You are lying," he said coolly. "Caden is not dead. Nothing you have here could ever hope to kill him. Now, where is he?"

Mother Mildred opened her mouth to speak, but only a cough came out. Followed by another, and another. The air

suddenly had a thick taste to it, like she was gulping down mouthfuls of dust with every breath. Her eyes watered and she bent over, gasping for air. Five stepped forward while the smaller Six stayed perfectly still. Five waved his hand toward Mother Mildred. She was yanked upward as if by invisible ropes attached to her feet. With a shriek that only came out as another cough, Mother Mildred was suddenly hanging upside-down in midair.

“Where is Caden?” Five asked calmly. He crouched down to be face to face with Mother Mildred. Suddenly her mind was filled with the thoughts of the Nobodies. What would these two do to them? She had an urge to tell them everything, anything at all that might get them to go away.

“Caden ran away,” she said. It felt like the thick, particle-filled air was reeling the words out of her. “He tried to escape on horseback but was spotted by Holy Police. When they saw him running away, they chased after him, but there was an explosion. We ... we haven’t seen any sign of ... of ... Caden s-since th-then.”

Blood rushed to Mother Mildred’s head, making it heavy as stone. Breathing was impossible. Her face twitched, dripping with sweat. Her body was no longer her own. It was being controlled by something else.

“Do you mean to tell me,” Five said, “that you’ve lost Caden?”

“Y-yes,” Mother Mildred eked out. Five leaned so close that she could see his eyes through the holes in the mask. They glared at her with a searing anger that electrified the air between them.

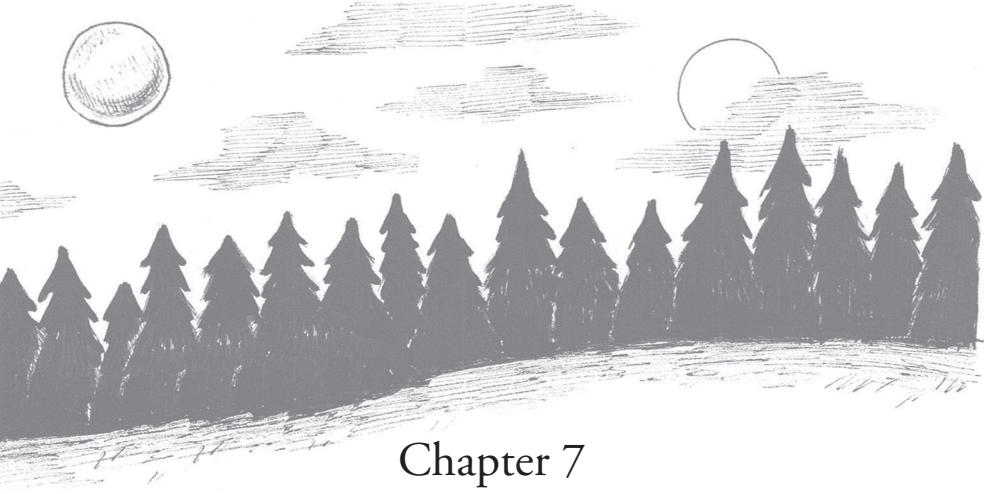
With gnarled fingers, Five swiped his hand, sending

Mother Mildred flying across the room and slamming into the wall. The impact shook the Home and brought down the tapestry of Gotama's Ant on top of Mother Mildred, now unconscious on the floor. The sound of confused and scared Nobodies waking up in their rooms came down the hallway.

Six sighed. "Why'd you have to go and do that, Five? Now we have to deal with all those brats."

Five flexed his fingers and shook his head. He looked at Six, and even though his mask was smiling, anger was radiating off of him.

"You think I care about a couple of Nobodies?" he seethed, thrusting out each word like a knife. "If we don't find that boy, he'll destroy the world. Again."



## Chapter 7

### Salem

After escaping the Holy Police, Caden and Annika trudged deep into the forest. They'd dismounted the crippled Deber and continued on foot. With the arrow still sticking into Deber's backside, walking slowly was all that she could handle, and it was a lot easier for her without two people riding. As they pushed forward through the hanging branches and ground thick with roots, the Home's thundering bellrock became more and more muffled until it was only a quiet clink in the distance.

Caden couldn't stop thinking about Tooby. He felt so alone. Tooby was the one who had told him what to do, the one who had given him hope. If it wasn't for the Iltech spider, Caden would have a pair of broken legs and be heading off to live with Mr. Stercus. And how had Caden thanked him? By letting him blow himself up. Tooby had told Caden to sense electric signals—whatever that meant—but all he could feel right now was a sharp pain in his chest, constantly reminding him that his friend was gone.

“Deber doesn’t look like she’s bleeding,” Annika said, sounding as far away as the bellrock. Caden took a deep breath. He didn’t want to move on, but he knew he had to. He didn’t want Tooby’s sacrifice to be in vain. And the first step toward doing that was to make sure they weren’t leaving a trail of blood for anyone to follow.

Annika was walking next to Deber, inspecting the wound up close. Caden peered over. She was right. There was no blood, on the outside anyway. The arrow stuck out of Deber’s skin as neatly as if it had sprouted there, a thin wooden rod growing out of red and purple splotches on her white hide.

“It looks painful,” Caden said. “Should we take it out?”

“No way,” Annika said. “If you do that, blood will gush everywhere.”

“What do we do then?”

“Look at this.” Annika gently stroked the arrow all the way up to its feathered end. “This is a slim arrow. It’s designed not to cause any excessive damage. For some reason, the Holy Police were shooting to get us alive.”

Caden narrowed his eyes in skepticism. “How do you know so much about arrows?”

Annika bit her lip. She pulled up the sleeve of her green dress and revealed her left forearm to Caden. There was a scar the size of a large pebble, and when she flipped over her arm, a nearly identical scar was on the other side.

“I know a thing or two about being shot by Holy Police,” she explained, rolling her sleeve back down. That was enough for Caden.

“Do we just leave the arrow in then?”

“That’s all we can do for now. Pulling it out will cause

bleeding. Leaving it in for too long will cause infection. We have to get her to an animal doctor in Salem.”

Deber put on a brave face as she trod along, but her limp and whines of pain told Caden that she was in bad shape. And it was his fault for forcing her to leave with them. The only thing he could do was rub her back and reassure her.

“Don’t worry, girl. When we get to Salem, we’ll find someone to fix you up real quick.”

Deber snorted. Caden held onto her reins and focused on moving forward. Walking through the woods without a path was tough. They had no idea where they were going. There was little sunlight. Gnarled roots, leafy nets, and sharp branches stuck out like traps everywhere. The only thing guiding them was the Home’s bellrock growing fainter, and finally silent, behind them. At least there was no sound of galloping hooves. For now, they were safe.

As they walked, Annika made sure that every branch they snapped was picked up and tossed aside, and every hoof and footprint they left in the dirt was brushed away with a fan of pine needles. She did it all silently, without saying anything to Caden. He wondered how much experience she’d had running away, but she was the one who spoke up first.

“I have a question,” she said. “What the steel was that Iltech spider thing all about?”

Caden smiled. As they walked he told her about Tooby and his dad and the Xs on his palms. Annika didn’t believe him until he removed his gloves and showed her the glowing marks. The bright red Xs reflected in her wide eyes.

“Let me get this straight,” she said, sounding overwhelmed. “You’re a part-human, part-robot ... *thing*. And somehow

you triggered that big X on Metl that's going to cause the end of the world?"

"Yep," Caden said simply. "But Tooby said as long as we find my dad before Metl hits us, we'll be fine."

"And how long do we have before that happens?"

"Uh, about two days. I think. That's what Tooby told me."

Annika let out a sigh. "Well I guess that means us being wanted criminals isn't a big deal, right? Either we find your dad in two days and we're heroes, or ... well, the world ends."

Caden nodded. Now it was his turn to ask something.

"So why did you run away with me?"

Annika let an airy laugh escape out her nose. She looked like she was faking a smile.

"I'm just along for the ride. I mean, you can only stand so many of Mother Mildred's lectures on proper corn seed planting before you have to leave, right?"

"Oh, come on," Caden groaned. "I had to leave but you didn't. What made you go?"

Annika was silent again. The sound of birds fluttering above and moist grass smooching under the slow tread of their shoes were the only sounds in the woods.

"I have some things I need to take care of," Annika said finally. "And being stuck at the Home wasn't helping."

"Are you looking for your mom?" Caden asked. He realized only too late that this was not the right thing to say. Nobodies never wanted to talk about their old lives. Annika closed her eyes and squeezed her branch of pine needles so hard it looked like she was going to grind it into a pile of wood chips.

"We'll see," was all she said. Caden didn't ask any more



questions. The two of them and Deber continued along, Annika still covering their tracks, now with a silent scowl on her face.

They kept walking for hours. As the sun went down the woods grew darker and more alive. Bugs chirped, owls hooted, and shadows bounced between tree tops, shaking branches and leaves. Caden and Annika glanced over their shoulders at every sound. All they ever saw was the growing blackness behind them.

But being attacked by some forest creature wasn't the biggest fear on Caden's mind—finding food and water was. He hadn't eaten anything all day, even missing out on his own adoption breakfast. Now it was catching up to him with pangs of hunger rippling through his stomach. He wished more than anything he'd spent those extra few seconds grabbing an apple or two out of the tack room before running away.

Even worse was the thirst. The dryness in his mouth was excruciating. Every time he tried to swallow or lubricate his throat, nothing came up but dust. Annika suggested chewing on sticks to stave off the hunger, and to occasionally get savory little morsels of moisture caught in leaves and stems. The first time Caden put a stick in his mouth and tasted the dirt and bark was the first time he thought maybe he'd made a mistake.

It finally got so dark that Caden had to hold out his glowing red palms to see anything. He walked squatting close to the ground to keep his hands as low as possible. Even then he could barely see a foot in front. When he tripped over a root that he'd missed and landed face-first onto a decaying log filled with insects, they decided that was enough, it was time

to set up camp. And by “set up camp,” Deber just laid down and Caden and Annika leaned against her twitching body.

Doubt continued to creep into Caden’s mind. If he’d just stayed at the Home, even if that meant being adopted by Mr. Stercus, at least he wouldn’t die of starvation or thirst. Sure, he’d never find his dad, but he’d never find him anyway if he was dead. And because of him, Deber had been hit by an arrow that was sapping her life away. And then there was Tooby, who might still be alive if it wasn’t for him running away too.

Tooby. Caden closed his eyes and remembered the metal spider. If only he were here now to guide them and tell them everything would be all right. Without him, Caden didn’t know what he was doing or where he was going. He finally fell asleep, wishing he had any idea how to sense those stupid electrical signals.



When Caden woke up, it wasn’t because he sensed anything strange. Rather, he heard something distinctly normal—human voices.

Annika heard them too, and the two of them were instantly on their feet. Deber slowly got up on all fours. Her wound looked worse than yesterday. The purples and reds had darkened and spread out like a web of infection. Caden reassured her, and himself, that they’d find a doctor in Salem.

Caden looked up through the tops of the trees toward

the sunlight. They'd slept longer than he'd thought. It was already late morning. The human voices were getting louder and louder. It sounded like dozens of people shouting to be heard over each other. Whatever they were yelling about, Caden didn't care. If people were nearby, that meant food and water were nearby too. Adrenaline suppressed Caden's hunger and thirst, and he plowed through the woods along with Annika and Deber.

More and more sunlight began filtering through the trees. The brush became less thick. Then suddenly and without any warning Caden took a step and he found himself teetering on the edge of a slope. He shot his arm out to stop Annika and Deber from tumbling over, and then he stood there, shocked as he took in the view.

Caden had only ever heard stories about Salem, but they couldn't compare to the real thing. It was like there were Homes, hundreds of them, stacked next to each other and on top of each other in every imaginable shape and size. There was a rainbow of brown, cream, and red wooden buildings, some of them with smoke pouring out of brick chimneys or with spinning windmills, all lined up against roads that faded between stone and dirt. Caden had never seen so many people before. They were walking along the streets, riding horses, carrying buckets of produce to sell, kids running around playing games with rocks and sticks. Everyone was dressed in earth tones, the men wearing hats and the women in bandanas and bonnets.

Just beyond Salem toward the horizon lay the ocean. Caden could only make it out as a sparkling blue sliver in the distance. The other Nobodies had talked about the ocean

before, but Caden had a hard time believing there could be so much water in one place. He gazed at it in awe, feeling like he'd finally been let in on a secret that the rest of the world had known forever.

But there was one building that stole Caden's view: the church. It was an intricately carved sculpture in the center square that towered above the other buildings, at least ten stories high. Far more than a building, it looked like a statue divided into two halves: on the left was Gotama himself as a massive, burly man with a flowing beard. On the right was a giant ant with a human head and antennae that Gotama was wrestling with.

Mother Mildred had told the Nobodies stories about the church. She'd said that it was carved out of a colossal tree that, a thousand years ago, humans had engineered to grow all the way up to Metl. Humans had become so advanced that they could transform into animals using Iltech if they wanted, so they turned their bodies into ants to gain the insects' incredible strength and ability to climb trees. They climbed the giant tree all the way up to Metl and used their strength to fight Gotama, to show that they were more powerful than him.

But Gotama easily defeated the human-ants. He was disgusted that his creations had twisted their natural forms, and he destroyed the giant tree and cast the human-ants back to Earth. To punish them, Gotama took away humanity's unnatural Iltech powers and instructed them to appreciate his creations for what they were. Through the Six Virtues he showed them that even each tiny leg of the ant has a purpose, and he instructed humanity to follow them to make the most

of his gifts on Earth.

Caden had always thought the story was silly, but now that he was seeing the statue-church for himself, it seemed possible.

Especially since Metl was closer than ever.

Metl had been hidden to Caden all day yesterday while in the woods, so seeing it now made his heart stop. It was five times the size of the sun, and its ominous X still glowed blood red. It was almost comical watching clouds float in front of it as if nothing were wrong.

Only the shouting voices stopped Caden from staring at Metl. The same yelling he'd heard in the woods was now even louder, and Caden could see exactly what was happening. On a wooden stage in front of the church there were two people kneeling and being berated by an audience of hundreds. The mob was shouting and throwing sticks, dirt, whatever they could at them. The only thing that prevented them from storming the stage were the Holy Police armed and ready.

Caden narrowed his eyes to get a closer look, but then snapped them open in shock when he saw who the two people on stage were. They were far away and hard to see, but there was no mistaking that red hair and flowing coat.

They were Dom and Mr. Stercus.

"Hey," Annika said. "We should go down while everyone's distracted. We can easily get some food and water."

"Did you see who's on stage?" Caden asked. He still didn't believe it. Annika carefully leaned closer and she gasped.

"Gotama's Ant," she said. "What are they doing there?"

"I don't know." Caden quickly tied Deber's reins to a nearby tree, sat down at the edge of the slope, and swung his

legs over. It was a rocky, dirty, two-hundred-foot slide down. "I'm going to find out what's going on."

"Are you crazy?" Annika howled. "Going to the stage is the last thing you should do! There's Holy Police there. We need to stay as far away from them as possible."

Caden knew she was right, but at the same time there was something pulling him toward the stage that he couldn't resist. It was like a hook latched around his bellybutton, gently tugging at him. If those were the electric signals that would lead him to his dad, then he had to follow them.

"I'm just going to check it out really quickly," he said, starting to shuffle down the slope. "You stay here with Deber. She can't come down this slope anyway."

Annika continued protesting, but Caden was already sliding down, careful not to slam into any large rocks. Around him earth crumbled and pebbles tumbled until he landed at the bottom, right behind a wooden building. As he brushed himself off, something else rushed down behind him. A few seconds later Annika was next to him, covered in dirt and dust.

"Glad to see you changed your mind," Caden said.

Annika glared. "Let's just get this over with. I'm dying of thirst."

Finding water was easy. Salem was peppered with wooden buckets all over town, acting as rain water receptacles for horses to drink from, to water plants, and most importantly, to put out fires. In a town where nearly every building was made of wood, fire was the worst disaster imaginable.

Caden and Annika ran to the nearest bucket and practically dunked their heads inside. Water had never tasted

so beautiful. It was like honey, flowers, and a big juicy steak all put together in the most satisfying way imaginable. They gulped down handful after handful, only stopping when the bucket was emptied.

Their thirst quenched, Caden and Annika headed to the streets. Navigating inside Salem was a lot harder than viewing it from above. Caden wasn't used to walking such narrow paths; there was at least an acre between each building at the Home. The tiny spaces here made him feel squeezed from all angles. It didn't help that every few seconds people would slam into him and Annika as they ran past, eager to make it to the church square while the action was still going on.

They followed the groups of stragglers to the stage. When they reached the center of the ruckus, Caden and Annika stood at the back of a thousand people. Everyone was craning their heads for a better view, shouting and shaking balled fists in the air. Caden stood on his toes to try and see. He could just barely make out Dom and Mr. Stercus kneeling on stage, surrounded by a dozen Holy Police.

Caden had never been around so many people. More and more filled in behind him, pushing up against him and Annika, trapping them. Caden wondered what would happen if he was recognized by the Holy Police. He'd have no way to escape. He started to wish he'd stayed with Deber.

Suddenly there was an eruption of noise that overpowered the unruly crowd, a blast so loud it caused everyone, even Caden, to cringe in pain as they covered their ears. Caden opened his eyes a slit, seeing something on the stage that he'd overlooked before: a hollow wooden cone the size of a shack. The open end was facing toward the crowd, and a tiny man in

gray robes peeked out from the other end, then disappeared behind it again.

“That’s better,” boomed his voice throughout the town. “Now that you’re all quiet and I have your attention, could someone explain why these two have been brought to Gotama’s stage?”

The crowd exploded into a frenzy of incomprehensible shouts, and the little man let loose with another booming noise out of the cone. It silenced the mob as everyone slammed their hands over their ears.

“I can’t hear you when you all scream at once. One at a time.” This time no one shouted anything. A single Holy Police walked over to the small man, whispered into his ear, then handed him something that glittered in the sunlight. It reminded Caden of Tooby.

“It appears that these two are accused of possessing Iltech,” he spoke as loud as thunder through the cone. There were shouts of agreement from the crowd, but they quickly quieted down, not wanting another blast to force them silent. “This boy—a former Nobody—turned in his adopter to the Holy Police for hiding Iltech inside his jacket. But the adopter claims that the Iltech is not his. As you can see, we have a bit of a problem. And it’s made even worse by the fact that this is no ordinary piece of Iltech.”

The small man held up the shiny thing that the Holy Police had given him. There were shrieks of terror from the audience.

“Does anyone know what this horrible thing is?” he asked into the cone. The only response was shaking heads and fervent denials. Caden squinted to try and make out



what it was. It was small and square and looked like it had buttons. Maybe it was a camera? Or a computer?

“This despicable instrument is called ... a *calculator!*”

At hearing the name of the Iltech, people in the crowd shut their eyes and covered their ears as they wailed in pain. Caden had never seen how anyone outside of the Home reacted to Iltech, but now he could understand why every Nobody he'd talked to about it ran away.

“The calculator is one of the most abominable examples of Iltech,” the small man bellowed. “It takes Gotama’s gift of the human brain and turns it into mush. It makes wise men lazy and lazy men arrogant. Is this what is causing Gotama to be angered?” There was a cheer of agreement. “Should we send both these sinners to Gotama and have him deal with them as he pleases?”

That was apparently too much for Mr. Stercus. He leaped up from kneeling and stomped over to the small man. Just as the Holy Police caught up to him and grabbed his coat, he ripped the calculator out of the man’s hand and leaned into the cone.

“This horrible Iltech isn’t mine!” Mr. Stercus announced to the crowd. “This disgusting little Nobody, who I adopted out of the kindness of my heart, must have planted it on me as soon as we got to town. He probably got it from some devil black market dealer, conspiring to frame me and take over my business! If there’s anyone to punish, it’s this boy over here.”

Mr. Stercus brandished the calculator at Dom. Caden had never seen Dom like this before. He was in tears, kneeling on the ground, pleading with Mr. Stercus. He crawled over to him on his knees, babbling something that Caden couldn’t

hear. The short man guided him to speak into the cone.

“Please, Mr. Stercus,” Dom cried. “I didn’t do any of that. I just ... I saw the Iltech and I thought ... I thought I was doing the right thing. I thought, maybe, I could get my real family back.”

“Don’t lie to these people, boy!” Mr. Stercus yelled into the cone. “I should’ve known better than to adopt a tainted Nobody like you. Once a sinner, always a sinner.”

“Mr. Stercus, father, please I—”

Mr. Stercus smacked Dom hard with the calculator in the eye. Dom howled and covered his face as blood dripped through the slits between his fingers. That was enough for the Holy Police to finally drag Mr. Stercus and Dom back to the other side of the stage and return the calculator to the small man in robes. Caden didn’t know what to think. Part of him felt like Dom deserved it, but at the same time he didn’t want to see him like this.

The crowd was getting more riled up. People were demanding that someone be punished to appease Gotama and stop Metl from crashing into Earth. One of the Holy Police dashed across the stage to the small man and said something to him. The man smiled and spoke into the cone.

“Father Yohan has been summoned,” he blared. “He will put an end to this madness.”

There were murmurs of agreement through the crowd. The Holy Police stood at attention, and a man walked up from a staircase behind the stage. He was dressed in gray robes and had a wooden pendant in the shape of Gotama’s Ant around his neck just like Mother Mildred. A mane of white hair framed his face, from the beard that reached down

to his chest, to the wisps on the sides and top that stuck out like bleached fire. But despite his imposing appearance, he had a kind look on his face.

He drifted over to the wooden cone with his hands behind his back, leaned in, and spoke in a voice that didn't sound old at all. It sounded confident and experienced, as if he'd seen all this happen hundreds of times.

"I have heard all that I need to hear," he said. "Who are we, mere humans—less than ants—to judge each other? We should let the Great Gotama decide who is innocent and who is guilty, for only he has the power to make decisions free from Earthly sins."

The Holy Police prodded Dom and Mr. Stercus with empty crossbows, shuffling them to the center of the stage in front of Father Yohan. Dom was still dripping tears and blood out of his eye as he kept it covered, and Mr. Stercus looked like he was smelling something foul coming from Dom's direction. Father Yohan put a hand on each of their heads, then looked up to the sky, past the giant statue of Gotama and right to Metl overhead.

"O Great Gotama!" he yelled loudly enough to be heard without the cone. "Is there a sinner among us? Show us so that he may be punished justly, and the innocent allowed to continue to serve you."

The crowd was silent. The only sound was Dom sobbing on stage. Caden didn't know what was going on. Were they waiting for a sign from Metl? Was the statue of Gotama going to move? He'd never heard of anything like that before.

Then Mr. Stercus let out a howl of agony that rippled through the air. At first it was hard to tell what was wrong, but



when he leaped to his feet everyone in the crowd could see it.

His face had aged fifty years.

Mr. Stercus wasn't young to begin with, but now he looked ancient. The skin was spread thin over his skull, and brown splotches popped out on his sunken cheeks. His hands were nothing more than gnarled masses of veins and wrinkles, and his screaming voice was dying away by the second. Moments later his legs gave out and he collapsed on stage. His bones crumbled to dust and were blown away in the wind, leaving behind just his fur coat and hat as the only evidence he'd ever existed.

Caden immediately thought of Dom and hoped the same thing wasn't going to happen to him. But Dom looked exactly the same. He was still kneeling on stage and had stopped crying. He lowered his hands from his face, and his eye looked as good as new. There was no blood, no sign that it had ever been hurt.

"Gotama has spoken!" Father Yohan announced. "The true owner of the Iltech has been dealt his due justice, and the innocent in needless pain has been healed. Such is the benevolence of the Great Gotama. We are his Ants!"

"We are his Ants!" repeated the crowd. Caden was too stunned to say anything. What had just happened? Did he just witness a miracle? From somewhere in the crowd there came a shout.

"But the red X is still there! Metl is still going to hit us!"

Fearful murmurs spread as people stared and pointed up. They had expected the X to fade away and Metl to retreat to its old position in the sky after the Iltech sinner had been dealt with. But nothing had changed, and the crowd grew



anxious. Father Yohan spoke into the cone.

“My fellow Ants, have you already forgotten the miracle you just witnessed? The Great Gotama is watching over us, making sure that his believers are safe! Everything is part of his grand plan. Do not lose faith now, when we are on the verge of his greatest sign in a thousand years. Now is not the time to fill your hearts with fear, but with joy and love for Gotama and Metl in the sky.”

Father Yohan turned to Dom who was still kneeling in disbelief. He offered Dom a hand and helped him stand up.

“You, boy,” Father Yohan said. “You have witnessed Gotama’s greatness firsthand. Do you believe he would allow Metl, his finest creation and our eternal home, to simply crash into us?”

Father Yohan offered Dom the wooden cone. Dom spoke, and his amazement echoed through the town.

“Gotama saved me. I ... I didn’t ask him to, but he did. It’s because he knows I’m not an Iltech sinner. And I don’t think anyone else here is either. If you are, then you should give yourself up to Gotama right away. Gotama is great! Gotama is great! Gotama is—”

Father Yohan gently ushered Dom away from the cone. With a smile on his face, he leaned in to speak again.

“With such passion, I’d say we’d be missing out if we didn’t recruit you to the Church. What do you say, boy? You were a Nobody, weren’t you? It seems your adopter had ill intentions in his heart. Will you join us in the Church to help repair your wounded soul, crying out in pain?”

Dom didn’t need to go near the cone for everyone to hear his enthusiastic yes. Father Yohan put a hand on Dom’s back

and guided him off the stage, escorted by two Holy Police. The remaining Police picked up Mr. Stercus's clothes. A few puffs of dust billowed into the air. The small Father from before cleared his throat and returned to the cone.

"Thank you very much, Father Yohan. As we've stated before, there is nothing to worry about. We've almost figured out what Gotama is trying to tell us, and any more distractions are just wasting the Church's time. Please remain calm. We are his Ants."

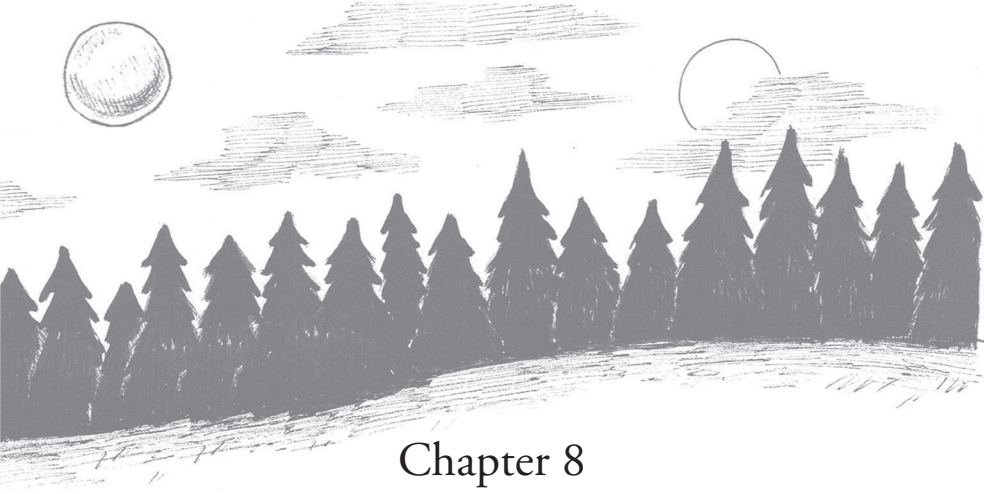
The crowd repeated his words, not nearly as excitedly as before. The short Father and Holy Police on the stage left, and the audience began to disperse. Everyone scuffled away in varying states of confusion, fear, and forced smiles. They didn't look convinced by the Church's words.

Caden just stood there, still in shock by what he'd seen. It wasn't until someone slammed into him walking past that he was knocked back to reality, suddenly very aware of how much he stood out. He was one of the few without some sort of head covering, not to mention his denim overalls that looked out of place in a sea of white and brown cloth. Caden felt like he was one stare away from being put up on stage and turned to dust too.

Annika was right. Coming down here had been a mistake.

Thinking of Annika, Caden turned to talk to her. They needed to figure out what to do next. Caden looked around, expecting her to be standing right next to him. But she wasn't there. Caden panicked and tossed his head in every direction as more and more people bumped into him and gave him suspicious glares. But she wasn't anywhere.

Annika was gone.



## Chapter 8

### Twelve

His face burning red and his heart racing, Caden forced himself to keep moving with the flow of the crowd. The last thing he wanted was to stand still and stick out more than he already did. His eyes ravaged the crowds, desperate for any sign of Annika's lime-green dress and bonnet, but it was as if she'd simply vanished.

As Caden followed random strangers, the crowd grew thinner. People spread out back to their homes and shops, and Caden suddenly realized he had no idea where he was. Even worse, people were starting to notice him more. In the center square he was just another face. But now, down whatever street he was on, he was in someone's neighborhood. A plump woman sweeping outside her door gave him a dirty look, and a group of kids stopped playing their game of rocks in the street and stared as he passed by. These people knew everyone else who lived there, and they had no idea who this overall-clad, gloved stranger was.



“You lost there, Blondie?”

Caden jumped at the voice. He spun and saw an old woman sitting in the road. She was covered in burlap sacks and had wild, straw-like hair. The way she peered at him with her narrowed eyes and the smirk on her dust-covered face made Caden feel like she knew exactly who he was. He didn't like it.

“No, I'm not lost,” Caden said quickly. “I'm going home. Bye.”

The woman let out a laugh that shook her burlap coverings. If she had arms or legs, Caden couldn't see them. She spoke again, her voice crackling like a dying flame.

“Blondie, I promise I'm not as dumb as I look. Now, tell me: are you lost in the good way or the bad way?”

Caden's brain was yelling at him to get away, but just like before when he'd felt pulled toward the stage, he felt something pulling him toward the woman.

“I don't know what you're talking about,” he said. The woman grinned.

“There's only two kinds of people who are ever lost. Ones who have done something bad, and ones who are about to do something bad. Which one are you, Blondie?”

The more Caden spoke with this woman the more he felt he should just listen to his brain and get out.

“I'm just looking for my friend,” he answered.

“Oh. Well then. Your little friend wouldn't happen to be a girl about your age, would she? With a green dress, long braided hair, looking like she's up to the same kind of trouble as you?”

Caden wasn't sure what to say. She was probably talking

about Annika, but he didn't know if giving this woman any information was a good idea. His silence was more than enough for her. She smiled in a satisfied way.

"Pretty little thing, she is. You picked yourself a nice little girlfriend. Hope she's not off running away with some other boy. Not that I'd blame her much."

"Where did she go?" Caden finally asked. If this woman knew where Annika was, then he might as well take a chance. The faster he could find her the faster they could come up with a plan.

"Well well, getting antsy, are we?" she snickered. "I saw her run over there, by the market street. Hope she wasn't trying to get away from you."

Caden mumbled a "thanks" and took off down the road. He was happy to get away from the old hag. Everyone in Salem made him uncomfortable. Maybe these people were perfectly okay with watching someone get turned to dust on stage, but he wasn't.

When Caden reached the row of food shops, he tried his best not to look like he was hysterically searching for someone. Or starving to death for that matter. He ignored his rumbling stomach and strolled past the wooden displays of fruits, vegetables, and breads under the sun-bleached awnings. He tried his best to act like an average customer, even though he had no idea what an average customer looked like. But there was no one around. The only life in any of the shops was a cloud of flies in the butchery buzzing around a stone cleaver. Caden gagged on the putrid smell and he brusquely walked away, as lost as before.

"Hey!"

A loud whisper came from a narrow alleyway. Caden looked down and saw heaps of garbage piled against the sides of buildings—rotten food, moldy wood, horse manure. It made the butchery smell like daisies in comparison. But then Annika peeked out from the very end and it could've smelled like the Home's outhouse for all that Caden cared. He'd found her!

Annika beckoned him down the alley. Caden waded through the piles of garbage and met her at the shadowy dead end. They were hidden from view in this dark corner of town.

"Where did you go?" Caden asked, half relieved and half upset.

"I slipped away to find us some food," she said. "Sorry I didn't say anything, but I didn't want to cause a fuss in the middle of the crowd. I think my haul makes up for it though."

Annika held out her hands and revealed apples, strawberries, and even half a loaf of bread fresh from the oven, still exuding heat and a sweet aroma. Caden's mouth watered and he made a grab for some, but then he stopped himself.

"Wait. How did you get all this?"

Annika shrugged awkwardly. "I got it from the shops."

"You 'got' it? You mean, you stole it?"

"Yeah, well what do you expect?" Annika said sharply. "We don't exactly have any money or anything else to trade. What were you gonna do? Try and sell your Iltech photo? Offer rides on your crippled horse? Come on, Caden. This is what we have to do."

The bubbling acid in Caden's empty stomach was

screaming at him to eat the food, but at the same time he knew that the easiest way for them to get caught was by stealing. He'd already made one risky move coming down to the stage. Now they needed to lay low and figure out how to find his dad, not commit more crimes. If that meant chewing on sticks and foraging in the woods, then so be it.

"We can't steal food," Caden said. "Or anything. This town is weird, Annika. You didn't see what I saw on stage. This guy came out, Father ... something. And he—"

"Let me guess," Annika said knowingly. "He put his hand on someone and they turned to dust, right?"

Caden was taken aback. "Yeah, how did you know?"

"Did you forget? I used to live in Salem. I've seen what Father Yohan can do, and I knew I didn't need to see it again. All I wanted was to get us some easy food."

Caden felt like an idiot. With everything that had happened he'd forgotten that Salem was where most of the Nobodies had come from. He was the one who was different, basically born and raised at the Home. But for Annika it was like being in her own backyard again.

"Listen," Annika said, trying to sound sympathetic. "I've stolen from these shops a hundred times. Now you can either eat what I have here and be thankful, or you can starve. It's up to you. Either way I'm going back to get some more before everyone returns. Here, hold onto this and try not to eat it all."

Annika shoved the bounty of food toward Caden. He reluctantly took it. It still didn't feel right. Seeing him not eat anything, Annika sighed and ran her fingers through her hair.

“I mean, you want Deber to get better, don’t you?”

“What does Deber have to do with this?” Caden asked.

“How do you think we’re going to pay an animal doctor to treat her? And do you honestly think they’re not going to know what kind of arrow hit her? We have to bribe them with something, food or whatever else we can get, or else they’ll just turn us over to the Holy Police.”

Caden felt overwhelmed. There was so much he didn’t know. It was bad enough when he found out he wasn’t fully human, but now he was finding out he didn’t even understand how real human society functioned. As if reading his mind, Annika spoke up.

“I know how this town works, Caden,” she said. “You worry about finding your dad, and I’ll worry about making sure we don’t starve. Deal?”

Caden didn’t say anything. He bent over, leaned his mouth on one of the apples cradled in his arms, and took a giant bite with a satisfying crunch.

“These aren’t nearly as good as what we had at the Home,” he said while chewing. But that didn’t stop him from finishing the apple with another three massive bites, then start sucking down the juicy strawberries one by one. Annika laughed and shook her head.

“All right. You stay here. I’ll be back with more. Then we can find a doctor for Deber.”

“Do you want me to come?” Caden asked, his chin dripping with strawberry juice.

“Uh, no offense but you’ll just get us caught. You try to detect those electrical signals or whatever that spider told you to do, all right?”

Caden didn't argue. Annika snuck out of the alleyway and back onto the road, moving as fluidly as a cat. Caden helped himself to another apple and tried to remain as hidden as possible.

As he waited, Caden focused on trying to sense something—anything. That was what Tooby had told him to do, and it was the only way he was going to find his dad. When he'd stood on the slope earlier and had seen the stage, he'd felt a strange pull toward it, and then there turned out to be a calculator there. Maybe that pulling sensation was what he was supposed to be feeling?

But no, Caden thought, that couldn't be it. He'd felt the same pulling sensation when he'd talked to that old woman in the street. And she was about as electric as a potato. He had to be missing something.

Caden's thoughts were cut off by a scream. It was Annika.

He dropped the food and ran out of the alley. There was a crowd gathered. The butcher was back, standing high above everyone at over seven feet tall and as wide as a horse, wearing a blood-stained apron. He had monster-like wild hair and stone piercings in his ears and lips. He held Annika up effortlessly with one hand, his thick sausage fingers wrapped around both her wrists. She kicked and wailed and tried to free herself, but the butcher just grinned with yellowed teeth, watching her like a fly trying to escape his grasp.

"Well look who's back," he cackled. "My best customer who never paid for anything."

There were laughs from the crowd. Caden felt helpless. He knew stealing was a bad idea.

"Let go of me!" Annika yelled. She swung her legs at the

butcher, bit his fingers, spat in his face, but nothing she did even so much as made the giant man blink.

“Last I heard they sent you away to the sin farm. Looks like you managed to weasel your way out of there too. But you’ve gotten sloppy. You’re out of practice, dear.”

“Don’t call me ‘dear,’ you giant freak,” Annika screamed. Her words did nothing. He just kept staring at her with a smile the size of a scythe.

“If you escaped from the sin farm once, I guess that means I’d better not take any chances this time. I’ll deal with you myself.”

Still holding onto squirming Annika with one hand, the butcher reached inside his shop for the stone cleaver. Annika froze as he caressed her arms with the blade.

“Hey!” said a woman in the crowd. “If that girl ran away from the Home, then maybe she’s the one upsetting Gotama and causing all this ruckus. You should turn her in to the Holy Police immediately!”

Things were getting worse by the second. Annika was trapped, and now Caden was in danger just by standing there. If he tried to help her, the entire town would be after them both.

“Don’t worry,” the butcher said coolly. “I’ll turn her in to the Police. After I make sure she can never steal again.” He then turned to the crowd and brandished the cleaver, causing everyone to step back in fear. “And if I were to tell the Church she happened to lose her hands in an accident, I don’t think anyone would argue with me, would they?”

Everyone in the crowd shook their heads. The butcher smiled and returned the cleaver to Annika’s wrists. Caden

was out of time. Even if he ran full speed he wouldn't reach Annika before her hands were lying on the ground.

Caden had felt this way before. Powerless. He remembered when Dom had shoved him to the ground at the Home, come at him with the sledgehammer in the stable, and a hundred other times in the fields when he'd bullied Caden while no one was looking. Each time Caden wished he could just thrust out his hands and send a giant blast of air right at Dom to send him flying away. But though he'd tried, nothing had ever happened. He'd just gotten punched in the face or kneed in the stomach.

But out of instinct, Caden's hands extended themselves again. All he could do was hope for a miracle like he'd seen on the stage. He closed his eyes and grit his teeth and spread his fingers as wide as he could. He had to save Annika!

Something happened. A tingling sensation buzzed inside Caden that he'd never felt before. It was warm and filled him from toes to nose, like a million fireflies shining bright inside him. On and off, on and off, on and off, faster and faster. Inside it suddenly felt hot, so hot that Caden needed to let it out. He couldn't control it. It was coming out whether he wanted it to or not!

Caden shook, the palms of his gloves ripped, and something invisible erupted out of them, slamming right into the giant butcher's stomach. The man let out a mountain-shaking roar as he was launched straight up into the air above the houses and crashed into the brick roof of the building behind him. He sunk deep into it, splashing brick fragments and splintering wood. He lay there unmoving in a cloud of dust as shrieks of terror rang out. Annika looked unhurt,



standing in the road with her arms up like they were still being held. She stared at Caden in shock as if he'd just caused an explosion with his bare hands.

Which made sense, because he had.

Everyone looked at Caden in wide-eyed silence. There were no more screams, just the horror on everyone's faces as they slowly realized what had happened. Caden stood paralyzed by what he'd done. His hands were still out in front of him, incriminating him. The palms of his gloves were shredded, and the red Xs shone through as brightly as if his hands were on fire.

"It's him!" shouted someone in the crowd. "That boy is the one who's angering Met!"

"We've found the sinner!"

"Get him before he escapes!"

Suddenly Caden found the strength to move. He spun around ready to bolt, but another crowd was already blocking his path from the other direction. Both mobs closed in on him, the hunger to destroy Iltech raging in their eyes.

Caden was trapped from all sides. The crowd cautiously encircled him, wary of the horrible power they'd just witnessed. Caden thrust his hands out at them, trying to summon the same power as before. It made them step back momentarily in fright, but that was all. Whatever miracle had happened before wasn't happening again, no matter how hard Caden tried.

As the mob closed in, Caden thought to himself, this is it. He wasn't going to meet his father. He was just going to die here, either at the hands of these people or by being turned into a pile of dust on stage. He had so many questions, and now he was never going to find the answers.

That's when it got dark.

The transition was so quick it was like someone had blown out the sun. One second it was daytime, the next all of Salem was shrouded in darkness. Midnight had decided to show up early.

It only took one shriek to see what had happened. Metl, still massive in the sky, had eclipsed the sun. There was no longer a shining ball of light above, only darkness and that terrifying *X*.

The mob quickly forgot about Caden, but even more so once the water began to flow. In the streets all around, water began streaming past like a river, growing deeper and more intense by the second. Everyone ran yelling toward higher ground, flailing their arms in the air hysterically. It felt like the world was ending.

“Get out of here!”

“Metl has sent a flood!”

“Run away! The sinner is planning something!”

Far from “planning anything,” Caden stood there alone, not having any idea what was going on. He was surrounded by darkness, knee-deep in churning water, and more confused than ever. Annika ran up to him, splashing her way through the newly-formed canal.

“Caden! What's going on?”

“I don't know!” Caden shouted to be heard above the screaming mob and rushing water. “But let's get out of here before they come back.”

A familiar voice came from the shadows.

“Well, Blondie, it looks like you were lost in the bad way after all.”

It was the old woman from before. She didn't sound the same. The febleness in her voice was gone. She was standing in the middle of the gushing water as solid as a statue, arms crossed, giving off an aura of strength that she had not had before.

"What are you doing here?" Caden asked.

Annika was shocked. "Caden, you know this person?"

The woman laughed. She shrugged off her burlap sacks and let her straw wig fall into the flowing water. The old woman was gone, and someone new—someone Caden would have guessed was from a different planet—had taken her place. She wore a sleek black uniform, heavy black boots, and was draped in a flowing black cloak. All the black made her blue hair with yellow streaks stick out even more, as well as the red scars that spread down her neck like branches on bare winter trees.

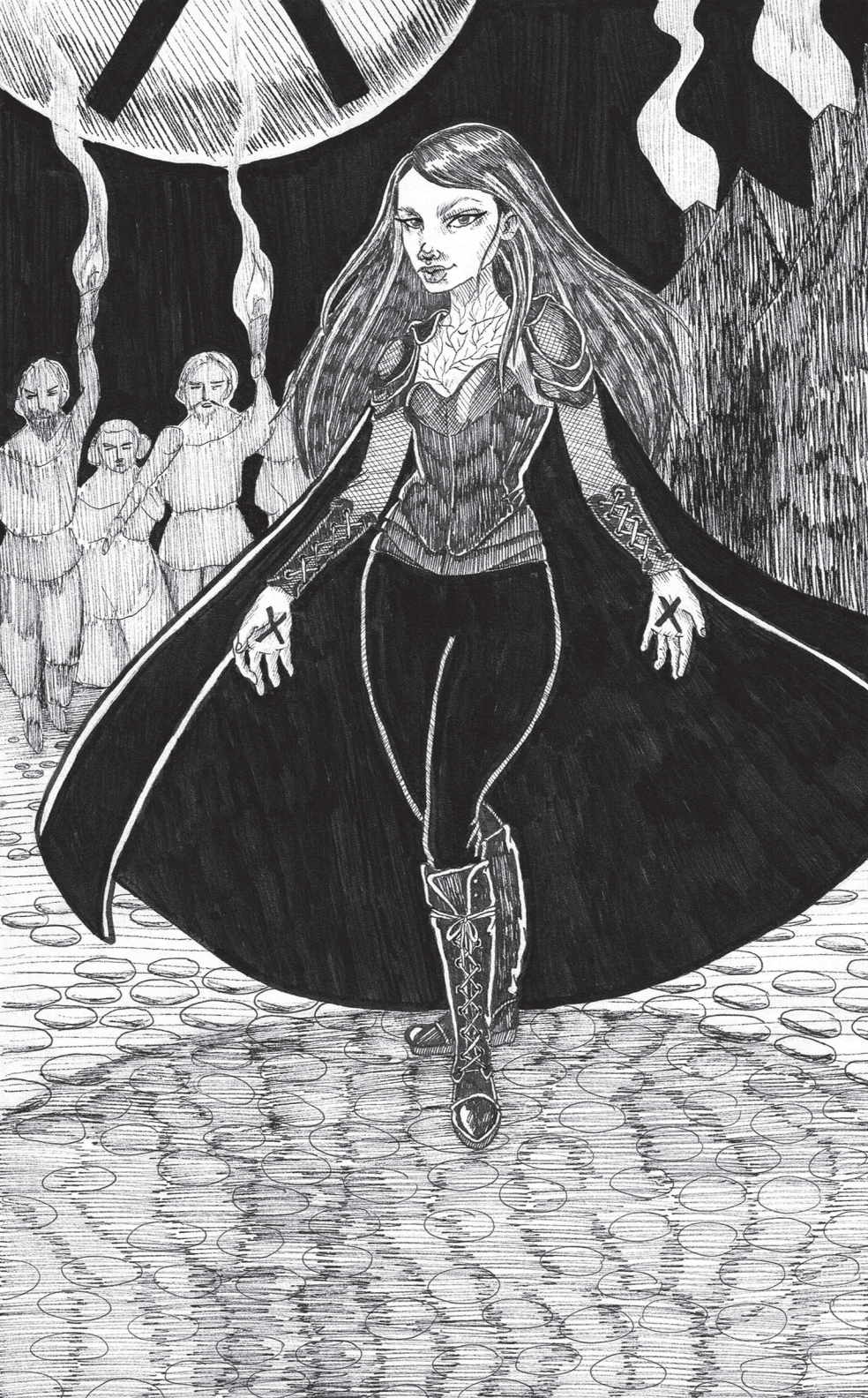
But what Caden noticed most of all were the blue glowing Xs on her palms.

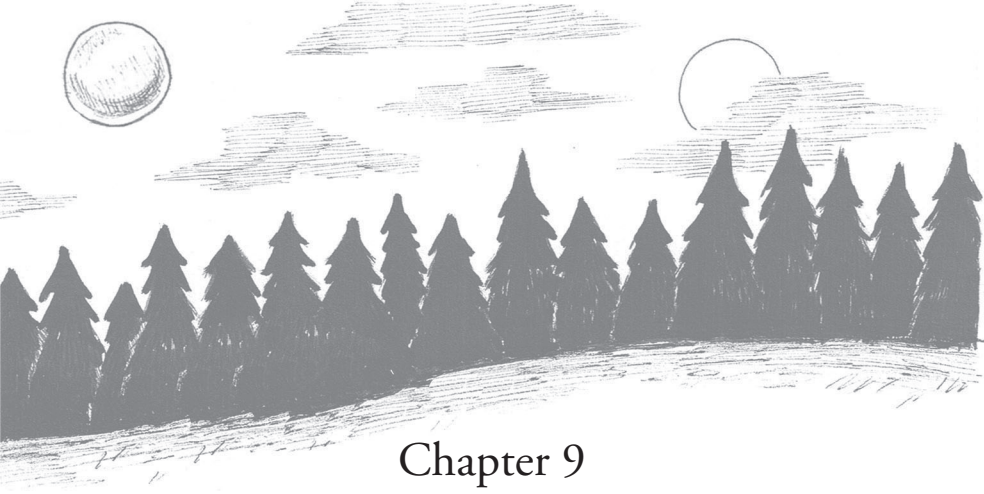
"I can assure you, Split Ends, that Blondie here doesn't know who I am," she said to Annika with a grin. "But I know who he is."

"Then tell us who you are!" Caden yelled.

"Well, well. Getting pushy, are we?" she snickered. "But I guess it was only a matter of time before we met. The name's Jadice, formerly known as Twelve—of the Twelve Apostles. It's a group I'd get to know if I were you, Blondie, seeing as they're trying to kill you."







## Chapter 9

### The ANGEL Weapon

Caden wasn't sure what was the worst thing happening. Metl eclipsing the sun and casting a shadow over the world, the river he was still standing in that had suddenly flooded the town out of nowhere, or the woman in front of him, Jadice—or “Twelve” or whatever her name was—with her yellow and blue hair and bright glowing palms. At least he wasn't being cleaved to death or engulfed by an angry crowd.

But despite that small reassurance, Caden's mind was on the verge of explosion. Today had been nothing but shocks and surprises. He needed answers.

“Who are the Twelve Apostles?” Caden blurted out. Jadice sighed.

“It's, uh, really kind of a long story. Can we talk about it somewhere else, where the people are a little less . . . murder-y?”

Splashes behind Caden made him turn around to a new mob of townspeople, this time armed and ready. They were carrying flaming torches to light up the darkness and were



armed with wooden clubs and stone knives.

“Destroy the sinners!” one of them cried.

“It is Gotama’s will!”

Caden and Annika both made a move to run, but Jadice waved a finger at them lazily.

“No, no, no,” she said. “Here. I know a better way to clean up those unsightly messes.”

Jadice crouched down and thrust her hands into the water. Immediately there was a rumbling like an earthquake. Caden and Annika grabbed onto a nearby building to not fall over, and the mob that had been so aggressive a moment ago was suddenly on their knees, soaked and shaking.

Caden heard it before he saw it. It was the sound of rushing water, like when the stone cauldron at the Home was turned over and emptied, only a thousand times louder. The mob let out a collective yell as a wave taller than the rooftops rushed down the main road and crashed into them, dousing their torch fires and carrying them away in the current. Caden and Annika held on tight as the wake of the wave rushed past them, carrying the struggling townspeople and extinguished torches along with it.

“And now for a bit of insurance,” Jadice said. She stood solid as a rock amid the raging rapids, her hands still submerged in the water. A wild grin flashed across her face. She closed her eyes, plunged her arms deeper down, and let out a powerful grunt that sent splashes up all around her.

From far away in the center of Salem, the sound of wood snapping and bricks crashing mixed with the screams of townspeople. Then again. And again. Three massive geysers of water as wide as houses rose into the air, reaching up as

far as the top of the statue-church. They roared like water tornadoes, gushing high above the town they had easily overpowered.

“Let’s get out of here while all those dirty Ants are getting a good washing,” Jadice said. She motioned to Caden and Annika to follow her, but Caden was still distracted by the three massive pillars of water overshadowing the town.

“Did *you* do that?” he yelled to be heard over the rushing water.

Jadice rolled her eyes. “Yes. Now come on and follow me and I’ll tell you all about my little magic tricks.”

Caden looked back to Annika. She shook her head and pointed in the opposite direction, desperately urging Caden to run away. She had a point. They’d seen what this woman was capable of—creating floods and waterspouts out of nothing. Who was to say she wouldn’t blast them with a geyser once she’d gotten whatever she wanted from them.

But still, there was something about her that tugged at Caden. Her pull was even stronger than what he’d felt come from the stage. And she knew who he was. It had to be worth the risk to see what else she knew.

“Are you two going to come on your own or do I need to conjure up a wave to push you along?”

Jadice was waiting, hands on hips. There were no townsfolk around, though Caden could still hear their cries. If they were going to make a break for it, now was the time.

Caden gave Annika a shrug and splashed over to Jadice. He waved her over and she reluctantly trudged through the slowly-receding river, clearly not happy about their new ally.

“Don’t worry, Split Ends,” Jadice said to Annika with a

smirk. "I'm not going to steal Blondie away from you. He's too young for me. And too plain. Plus, as a human myself, I have a policy of only dating other actual humans."

"I don't think any human could do what you just did," Annika said bitterly. "So, what does that make *you*?"

Jadice smiled and looked at Annika with a hint of respect.

"What am I?" she asked. "Little girl, you'll soon wish you never knew."



Jadice led Caden and Annika back up the slope they'd slid down what felt like ages ago. Every few seconds Caden checked over his shoulder to see if anyone was following them, but there was nothing but puddles and the occasional yell in the distance. By the time they reached the woods, the three massive water pillars had died down. The sun reappeared from the other side of Metl, giving enough light for Caden to observe the destruction.

The town Caden had seen earlier was gone. There were no people filling the streets. Everyone was shut indoors for fear of the world ending. Holy Police patrolled on horses up and down every road, crossbows armed and ready. The church was surrounded by piles of soaked wood and bricks that had once been buildings. Had just one person caused all this damage?

Jadice was silent as they walked. When Caden asked if



they could take a detour to bring Deber along with them, she just nodded. It was then that Caden noticed her face was drenched with glistening sweat. It wasn't particularly hot out, but Jadice breathed heavily with each step. When they reached Deber, she sighed with disappointment.

"Didn't know your horse was a cripple," she said. "I was looking forward to getting a ride."

"Couldn't you just make a river to wherever we're going and float on it?" Annika asked in a biting tone. "Seems like you're having a tough time walking."

"Yeah, well I'd like to see you after you flood a whole town," Jadice snapped back, wiping her forehead. "Now come on. It's just a bit farther."

Caden had no idea what "it" was, but he followed behind Jadice leading Deber by the reins. Deber was happy to see him; she wouldn't stop licking his cheek. Caden ruffled her mane and stroked her back, doing his best to ignore the purple and green rainbow of infection that was growing on her rear.

As they walked, Caden stared at the back of Jadice's black cloak. It had a picture of a red double-tailed scorpion surrounded by a gray circle. He was curious about it, but it was Annika who spoke up first.

"What's the scorpion thing on your back?" she asked.

"Symbol of the Twelve Apostles," Jadice said breathlessly. "Eight legs, two claws, two tails. You do the math."

"But why a scorpion?" Annika asked. "And why two tails?"

"No more questions until we get there."

Annika looked over at Caden with an annoyed glare, but he shrugged, and they kept following her in silence. Jadice

led them through wild brush and leaves, moving slowly but confidently while Caden and Annika followed. It felt like they'd walked halfway back to the Home when she finally stopped.

"Well, we're here."

Caden couldn't tell where "here" was. All he could see in the dim forest light was a never-ending cluster of trees. Jadice walked up to the closest one, a thick oak tree that gnarled and twisted its way up to the sky. She stroked the moss-covered bark with her hand.

"This is just a tree," Annika said.

Jadice shook her head. "Only to those whose heads are stuck in the ground."

She pointed up. Caden and Annika strained their necks to look as high as they could. There was something up there, at least fifty feet above the ground. But from down here it could've been a beehive for all they knew.

"I'll go first," Jadice said. "You two stay here. If you're only as dumb as I think you are, then you'll figure out what to do."

She stretched out her arms, extended her fingers, and pointed her palms at the ground. Without any warning, jets of water shot out of each of her hands, propelling her straight up into the air. Caden watched in awe as she soared higher and higher until she finally stopped, landed on something, and then disappeared.

"I don't like her," Annika grumbled.

"She's weird, but we need to figure out what's going on."

"I'd rather figure it out ourselves."

"Come on. Now you're the one not being realistic. You said I was being unreasonable before about not stealing food;

now it's your turn. If anyone knows about my dad, it's her."

Before Annika could respond, a ladder made of braided straw and wooden planks came unfurling down from up in the tree. It jerked to a stop right above the ground next to Caden.

"I guess this is what we're 'dumb enough' to use to get up," Annika groaned.

"Well I'm going up," Caden said. "You can stay here with Deber if you—"

"Great Gotama!" Annika screeched in frustration. "Stop telling me to stay with Deber!"

She took Caden by surprise and jumped at the ladder, climbing up as fast as a squirrel. Caden smiled and followed behind.

The ladder wasn't easy to climb. It swayed as the two of them went up. Deber's lonely whinnies didn't help either, making it difficult to not look down, but Caden forced himself to focus on their destination. From the ladder all he could see was a mass of wood and leaves above, but when he finally got to the top and dismounted, he realized that it was anything but.

It was as if a giant had picked up a building from Salem and placed it on top of the trees. Caden stood on a wooden platform in front of a hut made of scrap wood. It wasn't huge, but it looked like it could comfortably house three people.

Even more impressive was the view. Caden had never been so high up before. He was above all the trees in the forest and could look out as far as the eye could see in every direction. Behind him was the peak of Salem's church and beyond that the ocean. In front he could just make out the Home's fields. A flock of birds flew right by his head, and he

felt like he could reach up and grab a cloud.

But seeing Metl sucked away Caden's happiness. The monstrous metallic sphere was so close he could see the red glow in the giant *X* vibrating and flowing as if it were on fire. Did they really have a day left before it hit? Looking at it now, it felt like they didn't even have an hour.

"Are you two coming in or are you just going to stare at that thing that's gonna kill us all?"

Jadice crossed her arms and gave a cocky smile. As usual Caden's mind was overwhelmed with questions, and the least important one slipped right out.

"Did you build this?" he asked. "This hut in the trees, I mean."

"I guess you could say that," Jadice said. She ushered them inside. "Come on, get in. We've got a lot to talk about and I'd rather not do it with that big *X* staring at us."

Despite being fifty feet in the air, the hut was somehow well-furnished. There were three wooden stools and a white circular table made out of something Caden couldn't identify. It felt like his old "mute" button Iltech. It was smooth, as if it had been crafted out of milk poured into a mold. Caden couldn't stop running his fingers over it.

"You really like that table, don't you?" Jadice noticed.

"What's it made of?" Caden asked.

"Plastic."

Caden looked at Annika. She shrugged. Neither of them had heard the word before. Everything was always just called "Iltech."

"Don't worry about it," Jadice said. "Plastic used to be everywhere a long time ago. But now you gotta know where

to look to find it.”

“Where did you get it?” Caden asked. He hoped he wasn’t being too pushy with all the questions, but he probably was because Jadice ignored him. She took off her black robe, revealing even more thin red scars running along her arms. Coiled around one of her wrists was a silver snake bracelet.

“Is that plastic too?” Annika asked.

Jadice grunted. “You two ask too many questions for kids who should be starving. Let’s eat first.” She brought over a cloth backpack from behind her, reached in, and started placing several small metal boxes from inside it onto the table.

Caden’s eyes widened at the Iltech in front of him. It was just some metal containers, but it was more Iltech in one place than he’d ever seen. Jadice pried open the lids on the shining containers as if they were normal wooden ones.

“All right, this here is some cheese, and here’s some jerky, and this one’s got some good honey in it. I’ve got some apples for dipping too, so—”

She looked up at Caden and Annika who were mesmerized by the Iltech boxes. She stifled a laugh and shook her head.

“Oh, you kids. Come on. Sit down. When we’re done these little boxes will seem like nothing.”

The three of them tore into Jadice’s food, especially Caden and Annika who were still starving. Caden made sure to drop down some apples and carrots to Deber who gave grateful whinnies and happily ate them.

Once they’d scarfed down their fill, Jadice took out a strange device from her bag. It was a cylinder and looked like it was made of the same plastic material as the table. She opened one end, casually filled it up with water from

her palm, and then set it on the table. After a few seconds a sound went off like a small bellrock being hit, and she poured the liquid into wooden cups. It was warm and smelled like flowers. The device had somehow made tea.

“Hope you like lavender tea,” she said, handing Caden and Annika their cups. “It’s all I managed to get away with.”

Caden took a sip. It tasted like being back at the Home. They often had dandelion or herb tea, or even apple cinnamon tea on Ant Day, but Caden had never seen it made in a white plastic cylinder that went “bing” before. Caden set down his cup. It was time for answers.

“Who are the Twelve Apostles?” he asked. Jadice furrowed her brow in thought.

“Well you see it’s ... it’d probably be better to explain if ... well, I guess it’s easiest to understand if we just start with the end of the world.”

“The end of the world?” Annika said in disbelief. “But that hasn’t happened yet.”

“Listen, who’s the one doing the explaining here?” Jadice scolded. Annika rolled her eyes. “So, Blondie. How much do you know about the Iltech Apocalypse?”

“I mean, I know what they taught us at the Home,” Caden said. “Humanity got too advanced so Gotama punished them.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought,” Jadice said. “But as you’ve probably figured out, that’s all just a big fat lie.”

Caden sat up in his seat. He was hanging on Jadice’s every word. Even Annika looked like she was paying attention. Jadice continued.

“Two hundred years ago—”

“Two hundred years?” interrupted Annika. “But the Church said the Iltech Apocalypse happened a thousand years ago.”

“Anyway,” Jadice said through gritted teeth. “As I was saying, two hundred and some odd years ago, humanity was very different from what it is now. Iltech—well, it was just known as ‘technology’ back then—was everywhere. People used it to cook, for entertainment, they even had these things called cars, metal boxes on wheels that could go a hundred times faster than a horse. Or even forget traveling on land! They had giant machines called airplanes that could fly in the sky and cross oceans in minutes.”

“Oh please,” Annika snorted. “That’s impossible. If people had all that, then where did it all go?”

“You.” Jadice brandished a finger at Annika. “I’m trying to explain stuff here, and explaining stuff isn’t my strongest suit—killing is. So, unless you want me to stop explaining and start killing, how about you shut it until I’m done?”

Annika glared but didn’t say anything. Caden pressed Jadice on.

“But what happened?” he asked. “Where did all the Iltech—er, technology go?”

“That’s where it gets interesting,” Jadice said. “Humanity was so advanced it got to the point where they discovered something they shouldn’t have. Something that all humans have wondered ever since they first started wondering. They found the meaning of life.”

Caden and Annika were silent. Caden wasn’t sure he understood, but Jadice kept going.

“And when I say, ‘meaning of life,’ I’m not talking about

some crazy old philosopher or the Six Virtues that give purpose or anything. I mean the actual meaning of life. The reason we humans, or any life for that matter, exist at all.”

“What was it?” Caden asked, excitement tingling through him. “The meaning of life?”

“That, I don’t know,” Jadice said. She ran her snake-coiled hand through her blue and yellow hair. “Unfortunately, I don’t have all the answers. But I do know that once humanity made the discovery, something bad happened. They did something they shouldn’t have. They tried to fulfill the meaning of life, and it backfired. Bad time. Billions of people died. *Billions*. And when it was over, we had that thing in the sky staring down at us.”

Jadice pointed outside to Metl. It was so big it filled up the entire view outside the door.

“And ever since then people have been a little, well, *wary* about technology to say the least. They don’t want another disaster, so that’s why we have the Iltech-hating world of today. Unfortunately, it hasn’t worked out very well, seeing as how another apocalypse is heading our way.”

Caden struggled to take it all in. He’d never thought the stories that Mother Mildred read from the Book of Metl were completely serious, but to find out that everything—all of it—was a lie, was mind-boggling.

“So that means there’s no Gotama?” Caden asked, feeling like a child. “And people who use Iltech aren’t sinners? None of it’s true?”

“Nope,” Jadice answered simply. “All that’s just a bunch of lies the Church made up so we don’t go crazy with Iltech and blow ourselves up again.”



“And the Six Virtues?”

“Just six stupid things to distract people from ever finding the real meaning of life again.”

“Hold on,” Annika said, finally speaking. “How exactly do you know all this? I mean, how do we even know what you’re telling us is true?”

“Easy,” Jadice said. “Because I used to be sworn to protect it.”

Caden and Annika were, yet again, shocked into silence. Jadice leaned in and showed off the deep blue Xs on her palms. Just like Caden’s they glowed bright as if blue flames were lit inside.

“These are called ANGEL Xs,” she explained. “They’re what you get when you have an ANGEL weapon installed inside of you.”

“An *angel weapon*?” Caden asked, gazing at his own red Xs with new interest.

“Yeah, ANGEL stands for Artificial Neural Gear for ... Enhanced Limbs, I think? Again, I’m not the best at explaining. But they were weapons created before the Iltech Apocalypse. We just have the ones that managed to survive to today.

“ANGEL weapons are used by the Twelve Apostles, a team of the twelve most elite Holy Police. The twelve of us can use Iltech, and we’re assigned as pairs to govern and go on important Church missions. Every member of the Twelve Apostles has an ANGEL weapon, and we’re ranked by how powerful the weapons are. I used to be number twelve out of twelve, and Eleven was my partner. I was the lowest position, so my weapon is weak and lame. All I can do is water stuff.”

“Weak and lame?” Caden whimpered, remembering how

Jadice had decimated Salem by herself. “What weapons do the other eleven Apostles have?”

Jadice narrowed her eyes. “Pray you never have to find out.”

“Wait a second,” Annika said. “How do these ANGEL weapon things work? Do you just make water out of thin air? Could you make enough to flood the Earth?”

“That was almost a good question, Split Ends,” Jadice said. “But no. Remember the ‘neural’ part, the ‘N’ in ANGEL? Neural means ‘brain,’ and it takes a lot of brain power to control the weapon. When I’m making rivers and geysers, I’m creating water by fusing elements in the air together, and I’m controlling every single water molecule. I might make it look easy, but even with the necessary neural shortcuts, it still takes a lot out of you. After today I don’t think I have enough left in me to even make another round of tea.”

“What about me?” Caden asked, staring at his red Xs. “Do I have an ANGEL weapon?”

“Kind of,” Jadice said. “But as I understand it, you’re different. ANGEL weapons are usually installed into humans, but you Blondie, you’re more like a human installed into an ANGEL weapon.”

“What do you mean?” Caden asked, not sure if he liked what he was hearing.

“Your ANGEL weapon is way more powerful than any water fountain I could create. Your weapon is what caused the Iltech Apocalypse two hundred years ago.”

Caden was silent as he took in what Jadice was saying. Tooby was right. He really did have the power to destroy the world. Technically he’d already done it once before. More

and more questions burned inside him.

“But what am I?” Caden asked. “Am I a human? Or a robot? And why was I created in the first place? If I’m a weapon, then what happened? Did someone lose me or something?”

“Whoa, slow down,” Jadice said. “Like I said, I was the lowest ranked Apostle, so they didn’t tell me everything. But I do know this: your existence scares the crap out of the Church. All of us Apostles have been assigned to find and destroy you at some point for thirteen years, but obviously all of us have failed.”

“Then what changed your mind?” Annika asked suspiciously. “Seems kind of weird to try and kill someone for thirteen years and then just give up.”

Caden expected Jadice to lash out at Annika again. Instead she sank back in her chair in silence. She ran her fingers through her hair and looked around the hut with a faraway gaze.

“I did a lot of things I regret as an Apostle,” she said finally, not looking at Caden or Annika. “When it’s your job to go around killing people who have done nothing wrong except trying to make their lives easier, it gets to you. And that’s all Iltech is, it’s technology. It’s supposed to make being alive a little bit more easy and enjoyable.

“I remember once, my partner Eleven and I were assigned to a village that had been using an electric pump to get water. It was my job to punish them. I was instructed to remove all water from the village, and to eliminate anyone who tried to escape.

“And so I did. I made all the water fly up into the air

toward Metl, just like I was instructed, to make it look like Metl was summoning back the Iltech-tainted water. And then I waited. At first everyone just thought Gotama was punishing them for a day without water. But then two days went by. Then three.

“It was when the first death from dehydration came that the villagers panicked. My partner eliminated a dozen people who tried to escape in search of water. After that point anyone who was left realized their fate and accepted it.

“It was ... it was a few days later when the only person left in the village was a little girl, no older than three. She couldn't even walk anymore. She crawled on the ground toward me, and my partner laughed at her and spat on her face. The girl slowly reached up with her tongue to try and lick the saliva off her cheek and enjoy it as the only moisture she'd had in days. But I had a job to do. Right before the tip of her tongue touched it, I made the spit float off her face toward the sky, denying her even that.

“I don't know why, but something came over me at that point and ‘I'm sorry’ accidentally slipped out of my mouth. And then the girl, she looked up at me—the person who was responsible for the destruction of her village and her own imminent death—and told me, ‘It's okay. This is the will of Gotama.’”

No one said anything. Jadice took a deep breath and continued.

“That's why I'm not one of the Twelve Apostles anymore. I pretended to still be one of them for a while, but when you were turned on, Blondie, your electric signal suddenly became a lot easier to track. My partner and I were nearby,

and he wanted to find you and destroy you, maybe move up a few ranks in the hierarchy. But I'd had enough. I saw Metl's glowing red X and I knew that destroying you wasn't going to stop anything. We need to use technology to beat technology. We've spent two hundred years fighting against it. It's time to embrace it.

"When I told my partner Eleven about my change of heart ... he wasn't too happy. He tried to kill me, but I escaped, getting these lovely ways to remember him in the process." She showed off the branching red scars on her neck, chest, and arms. "These are all electrical burns. Eleven can create and control lightning like I do with water. Let's hope we don't run into him."

Caden's head was spinning with even more questions, but there was one thing he needed to do first. He should've done it as soon as they'd started talking. He reached into his overalls pocket and took out the photo of his dad.

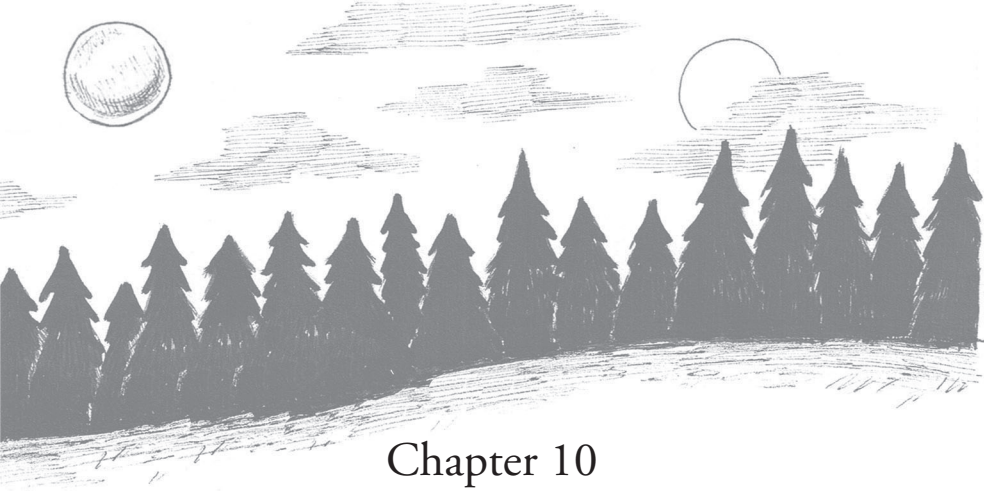
"This is my dad, the person who created me," Caden said as he handed the photo to Jadice. "I've never met him, but Tooby—I mean—a metal spider visited me and told me I had to find him to stop Metl. Do you know anything about him?"

At first Caden thought he saw a flash of recognition across Jadice's face as she looked at the photo. But then her gaze narrowed, and she scratched her head.

"Sorry, can't say I know him," she said. "But you were a Nobody, right? Then he's probably where all the Nobodies' parents are taken away to."

Annika leaped forward. "You know where our parents are?"

"Of course," Jadice said as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "They're all kept inside the town church."



## Chapter 10

### Eleven

This time it was Annika who was demanding Jadice for more.

“Are our parents really inside the church?” She was pressing her hands against the plastic table so hard it looked like it might crack in half. Even Jadice was taken aback.

“Hey calm down there, Split Ends. Yeah, of course that’s where they are. What do you think is inside that huge church anyway? Ant farms? It’s a giant jail for people who used Iltech.”

“That means my mom is in there,” Annika said. “We need to go there right now.” She stood and made her way for the door. Jadice laughed.

“Yeah, you go ahead little girl. I’m sure all the Holy Police in Salem will put up no resistance to you just barging inside.”

“I know some secrets about the church,” Annika snapped. “I know how we can get in.”

Jadice rolled her eyes. “Yeah, sure. You know all these secrets,

and yet you didn't know the biggest and most important one."

"Caden can get us in," Annika said, looking to Caden for support. "You saw what he can do. He has an ANGEL weapon or whatever too."

"Sure, except Blondie over here doesn't even know how to control it yet. Do you?"

Jadice and Annika both turned toward Caden. Jadice had a knowing, mocking look, and Annika had hopeful eyes. Caden knew who he was going to let down.

"We need more information before we can go, Annika," Caden said. "I still have so many questions, and we don't even know what my power is yet."

Annika deflated in disappointment and looked away. Caden knew how she felt. He wanted nothing more than to bust into the church and find his dad right away too. But doing that right now, with Jadice weak and him not even knowing how to use his ANGEL weapon, was just asking for failure. They had to prepare themselves somehow.

"Although," Jadice said, "I do have an idea. Blondie, I think I know where we can get your questions answered and get you some training with your ANGEL weapon at the same time."

Hope fluttered in Caden's heart. "Where?"

"There's someone in Salem who knows a lot more than I do. His name's Watson. I think we should go pay him a visit."

"But you just said Salem is guarded by Holy Police," Annika said bitterly. "I thought there was no way to get in?"

Jadice raised her eyebrows and her eyes twinkled. "That's because we're not going *into* Salem. We're going *under* it—to the Iltech black market."



The three of them and Deber trekked back to the edge of Salem, right to the top of the slope where they'd stood what felt like days before. By the time they arrived it was sunset. What should have been a beautiful sky was taken up by Metl, looming so large it felt like it would crush them at any second.

The town down below didn't look much better. Holy Police were still teeming the streets on horseback, looking even more menacing as their torches lit up their white uniforms. There had to be a hundred Police spread out over Salem. There was no way they could get in without being spotted.

"Well this is worse than I expected," Jadice grumbled, surveying the scene.

"I thought you said we were going under the town," Annika said.

"We are. The closest entrance I know of is that building, over there." She pointed down to an unassuming shack a little way into town at the bottom of the slope. Two Holy Police were patrolling near it, and several others were just a few blocks away. "I didn't think there'd be this many of them. I thought we could just slip right in."

"Is it really worth it?" Caden asked. "Couldn't we just wait until tomorrow and storm the church when you're rested and ready?"



“We’ve got to get you to Watson,” Jadice said. “I can’t take on the entire church myself, and talking to Watson is the only way you’ll learn to use your ANGEL weapon in time. It has to be now.”

“What do you suggest we do?” Annika asked. Caden looked around for something to use as a distraction. There wasn’t much. Just Jadice’s bag of food, his photo, and—

“The horse,” Jadice said. “If we shove her down the slope, it’ll distract the Police and we can make a run for it.”

“No,” Caden said firmly. He held tight onto Deber’s reins.

“Come on, Blondie. Look at the wound on that thing. You know she’s not going to make it. That infection is well past anything a doctor could heal.”

“We’re not using Deber as bait,” Caden said. Jadice gave him a disappointed look.

“Okay, whatever. We won’t use the horse. What’s your grand plan then?”

“Caden, you can use your ANGEL weapon,” Annika said. “You used it before. Even if you can’t control it perfectly, just do something to get the Police to go away for a minute.”

“I can try,” Caden said. He wasn’t sure what he could do, but using Deber was not an option. His unpredictable power was all they had left.

Caden stretched out his palms like before, extending his fingers as wide as possible. He imagined his insides growing warm again, pulsating on and off, and he concentrated on the church in the distance. If he could make the same explosion happen there that he’d caused earlier, then all the Holy Police in town would run toward it, leaving them plenty of time to

make it to the shack. *If* he could do it.

But nothing happened. Caden clenched every muscle in his body, trying to work up the same heat and intensity as before. He shook his palms, hoping an explosion would pop right out, but all it did was make his wrists ache.

He could feel the judging eyes of Jadice behind him. He trusted her, but she'd eliminated an entire village when she was an Apostle. She might toss down Deber to the streets if he couldn't do this. Caden couldn't let that happen. He had to protect Deber!

Caden suddenly felt heat welling up inside him, but it wasn't the same as before. It was too fast. There was a flash of warmth and then something invisible spilled out of his hands—not toward the church at all. It plummeted straight down to the dirt slope beneath him, impacting the ground with the force of an explosion. Rocks and mud flew everywhere, and the blast echoed throughout all of Salem. The town bellrock started clanging and dozens of Holy Police looked up to see Caden, Annika and Jadice at the top of the slope. They armed their crossbows and took aim.

"Whoops," Caden whimpered.

"Way to screw it up, Blondie!" Jadice yelled. "Follow me! Go, go, go!"

Jadice ran along the edge of the slope, and Caden and Annika chased behind. As soon as Caden yanked Deber's reins to force her to keep up, an arrow went whistling right by his face.

"Let's hide in the woods!" Caden shouted.

"No!" Jadice hollered back. "They'll track us too easily. We need to make a break for it."

She took a sudden turn and started stumbling down the dirt slope into town. The shack was within sight, but the Holy Police were swarming. The two that had been patrolling were galloping closer, and the sound of thundering hooves signaled more on their way. Running toward them did not seem like a good idea.

But Caden didn't have a choice. Annika followed Jadice down the slope, and Caden pulled Deber's reins to drag her down with him. She yelped in painful protest, but he tugged her along as they slid down the rocks and dirt.

That was when Caden got hit. There was another whistle and then a searing pain erupted in his leg. The arrow had gone right through his overalls and into his thigh. He yelled out in agony but kept limping forward, not daring to stop and become an even easier target. With every step downward, every pump of blood through his veins, excruciating pain pulsed through his leg.

"Caden's been hit!" Annika yelled to Jadice. Jadice turned to see Caden hobbling down the hill, grimacing in pain.

"For crying out loud," she grumbled. "You two, run for the shack! I'll try and hold these amateurs back."

Jadice stopped at the bottom of the slope and Annika ran past her, followed by Caden and Deber both stumbling as fast as they could. Jadice groaned and kicked out her legs, looking like she was trying to work up what little energy she had left after flooding the town.

But before she could summon any water, there was a rumbling in the sky and then an explosion of lightning struck down on top of the charging Holy Police. It wasn't just a single bolt, but tendrils of bright yellow flashing in the dark

sky, briefly turning it to daylight. The Holy Police and their horses were knocked to the ground, the tips of their uniforms singed and smoldering.

Jadice turned back to Caden and Annika, her face set in horror.

“It’s Eleven!” she cried. “He’s here! We need to go, now!”

The whistle of arrows had stopped. Even the gallops were gone. The only sound was the rumbling in the clouds above, signaling another electric blast was on its way. Caden and Annika ran toward the shack with Jadice right behind.

Thunder boomed up above, even louder this time, and another tentacle of lightning shot past the three of them into a house. The electrical impact blasted the wood into dust, leaving behind nothing but smoke and charred wood as the house collapsed in on itself. If Eleven got any closer, they’d be the ones being blown to bits.

“Get inside!” Jadice yelled. Annika threw open the shack door and Caden limped in with Deber, followed immediately by Jadice. It was a lot larger on the inside than it had seemed outside, extending into the neighboring houses. Jadice slammed the door behind them and locked it with a wooden barricade.

“He’s still coming,” Annika panted. Jadice waved her away and examined the floor with her glowing blue palms. She quickly grabbed onto a plank and yanked up a hidden door built into the wooden floor.

“Get down there now,” she whispered.

“What about Deber?” Caden asked.

“I don’t care about the horse! Shove her down there if you want but just go!”

Without saying a word Annika climbed into the dark hole. Caden held on to Deber's neck and cupped his hand around her snout then jumped in. They hit the dirt ground four feet below inside a hole the size of a cellar. Pain shot through Caden's leg like he'd jumped into a fire. Deber's own cries were muffled by his fingers. Jadice leaped in after them, closing the wooden panel back over their crouching heads.

Not a moment after they were hidden underground, there was a bang on the door. Caden tightened his grip over Deber's mouth, not daring to let her make so much as a whinny.

There was another bang upstairs and the door crashed to the ground. Footsteps stomped over the entrance to their hideout. Dust and dirt fell from above into their faces with each heavy step. Caden clasped his other hand over his own mouth, not daring to breathe for fear of accidentally coughing.

The footsteps went on for what seemed like forever. Caden felt like any second Eleven would pull up the wooden panel above them and blast them all with electricity. But just when he thought for sure they were going to be found, the footsteps stormed back outside. There was another rumble of thunder followed by the sound of galloping horses. Then there was nothing.

The three of them waited in silence. A minute passed. Then another.

"Is he gone?" Annika asked in the darkness.

"I think so," Jadice said, not sounding sure at all.

"But can't he track Caden's electrical signal? How did he miss us?"

“Are you really complaining?” Jadice snarled. “Come on, let’s keep going.”

Caden had no idea where they could possibly “keep going” to. Weren’t they in a hole in the ground? Jadice pushed past him and ran her blue glowing palms against the dirt wall. To Caden’s surprise there was a door built into it—a metal door.

The door was the height of the hole and had splotches of grainy orange. Caden remembered seeing it before on an Iltech chain Mother Mildred had shown the Home—it was called “rust.” Jadice reached under her robes into her backpack and pulled out a metal key.

“I hope this thing still works.” She slid the key into a small hole in the door and turned it with a clank. Dirt crumbled from the ceiling as she slowly pulled it open with a loud, grinding squeak.

“Follow me,” Jadice said.

The three of them and Deber slipped through to the other side. Ahead was a narrow dirt hallway dimly lit with electrical bulbs on the ceiling. Caden gazed at the flickering lights in awe, wondering how they worked. At the end of the tunnel was an even brighter light, though it looked small from where they were. Jadice pulled the door shut behind them and locked it.

“Where are we?” Caden asked.

“We’re underneath Salem,” Jadice said. “Now keep moving. We’re almost there.”

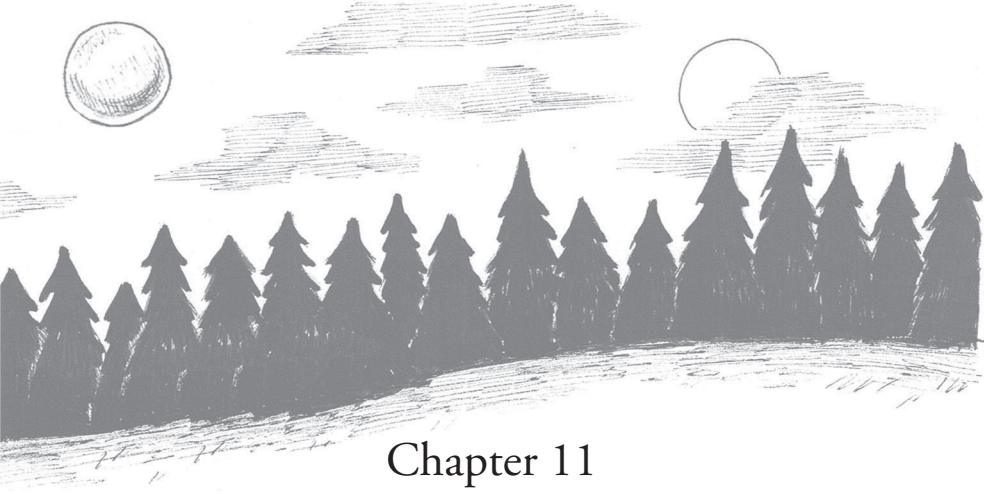
Caden’s shoes sunk into the ground with each step and he could hear insects scuttling on the walls and ceiling. The path sloped downward—they were going even farther underground. The thought made Caden uncomfortable.

He'd never been unable to see the sky. But with Metl looming above them now, not being able to see it wasn't such a bad thing.

And then there was that familiar tug hooked around Caden's bellybutton, pulling him through the tunnel. Were these the electrical signals he was programmed to sense? And if so, what were they pulling him toward?

When they reached the end of the tunnel, the light was so bright Caden had to shield his eyes. Jadice however walked right out in front of them. She opened her arms and had a smile on her face like she was a kid showing off her favorite toy.

"Welcome to Salem's Iltech black market," she said, her eyes glinting. "Or, as we like to call it, the Basement."



## Chapter 11

### The Basement

Caden slowly opened his eyes, but he couldn't believe what he was seeing. Somehow, underneath Salem, was a massive area as wide as the town square and nearly as tall as the church. The ground and walls were covered with concrete, tunnel holes were carved into the sides like an ant colony, and homes built out of a mishmash of scrap metal and plastic were stacked on top of each other along the sides. Multicolored lights were strung everywhere like spiderwebs, and wheels and pulleys constantly cranked ropes transporting crates full of supplies, people, and Iltech to every level.

Iltech. It was everywhere. Everyone was using Iltech as if it was normal. People walked around with Iltech devices in their hands and slung over their shoulders, women carried food in metal bowls, kids sat huddled around bright screens laughing, even piles of discarded Iltech towering up to the ceiling lay here and there just waiting to be explored. Seeing them reminded Caden of the mountain of Iltech behind his



dad in his photo. Was this where the picture was taken? Was his dad here, waiting for him?

“What is this place?” Annika asked.

“The best kept secret in Salem,” Jadice said. “There’s a dozen or so entrances all over town. Or at least there used to be. There might be more now. They’ve really spruced the place up since I was here last.”

Annika looked like she wanted to ask Jadice more about that, but her eyes fell to Caden’s leg. She gasped and covered her mouth.

“Gotama’s Ant!” she cried. “Caden, your leg!”

Caden looked down. In the panic of everything he’d forgotten about the arrow in his thigh. He expected a mess of blood on his overalls from the arrow wound, but there was nothing. The same kind of white arrow that had hit Deber was sticking out of his pants, but now that Caden thought about it, it hadn’t been hurting him for a while.

Caden reached down for the arrow. As soon as he touched it, it fell right out of his pants and landed on the concrete ground. There wasn’t even any blood on the sharpened tip. Caden rolled his pants up to his thigh to check the injury, but there was no sign anything had happened. His leg looked the same as usual—there was no wound where the arrow had hit him.

“Well I guess that saves us a trip to the doctor,” Jadice said. Caden couldn’t take his eyes off his unharmed skin.

“How is that possible?” he whispered.

“It takes a lot more than just an arrow to kill you,” Jadice explained. “Trust me, I know. I spent thirteen years trying to figure out how to do it.”

“But I don’t get it,” Caden said, still in disbelief. “There’s not even any blood.”

“Do you really think that’s normal human blood inside you?” Jadice asked, leaning close to Caden. “Do you really think that’s a normal human heart beating inside you? If you want to find out, there’s plenty of devices around here to cut yourself open with.”

Jadice’s way of putting it wasn’t the best, but she had a point. Now that Caden thought about it, there had been plenty of times at the Home when he should’ve gotten scraped or cut but never once had he bled. He’d always just thought he was lucky, same as how he never got sick. But no, it was because he was built that way. He wasn’t sure if he liked that. It made him feel ... unnatural.

“Let’s find Watson,” Jadice said, patting Caden on the back. “If you could bleed I’m sure you’d be bleeding questions, and Watson is the only one who can answer them all.”

Jadice strode through the Basement as though she were walking in her own home. Caden and Annika followed behind, drinking in their surroundings. People stared at them, wondering who these new faces were. Most of the attention was given to Deber, limping and clomping on the concrete with her hooves. It was probably the first time a horse had ever been in the Basement.

The people in the Basement looked like the townspeople in Salem, but they were thinner, paler, and their clothes were odd. Unlike the earth tones in the town above, the people in the Basement wore all colors of the rainbow. Some even had shirts with pictures or words on them. And every single person, regardless of age, was wearing a plastic helmet on

their head, presumably to protect from falling Iltech and rubble.

“Do all these people live here?” Caden asked Jadice.

“A lot of them do,” Jadice responded, “but most of them are just passing through. They get what they want, medicine or tools or whatever, and then go back to their lives Upstairs.”

“But how could the Church not know about this place?” Annika asked. “It’s so big, how did they even build it? And—wait a minute, you were an Apostle! Why didn’t you have this place destroyed if you knew about it?”

“You really like asking questions, don’t you?” Jadice grumbled. “Why don’t you try staying quiet for once and open your eyes. Maybe you’ll find some answers.”

Annika glared but didn’t say anything more. Jadice led them past piles of Iltech and through jungles of cables and wires to the other side of the massive room. She finally stopped in front of a building built into the concrete wall. It was as tall as the Basement itself and had windows every few stories giving off different colored lights. The bottom floor was open, filled with boxes of Iltech, and at the very front sitting at a desk with a stained yellow computer was the strangest thing Caden had ever seen.

It looked like a human, except for the single massive eyeball it had for a head. It was short, couldn’t have been more than four feet tall, and sat hunched over in a faded camouflage jacket typing away furiously. Caden didn’t want to go anywhere near it, but Jadice walked right up to the desk and slammed down her hand.

“Hey there, Clops! Remember me?”

The giant eyeball swiveled toward her and blinked. Caden

and Annika stepped back in revulsion. Then something even stranger happened—the eyeball laughed.

“Well, well, well,” it said in a raspy old voice. “Thought I’d see the sunlight before I ever saw you again, little Jadi.”

It wasn’t a monster; it was a person. The eyeball’s two hands reached up and grabbed the magnifying glass in front of its head, pulled it up, and revealed that it was a pale, rubbery old man with one eye sewn up and a grin full of metallic teeth. The giant magnifying glass was attached to his helmet by a thick cable, and it was now hanging up in the air, making him look like an Iltech angler fish.

“Last I’d heard you’d gone and joined up with the Apostles,” Clops wheezed out. “You’re not planning on turning us in, are ya?”

“Trust me, if that’s what I wanted, this place would’ve been gone ages ago,” Jadice said. “I left the Apostles. Didn’t like what they were doing anymore.”

“Sounds about right for the girl I knew,” Clops said through a cough. “But, if you left the Apostles, does that mean you still have the ... well, *you know*.”

Jadice rolled up her sleeves and showed off her glowing blue palms. Clops gazed at them with his one good eye and drool started spilling out of his mouth.

“A real ANGEL weapon,” he said longingly. “I don’t suppose you came here to sell it to little old me, now did you?”

“Nice try, Clops,” Jadice said with a smirk. “But even if I wanted to sell, you couldn’t afford it.”

“Are you sure?” he asked with a wink. Or a blink. It was hard to tell when he only had one eye. “I have more than you think. You’d get enough money to do whatever you wanted.”

“There’s only one thing I want, and it can’t be bought with money,” Jadice said, suddenly turning serious. She put a hand on Caden’s shoulder. “But here’s something you might be interested in.”

Jadice pushed Caden forward and Clops leaned over the desk to get a closer look. He brought down the giant magnifying glass, making his one eye as big as his face, then quickly pushed it back up again.

“The kid reminds me of one of your old boyfriends, Jadi,” Clops chuckled. “But what about him? I’m a weapons dealer, not a slave trader.”

“You’re not looking close enough. Blondie, show him your hands.”

Caden didn’t appreciate being treated like an animal sold at market, but he did as Jadice said. When Clops saw his glowing red palms, he leaped forward like lightning.

“Is this one for sale?” Clops asked through heavy breathing.

Jadice shook her head. “No, but—”

“Oh, for steel’s sake! Jadi, you’re killing me. You bring two ANGEL weapons in one day and neither are for sale? Are you trying to give this old man a heart attack?”

“This is no ordinary ANGEL weapon,” Jadice said. “Remember the stories you used to tell us when we were kids?”

Clops took another look at Caden through his magnifying glass. His massive eye grew even wider.

“You don’t mean to say ...”

He was interrupted by another monster behind him. A seven-foot-tall hairy man came staggering out of the building

with boxes of Iltech loaded in his arms. He had white bandages under his helmet and wrapped around his arms. There were holes in his ears and lips that looked like they once held stone piercings.

Caden recognized him right away, but Annika was even faster.

“You!” She thrust an accusing finger. “What are you doing down here?”

It was the butcher from Salem. He had survived Caden’s explosion into the building. Caden readied himself to fight, to try and summon up whatever power he had before. When the butcher saw Annika, he froze, and his boxes crashed to the ground.

“You ...” he said, his voice trailing off.

Annika balled her hands into fists and her eyes darted around, looking for anything that might serve as a weapon. But before she or Caden could make a move, the butcher crouched to the ground and hid behind Clops.

“That’s them, Daddy!” the butcher yelled. “They’re the ones who hurt me!”

It didn’t feel right, that deep powerful voice blubbering like a child. It disarmed Caden and Annika, but Clops looked even more shocked.

“These little kids are the ones that gave you those bruises?”

“Yes, Daddy!” the butcher cried. “The little girl and her friend too!”

Annika looked stunned. Her mouth was hanging open as words tried to escape.

“But ... but it was because you tried to cut my hands off!” she yelled back. That got Clops’s attention. He glared at

the butcher and brandished a wrinkled finger.

“Evan! How many times have I told you? Enough with the hand-chopping! These are our valued customers! Not your stupid little toys!”

Evan cowered in fear as Clops yelled at him. Caden had to hold back from laughing.

“But ... but Daddy!” he cried.

“Don’t you ‘but Daddy’ me, young man! If I hear about one more hand-chopping incident, then I’m taking away your DVD player. And you know what that means: no more *Star Trek!*”

“No, Daddy, please!” Evan begged. “Those are my history lessons!”

“Well then, no more cleaving. Do you understand me?”

Evan sniveled. Tears were streaming down his bandaged face, but he managed to nod. Clops shook his head in disappointment.

“I’m sorry about my son,” he said. “He runs the butchery upstairs alone, and without his pops around to watch over him, he can do some pretty stupid things. Is there anything I can do to apologize for the trouble he’s put you through?”

Caden didn’t have to think. As soon as he heard the words, he pulled Deber in front of the desk.

“Can you help my horse?” he asked. The arrow was still sticking out of Deber’s white hide, now a hideous shade of dark swamp-green. It was seeping down her leg, infection making it spasm every few seconds.

“Well, I can’t make any promises for something that bad,” Clops said. “But I’ll do everything I can.”

Caden thanked him and handed Evan the reins. He

caressed Deber's mouth and she licked it. She was going to get better. He knew it.

"And what about you, young lady?" Clops asked Annika. "I know I can never take back the scare my stupid son gave you, but at least maybe you'll let an old man try."

Annika grinned like she couldn't have cared less about almost having her hands chopped off. She pressed a single finger over her smile as she looked around Clops's building.

"Do you have any weapons?" she asked. Clops guffawed so hard that he knocked a can of metal pellets off his desk all over the ground.

"Little lady," he said, a smug look crossing his face. "You're looking at the number one Basement weapons dealer for fifty years running. I've got everything from explosives to long range lasers to blades that pop open like popcorn to surprise and sever your enemies. Whatever you want, it's yours."

Annika tapped her finger against her lip, thinking for a moment, until she finally spoke. "I want the strongest weapon you have."

Clops's eye lit up. "Right to the point, eh? I like your style." He turned to his son who was holding meekly onto Deber's reins. "Evan! Give this young woman your magnetizer."

"But ... but Daddy!" he sobbed.

"Do it or I'll hide the batteries to your Game Boy!"

Evan gave one last whimper then slunk his way over to Annika. He kept twitching in fear, as if expecting to be blasted away again any second.

"I ... I'm real sorry about earlier today," he whimpered. "I didn't know y-you were a customer of Daddy's. Here, you can have this. Just please ... d-don't hurt me again."



He pulled something out of his pocket. It was a black plastic rectangle with buttons all over. It looked similar to Caden's old "mute" button Iltech from back in the stable. Evan presented it to Annika like a worshiper making an offering to Gotama.

"And the charge packs too, Evan," Clops added.

"But Daddy ..."

"Evan!"

"Okay, okay."

Evan peeled off what looked like a bracelet from his tree-trunk arm. It was a belt with metallic cylinders attached all around. Annika's waist was just barely big enough to wear it. As she clicked it into place, she eyed the black rectangle in her hands suspiciously.

"Is this really your strongest weapon?" she asked.

"Sure is!" Clops said. "That's a one-of-a-kind magnetizer made by yours truly. It may look like a boring old remote control, but it's even more powerful—and portable—than a magnet-bow."

"A magnet-bow?" Caden asked.

"Ah, so you've never had the pleasure of meeting a magnet weapon before. Here, wait one second." Clops leaned backward and rummaged through the boxes of Iltech, grumbling to himself. "Now where did I put it? Where is it? Ah! Here we are."

With a heaving grunt, he slammed a heavy Iltech crossbow onto the desk, sending metal sheets and containers clanging to the floor. It was shaped just like a Holy Police crossbow, but it was red all over with a shiny silver tip. Clops patted the magnet-bow and flashed a smile of metallic teeth.

“These babies shoot out magnetic fields to suck up Iltech. I imagine with an ANGEL weapon inside you, it’d be pretty miserable to get hit by one. Yet another reason to be rid of it and sell it to me!”

Everyone ignored Clops’s offer. Annika was still staring at the magnetizer skeptically.

“I think I’d rather have the magnet-bow.”

“Nonsense!” Clops said. “The bow is just a glorified vacuum. That magnetizer though, it’s got some real juice to it, thanks to the charge packs. Just press power, push a button one to nine, and hit enter. At level one it just gives a little magnetic pulse, but at level nine it doesn’t matter if your target is made of stone or steel, you’re gonna blow it up.”

It was a lot to take in. Clops was using so many words that Caden didn’t understand. But if Annika was confused too, she didn’t show it. Now she was glowing with excitement as she held the magnetizer, inspecting it, admiring it from every angle.

“What do the other buttons do?” she asked.

Clops chuckled. “Absolutely nothing! They’re just to confuse your enemies in case it falls into the wrong hands.” He motioned to the building behind him. “Why don’t you head on inside? There’s a testing area on the second floor. You can take a practice shot or two.”

“Really?” Annika asked.

“Of course.” Clops snapped his fingers at Evan, making him jump. “Evan, you get that horse Upstairs right away. I don’t care if you have to sell off every last figurine in your collection, make sure it gets the best possible care or I’ll see to it that these three are riding *you* to wherever they’re going.”

“Yes, Daddy,” Evan said. He took one last terrified look at Annika and Caden, then led Deber away by the reins. Caden gave her an encouraging pat on the back. She didn’t whinny. She knew whatever Caden had decided was for the best. But that just made it all the harder when she looked back at him with big eyes and all Caden could do was wave goodbye.

“All right, all right, thanks for the gifts,” Jadice said, reminding everyone that she was there too. “But we’re here because we have some questions, Clops.”

“Well then, you’ve come to the right place,” Clops said with a grin. “Ask away!”

Maybe it was the thrill of all the Iltech around, or finally meeting someone who was offering to answer questions, but Caden blurted out the first thing that was on his mind.

“Is that a real computer?” he asked, pointing to the grimy plastic box on Clops’s desk.

“Sure is,” Clops said with a hint of pride. He turned the screen so Caden could see it. It was just a black screen with green letters and numbers. The glass was cracked and there were lines running down it, but it was still the most beautiful thing Caden had ever seen. It was real, working Iltech.

“How does it work?” Caden asked in an awed whisper. “Where does the electricity come from?”

“We’ve got a couple of tricks,” Clops said. “Plenty of generators left over from the golden age. Plus, you know all those windmills they have Upstairs? Think they’re for grinding grain? Nope. Most of ‘em are for powering us down here.”

“Have you ever been found out?” Annika asked. “Seems like the Church would realize those windmills aren’t being used to make flour.”

“Well if they have found us out, no one’s told me!” Clops said with a chuckle. “Besides, we’ve got security measures in place to cover our tracks if the worst happens.”

“Like what?” Caden asked. Clops gave him his widest grin yet.

“Self-destruction.”

Caden waited for more, but nothing came. Clops laughed and banged on his desk.

“But don’t worry about that. Only one person around here knows the codes for the bombs: me. And I’m not about to blow up our home unless we have no other choice. Although we’ve had some close calls. In fact, one of the closest was just this morning.”

The memories from earlier today flashed in Caden’s mind. “You don’t mean Mr. Stercus and his calculator, do you?”

“Ah, did you know him?” Clops asked. “Yep, that’s it. He just had to babble something about the ‘Iltech black market’ while the whole Church and Police were on stage. Still didn’t deserve what happened to him though.”

Caden found that a little hard to believe. Annika spoke up for him.

“Mr. Stercus wasn’t a good person,” she said. “He had someone throw me in the air just for fun. If anyone deserved to get turned to dust, it was him. He was evil.”

Clops’s smile faded and his face turned serious. “Little lady, I’m a weapons dealer. I’ve sold weapons to people who have done terrible things, and to people who have done great things. You know what the difference is between them?”

“No,” Annika said.

“The great ones were on my side. That’s it. The only

difference is that I believed in what they were doing. For someone else though, the terrible people could've been their heroes, and my great ones their enemies. Whether someone is 'good' or 'evil' has nothing to do with what they do. All that matters is what side they're on, and whether or not it's the same side as you.

"And your friend Mr. Stercus, maybe he did some bad things. But he probably did some good things too. No one ever wakes up and thinks, 'I'm going to be evil today.' Everyone just wants to stay alive and be happy. They want to be the hero in their own story. But, unfortunately, the hero in one story can just as easily be the villain in another."

Caden didn't say anything. He wasn't sure if he agreed with everything Clops was saying.

"Yes, yes thank you for the very interesting and totally-not-weird stories," Jadice interrupted. "But you're not the one we need to talk to, Clops. Blondie here needs to speak with Watson."

"Oh, Watson, eh?" Clops jumped back to his smiling self. He rubbed his hands together and raised his eyebrow. "Of course, of course. All it'll cost you is one ANGEL weapon."

"Clops ..." Jadice groaned.

"Kidding, kidding! But in exchange I don't suppose I could have a look at that ANGEL weapon of yours, eh? Maybe copy down a few schematics, make some notes?"

"Sure." Jadice cocked her head toward Clops's building. "Blondie, you get in there and talk to Watson. Ask him about your ANGEL weapon, whatever you want. He's still on the top floor, right Clops?"

"Oh yes, yes." He turned his single eye to Caden. "But

young man, Watson is a little fickle. He prefers speaking to machines, so understand this—you must address him the right way or else he'll get mad. He only gives answers as questions and only hears questions as answers. Got that?"

"What?" Caden asked. Clops laughed and disappeared behind the desk. He was so short that he wasn't visible until he came around in front.

Caden gasped when he saw him. Clops had no legs, only two tangled columns of Iltech and wires that extended down from his torso and ended in wheels. He probably used to be much taller, perhaps as tall as his massive son, but with his legs gone he only came up to Caden's shoulders. He had a cane for balance as his wheels rotated automatically, and he rolled right up to Caden.

"You like my wheels, boy?" Clops asked as Caden stared. He poked Caden in the stomach with his cane. "Take the elevator to the tenth floor, and don't stop anywhere else. You might accidentally blow up something and end up needing wheels of your own."

Caden didn't even ask what an "elevator" was. He just nodded. Clops wrapped his cane around Jadice's back and led her away.

"Now, Jadi, how about we discuss the power source for that ANGEL weapon of yours. I always thought they were Xanders but ..."

Their voices trailed off as they disappeared behind a towering pile of Iltech. When it was just Caden and Annika alone, Annika dropped her serious face and let out a yelp of joy.

"Great Gotama, did you see this thing?" she asked,

cradling her magnetizer like a newborn. "I can't believe he just gave it to me. How do I look?" Annika posed with her new weapon and charge belt, glaring at an imaginary enemy. Caden grinned.

"I'd say you look pretty tough."

"Right? Do you think it really works?"

"Probably. But why are you so excited?"

Annika had a mischievous grin on her face. "Let's just get your Watson questions over with so I can try this thing out. Come on."

She grabbed Caden's hand and led him into the first floor of the weapons building. It was a wide area, but it was so cramped with crates and boxes of Iltech that there was only one narrow path to follow through. It led to an open metal box with a rope pulley on top.

"Is this the elevator?" Caden asked.

"Must be," Annika said, pulling him inside. There were ten different colored buttons with a number written on each, looking as if someone had hastily scribbled them. The numbers on some of them were much more faded than others. Floors two and ten were barely legible.

"I guess we press the button for ten?" Caden said with a shrug. He pushed it, and the pulley began to squeak and crank as the metal box lurched upward.

"I wish I knew about this Basement place when I lived in Salem," Annika said. She patted her magnetizer, now in the pocket of her dress. "Getting one of these would've come in handy."

"Maybe it wasn't around back then," Caden suggested.

"I don't think so. Clops said he's been doing this for fifty

years, and didn't Jadice say she came here as a kid?" Annika paused for a second. "Although, wait a minute. Does that mean Jadice used to live in Salem?"

"I have no idea," Caden said. He was too distracted by the view to listen. They passed by floor after floor piled high with Iltech. Caden could have spent a lifetime examining any one of them, or even just the elevator they were riding in. He felt happier than if Deber were let loose in the apple orchard.

"I guess we can ask that Watson guy," Annika said as they finally reached the tenth floor. "I wonder who he is anyway."

The elevator came to a stop. At first Caden thought there was some mistake. Unlike every other floor, the tenth floor was empty. The white plastic floor and walls were perfectly sterile. The only signs of life were the faint sounds coming through the windows out to the Basement.

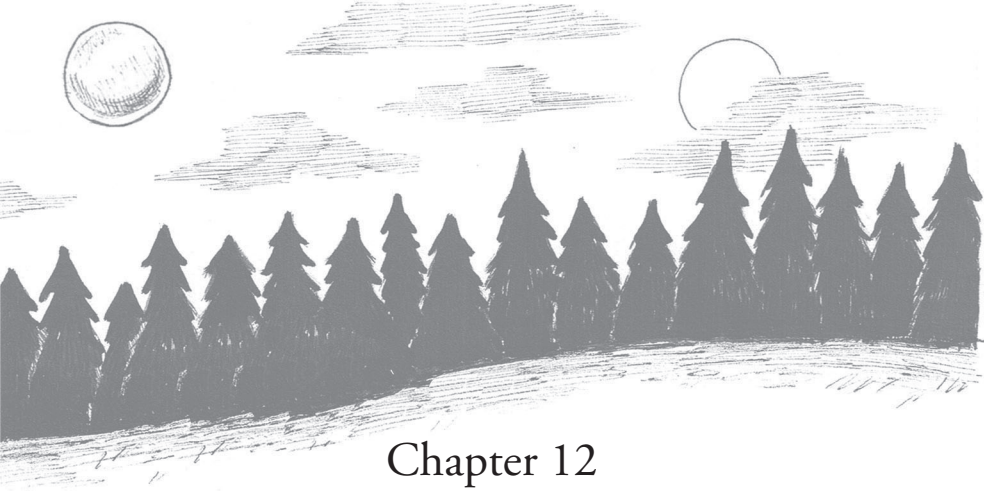
But there was one other thing on the other side of the room: a metallic box taller and wider than Caden with a bright blue screen. Not knowing what else to do, Caden and Annika walked toward it.

"There's no one up here," Annika said.

Suddenly a face appeared on the blank blue screen. It was made out of small white squares, and the mouth opened up and down choppily as it spoke in a distorted voice.

"What do most people say when they meet Watson, the smartest computer on Earth?"





## Chapter 12

Watson

Caden gazed at the boxy smile on the screen. He had already been impressed by Clops's computer, but that was just a bunch of numbers and letters. This one, this metal box, had spoken to him. And it had a face. Just like Tooby, this Iltech was alive.

"What did it say?" Annika asked.

That was apparently the wrong thing to say. The box emitted a horrible screeching alarm. Caden and Annika winced as the blocky white face contorted into a scowl and the screen flashed red.

"PLEASE PHRASE YOUR QUESTION IN THE FORM OF A STATEMENT!"

"Why is this box yelling at us?" Annika whispered to Caden. She said it quietly, so that the machine wouldn't overhear them and think they were daring to ask it a question again.

"I don't know," Caden answered. He remembered Clops

had said Watson got mad easily, something about only giving answers as questions and hearing questions as answers. Caden still couldn't wrap his head around it.

"This is a waste of time," Annika mumbled. Watson overheard her. The face on the screen transformed back into a smile and spoke.

"What is the vast majority of human existence?" it said.

Caden and Annika exchanged confused glances. Even though the machine was asking them a question, it didn't seem like it was waiting for an answer or anything. Rather it felt like the box was answering their statement—with a question.

"I think I get it," Caden whispered to Annika. "Here, I'm going to try something."

Annika shrugged and Caden cleared his throat. He wanted to start off with something easy.

"The number four," he said. Annika gave him a weird look, but Watson understood.

"What is the integer between three and five?" it said in its metallic voice. Caden grinned. This was working. He decided to try something a bit harder.

"The Home outside of Salem run by Mother Mildred."

Watson didn't miss a beat. "What is an orphanage for Nobodies with a total of twenty-four slots for the children of parents arrested by the Church?"

"Gotama's Ant," Annika whispered to Caden. "This thing is giving us answers, but as questions."

"Yup," Caden said, excited that they'd figured it out. "And it seems to know a lot. It even knows about the Home."

"But why does it have to be so ... strange?" Annika asked.

She stepped closer to Watson and asked her own statement. "Answering in the form of a question."

"What are the rules?" Watson stated simply. Annika flopped her hands to her sides in defeat.

"Well, just because it can answer everything, even as a question, that doesn't mean we'll understand it, I guess."

"Maybe." Caden rubbed his palms together in anticipation. "But it's time to see what this thing really knows."

Caden had been waiting for this opportunity his entire life—a treasure trove of information about anything he wanted to know. Who cares if he had to phrase it a little weird? It was time to start digging. Caden shivered with excitement as he spoke the words he'd always wanted to hear the answer to.

"My father, the person who created me."

Caden held his breath as he waited for the response. But once the box spoke it aloud, he didn't know what to think.

"Who is Caden Aire?"

"What?" Caden asked in confusion. That was a bad idea. The screen blinked red and the angry face returned.

"PLEASE PHRASE YOUR QUESTION IN THE FORM OF A STATEMENT!"

"Why did it tell me my own name?" Caden asked Annika quietly.

"Maybe it's trying to confirm who you are," she suggested. "Maybe it can't see you." Caden wasn't sure, but it was worth a shot.

"Yes, my name is Caden Aire."

Watson's calm blue screen and smiling face returned. "What were you told by Spyder unit 20219-B after finding you?"

Caden sighed. He wasn't getting very far with this thing.

Maybe it was time to change subjects.

“Okay, how about ... the reason I was created.”

“What is to destroy the world?”

“I already knew that,” Caden mumbled under his breath.

“The way I will destroy the world.”

“What is by utilizing Metl?”

Caden groaned in frustration. Watson hadn't told him anything they didn't already know. He was supposed to be getting answers from this thing, not more questions! Before Caden knew it, he was yelling at the metal box.

“The reason I'm part human and not just a weapon that someone can pull the trigger on and use however they want!”

Caden almost expected Watson to get angry back. But it replied in the same calm, robotic voice.

“What is to communicate with Metl?”

Now they were getting somewhere.

“What does that mean?” Annika whispered.

“Don't know,” Caden admitted. “Maybe I'm supposed to talk to Metl somehow? My dad would tell me how to do that, I guess.”

“Maybe this thing knows too?”

“I can try.” Caden cleared his throat again. “The way I communicate with Metl.”

“What is by talking like a normal human?”

And they were back to square one. It looked like they were going to have to wait until they found Caden's dad before they'd get anything besides a headache from Watson.

“I have one that's been on my mind ever since that weirdo Jadice mentioned it,” Annika said. “Back when she explained all that stuff that happened two hundred years ago.”

“Go for it.” Caden offered Annika the space in front of Watson. She faced the machine’s smiling screen and stood up tall.

“The meaning of life.”

Caden had almost forgotten about that one. His heart leaped in excitement, until he remembered who they were talking to. Watson gave his monotone answer.

“What is Gotama’s Second Revelation?”

“All right, I’ve had enough,” Annika said. She was glaring at Watson and looked about ready to kick its screen in. “Let’s go down to the second floor. I’m itching to try this magnetizer out.”

“Wait, I still need to ask about my ANGEL weapon.”

“You really think you’re going to get anything useful out of this thing?”

“I have to at least try.”

Annika crossed her arms. “Whatever. But let’s not waste much more time.”

Caden nodded in agreement. He held up his glowing red palms to Watson, not sure if that would help him identify anything, but it couldn’t hurt.

“My ANGEL weapon,” Caden said. Watson had the question ready right away.

“What is telekinetic consciousness using Planck probes?” it answered. Caden and Annika looked at each other and shrugged. Those were a lot of words Caden didn’t understand, but he asked about the one that sounded most important.

“Telekinetic.”

“What is the ability to interact with objects without physically touching them?”

Caden felt his fingers tingle. “Okay, the way I use my ANGEL weapon.”

“What is by using your human part?”

Caden looked down at himself—his hands, his arms, his torn gloves, his overalls with the arrow hole in it. Which parts of him were human and which weren’t?

“What does that mean?” Annika asked.

“I don’t know.” Caden thought back to the two times he’d ever used his ANGEL weapon. The first was to protect Annika from the butcher, and the second was to protect Deber from being used as bait. Was wanting to save someone how he used his “human part?”

“Maybe it means doing something robots can’t do,” Annika said sarcastically, “like making sense, for starters.”

“That’s it!” Caden said. Annika looked at him suspiciously. “Well I mean, not the making sense part, but doing something that Iltech can’t—feeling emotion. I can only use it when I’m feeling something.”

“How does that work?” Annika asked, not sounding convinced. “You just think about a sad story, and then you can blow things up?”

“I don’t think so.” Caden flexed his fingers and stuck out his palms. “But I’m going to try and see what happens.”

Caden concentrated on the only thing in the room: Watson. If what it had told them was true, then Caden should be able to move the machine without touching it. It was taller than him, three times as wide, and probably weighed a couple hundred pounds, but so had Evan the butcher and Caden had sent him flying into a building. Just a little budge should be easy.

Caden focused on moving Watson. At the same time, he

tried to summon as many emotions as he could. He thought about the terror of being chased by the Holy Police on horseback. He thought about the shock of seeing Mr. Stercus turned to dust on stage. He thought about the warm coziness of Mother Mildred bringing him a piping hot cup of apple cider in the stable on a cold winter's night. He thought about the Iltech paradise all around him, his father who he was going to find inside the church, and not knowing if he was truly going to be able to do it. And he thought about Tooby, his spider friend, who had sacrificed everything for him to be here right now.

"Uh, Caden?" came Annika's voice. Caden hadn't realized his eyes were closed. When he opened them, his arms were still outstretched, and Watson was floating a foot above the ground.

"Am I doing that?" Caden asked, not believing what he was seeing. But he'd said it just a bit too loud. Watson started flashing red again.

"PLEASE PHRASE YOUR QUESTION IN THE FORM OF A STATEMENT!"

"Sorry, sorry," Caden whispered with a grin. He was too excited to care. He visualized Watson going up even higher, and the machine rose right up along with his thoughts. How high could he get it? All the way to the ceiling?

"I think you should put it down, Caden," Annika said worriedly. "You don't want to break it."

Caden didn't hear her. "What?"

He turned to Annika for just a second, but in that moment of distraction Watson crashed to the floor, causing the room to shake.

“Sorry!” Caden and Annika apologized together. Watson looked unfazed. Aside from a small dent in the bottom of the box, it hadn’t been damaged. The happy white face reappeared on the blue screen.

“What do most people say when they accidentally drop Watson, the smartest computer on Earth?”

“Well at least it has a sense of humor,” Caden said with a nervous laugh. He didn’t want to test Clops’s kindness by accidentally breaking one of his machines.

“Let’s head downstairs,” Annika said, bouncing with anticipation. “You got your chance to test out your weapon, now I want mine.”

“Just one more question,” Caden said. He could spend all day—the rest of his life, probably—asking statements and getting questions from Watson. But they had a time limit. Metl was on its way, and Caden didn’t want to be down here talking with Watson when it slammed into Earth.

“All right, that’s ... fine,” Annika said with a surprising yawn. For someone who was so excited just a second ago, she suddenly seemed to be getting tired very quickly.

As Caden thought about his last question, he couldn’t shake the feeling of exhaustion either. He had to blink constantly, as if fighting to stay awake. Jadice had mentioned that ANGEL weapons drained their users mentally, but all he’d done was lift Watson a bit. He tried to shake it off. This was his last question. He had to make it count.

“The thing I need to do next.” Caden was proud of his statement. There was no way Watson could be cryptic or confusing about this one. The blocky face was quick with its response.



“What is escape the poison filling up this room?”

Caden and Annika went silent. They looked at each other and Annika forgot about the no-questions rule for a moment.

“Excuse me?” she said to Watson. But its screen didn’t flash red. It accepted her question as a statement and gave its smiling reply.

“What did the two people in masks behind you not say when they entered this room?”

Any exhaustion that Caden and Annika had been feeling vanished. They swiveled toward the elevator shaft. Standing right at the entrance were two figures—one tall and one short—dressed in identical black robes. The tall one had a white mask with a smiling face, and the small one had a mask with a frown. The short one’s palms were out, revealing glowing purple Xs.

Caden’s blood turned cold. Was it Eleven? He tried to remember how Watson had told him to use his ANGEL weapon, but fear paralyzed him. The taller masked figure made the first move.

“Caden,” he said in an icy voice. “I’ve been waiting for this.”

There was something about watching the cloaked figure raise his hand that made Caden suddenly want to move very much. He couldn’t remember how to use his ANGEL weapon, but he could remember how to run. He burst toward the side of the room and pushed Annika along with him.

And not a second too soon. Just as Caden crashed into Annika, a crunching sound came from Watson. Dents and cracks with wires sticking out erupted all over it, as if a giant invisible hand had wrapped itself around it and squeezed.

“PL-PLEASE PHRASE YOUR Q-Q-QUESTION IN THE FO-FO-FORM OF A STATEMENT,” Watson warbled. Its screen flickered between blue and red then finally gave out as the glass exploded into shards on the floor. No more sounds came from the crumpled metal box.

“Let’s go!” Caden yelled to Annika.

“Where?”

“Out the window!”

It was their only chance. They couldn’t get past the two Apostles to the elevator, and they couldn’t fight them either, not if they had ANGEL weapons like Jadice. Their only shot was to jump for it and hope that Caden could use his weapon to guide them down.

“Are you crazy?” Annika yelled.

“I’ve caught you once and I can do it again! Just go!”

The window wasn’t large. It was just a crudely cut hole in the plastic wall.

“Caden, I can’t do this!” Annika said, panicked. The cold voice of the Apostle came howling from behind them.

“Stop right there, Caden!”

Caden didn’t have a choice. One second of hesitation and they’d be crushed like Watson. Still sprinting, he wrapped his arms around Annika and dove through the window out into the Basement.

Ten stories above the ground.

Annika tried to scream but nothing came out. Her eyes and mouth hung open as the two of them plummeted in free fall through the webs of rope and pulleys in the air straight down toward the concrete ground.

Caden thought he could use his ANGEL weapon to glide

them down safely, but the ground was rushing up at them far faster than he'd imagined. He panicked—seven stories left—what was even the name of his weapon again? They snapped through a wire and—five stories left—they were going to smack into the ground any second. Two stories left—time for Plan B!

Caden extended his legs and his feet slammed into the concrete floor with the full weight of two people. The boom of their impact echoed through the Basement. Caden let out a gasp and his eyes felt like they were going to pop out of his head. Sweat dripped down his face, and he collapsed to his knees. It was like a boulder was crushing his legs, grinding and yanking his muscles, snapping them apart. Annika rolled out of his arms unharmed.

“Caden! Can you stand up?” She held onto his wobbling torso and looked him over. Caden could only barely hear her over his ringing ears.

“I ... I don't think so,” he managed to eke out. He tried shuffling his legs. Nothing.

“Oh steel, oh steel,” Annika said frantically. She dashed over to a nearby pile of Iltech and yanked something out of it. It was a rusted metallic version of a wooden tool they'd used quite often at the Home: a wheelbarrow.

Not wasting a second, Annika scooped Caden off the ground and tossed him in. A crowd was gathering around the two of them, people in helmets murmuring and asking questions that Caden couldn't hear over his pounding head. He tried to look around for Jadice and Clops.

“We need to ... find Jadice ...” Caden panted.

“No time,” Annika said. She grabbed the wheelbarrow

handles and started running. “We’ve got to go. Now. They’re coming after us.”

Suddenly the mountains of Iltech around them started shaking violently. Was there an underground earthquake? Not now, Caden silently pleaded, please not now.

It was no earthquake; it was worse. The piles of vibrating Iltech began hovering above the ground, slowly floating up into the air. Bits of metal and plastic came raining down on top of the helmeted population. Screams rang out as people ran for cover, and Annika wheeled Caden toward the nearest exit as fast as she could.

Then it all came crashing down. The mountains of Iltech crumbled and metallic parts flew across the Basement, banging against walls and buildings, tearing down pulleys and snapping ropes. Glass light bulbs, plastic crates, and rusted scrap metal showered down over the entire Basement. It was pandemonium as lights flickered and sharp clangs and smashes rang out, blending with the cries of people trying to escape.

“They’re trying ... to find me,” Caden said, wincing through the pulsating pain in his legs.

“I know! I know!” Annika said, running head-first through a stream of falling dirt and metal filings. “I’m going as fast as I—”

A huge plastic box the size of a shack crashed right in front of the wheelbarrow. Annika veered out of the way just in time. Caden spotted something curved and metallic on the ground behind a shattered television ahead of them. It looked familiar.

“It’s Clops!” Caden said as loud as he could. “I see his magnifying glass! Go over there!”

“Got it.” Annika pummeled full-force straight ahead.

Caden sat up and tried to get a closer look but the pain was excruciating. Still, he gripped the sides of the wheelbarrow and peered over. Maybe Clops had something they could use to fight back. At the very least Caden had to help him get out of here.

“Clops!” Caden yelled. But they were too late.

Clops lay motionless on the ground, his wheel legs and the rest of his body unmoving. His face was a pallid yellow and his lips and one good eye were purple. The Apostles had already gotten to him. Caden turned away and Annika didn’t slow down.

“There’s an exit over there!” she said. “Let’s get out of here!”

Caden shook the image of dead Clops from his mind. They’d be joining him if they didn’t escape. As soon as Annika pushed the wheelbarrow inside the passage, all the lights in the Basement went dark. It was like they were leaving behind a tomb of screaming and metallic scraping as Annika plowed upward through the tunnel of blackness.

The echoes of destruction grew fainter as they pushed farther up. Even if they couldn’t see anything, the yells and crashes turning to whispers in the distance behind them meant they were heading in the right direction. Annika ran full speed ahead through the darkness, pushing Caden along as the wheelbarrow squeaked.

Until she slammed into something with a clang.

“Sorry!” she said.

“It’s okay,” Caden said, shaking off yet another spasm. “I think we just ran into the door out of here.”

Caden grit through the pain to lean forward and hold out his shining red palms. Sure enough, they had reached a

door. It wasn't the same one they'd come in from; this one had a circular metal lock with numbers written on it. There was a spinnable dial in the middle. It looked like you had to know a code to get out. Annika fiddled with it but after a few tries slammed it against the door in frustration.

"I don't know how to unlock this thing," she said. Caden tried to think, but all he could feel was throbbing pain in his legs. And he wasn't sure if he was imagining it or not, but he thought he heard faint footsteps quickly approaching.

"We need to get out of here," Caden said.

"Yeah. I know. I know." Annika looked around for anything to use, but all they had was dirt and darkness. Caden was sure he wasn't imagining the footsteps now. They were getting louder and closer.

"I don't think ... I can do anything about the door," Caden said. He tried visualizing breaking down the door with whatever power Watson had told him he had, but he couldn't hold a thought for more than a second before his legs gave him an agonizing reminder that he'd just fallen ten stories.

"Don't worry," Annika said. "I've got this."

Caden shone his palms on her. She was holding her magnetizer with both hands. It was already powered on and a green light at the end was glowing.

"Let's see if this thing actually works!" Annika pointed the magnetizer at the metal lock, pressed the button for "five," and hit enter.

*PSHEW!*

The blast that came out felt like it kicked Caden in the side of the head. His ears were ringing, static electricity tingled all over, and dirt crumbled from the ceiling. The

metal lock disintegrated into shards on the ground, and the door opened with a creak. Annika nodded in approval.

“Not bad at all,” she said, putting the magnetizer away. “Now let’s go!”

If Annika’s ears were hurting too, she showed no sign of it. She grabbed onto the wheelbarrow and thrust it through the door.

This was definitely not the shack they’d come in from. They were inside someone’s one-room house. An old woman was sitting in her straw bed, reading a book by candlelight, gaping in shock at the two people who had just come wheeling into her room.

“You’re not Ned,” she said.

“Sorry, lady!” Annika piped as she wheeled Caden past the woman. “But I’d get out of here if I were you!”

Annika swung open the door to the dark outside, driving them back into the streets of Salem. No one was out except the Holy Police. The clapping of their horses’ hooves was the only sound throughout the empty town. None of them were patrolling nearby, but the lights of their torches bounced up and down through the cracks between houses on neighboring roads.

The massive statue-church was lit up with candles in windows running all the way from Gotama’s foot to the tip of the human-ant’s antennae. It stood against bright gray Metl and the glow of its menacing *X*, now filling up a quarter of the night sky.

“We need to get back to the woods,” Annika whispered. “That’s probably where Jadice would expect to meet up with us.”

Caden nodded and tried to push himself out of the wheelbarrow. All it took was one budge to the side for him to

be overwhelmed by sharp, blinding pain.

“I don’t think I can walk yet,” he groaned.

“Don’t worry,” Annika said. “I can push you to the slope and then we’ll figure something out.”

Without wasting a second, Annika sprinted down the street with the wheelbarrow.

“Do you know where we’re going?” Caden asked.

“Uh, yeah,” Annika said. “I think so. There’s a few more buildings and roads now since the last time I roamed around here at night, but I think—”

“Get out!” came a raspy screech from behind them. It was the old woman. She was standing outside her house in her nightgown yelling at the darkness. “I’ve had enough of you people coming through my—”

They didn’t get to hear the rest. An explosion and heatwave blasted out of the old woman’s house. Flames burst out of her roof sending smoldering wood up into the sky. Her house wasn’t the only one. Pillars of flames lit up the night all over town. The ground beneath them rumbled, as if there were thunderclouds underground.

“What the steel was that?” Annika yelled. The church bellrock started clanging. Holy Police and residents alike flooded the streets and started dousing the flames with buckets of water.

Caden’s mind raced. Did Eleven do this? Had he caused an underground storm somehow? Caden thought of Deber, Jadice, even Evan and everyone else who lived down in the Basement. He hoped that they were safe, but he knew not all of them could have made it out in time.

The one thing the flames did do was make it easier to



see. The town was lit up bright as day as everyone struggled to keep the fires under control. Silhouetted against the blaze, Caden could make out two shadowy figures wearing white masks. As soon as he made eye contact with them, he gasped. They ran toward him and Annika.

“We need to go!” Caden shouted.

“I’m on it!” Annika dashed forward, sweat dripping down her face. If they could just make it to the woods, maybe they’d find help there.

Only a moment into her sprinting, something strange happened to Annika. She froze, as if she’d turned into a human photograph. Her terrified eyes still moved as she struggled against the invisible force holding her, but the rest of her was as petrified as a statue.

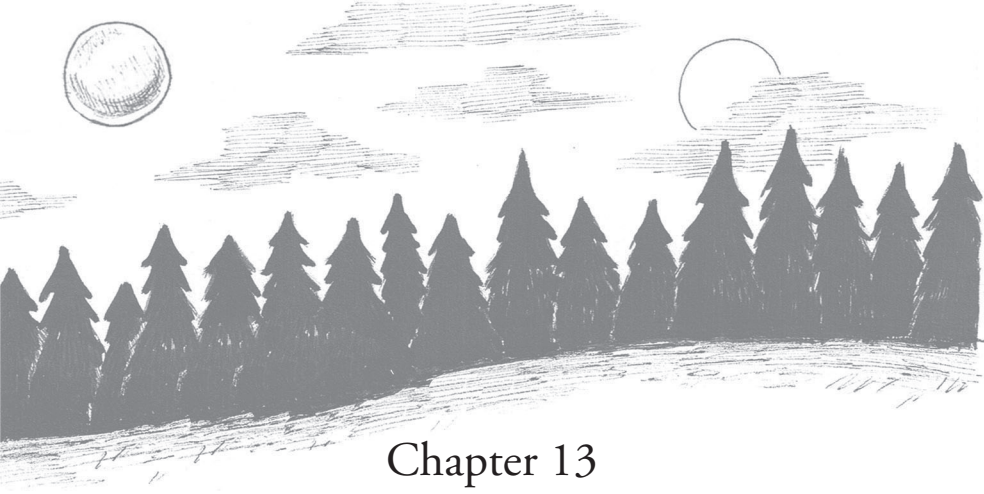
Caden tried to ask her what was wrong, but to his horror found that he couldn’t move his lips. He couldn’t move his arms or head or anything. He tried to scream but nothing came out. He and Annika were stuck in place, only able to watch in horror as the two cloaked strangers strolled up to them amid the frenzied inferno in the background.

“Thirteen years ...” the taller one hissed. “I’ve been waiting a long time for this.”

Caden tried to focus on using his ANGEL weapon, but it was useless. He was completely immobilized. The taller figure spoke to the shorter one.

“Do enough for the both of them,” he said. The small one nodded and held up glowing purple Xs in front of Caden and Annika’s faces.

*So, this is how it ends,* Caden thought to himself as he faded into unconsciousness.



## Chapter 13

### The Promise

As Caden slowly drifted awake, he felt dizzy. His head was heavy like there was a brick lodged inside, and the world around him bobbed up and down in constant motion. But when he finally pried his eyes open, he realized it wasn't his brain doing the bobbing. He was on a boat in the ocean.

Or rather he was floating in midair on a boat in the ocean.

It was a large rowboat as long and wide as the Home's hall. There were a dozen paddles on each side that were somehow automatically rowing through the water as fast as a galloping stallion. Salt water splashed against the sides and sprayed Caden's face, stinging his eyes and mouth. He resisted the urge to spit it out, remembering that their captors were probably nearby.

It was still nighttime, but it was hard to tell. Metl shone almost as brightly as the sun, reflecting off the ocean all around them as if there was another Metl drifting through the water. Caden tried to figure out how long he'd been asleep. An hour? Two?

Next to Caden hovered Annika, still unconscious in the air with her charge belt on and the magnetizer poking out of her dress pocket. Caden tried to move, expecting to be just as frozen as before, but to his surprise could wiggle his fingers and toes. His legs, which he painfully remembered should be torturing him, felt fine. Caden wasn't sure if it was his robotic healing at work or if it had something to do with him floating in the air, but either way he wasn't complaining. He made use of his limited movement to stretch his head back as far as he could and peer toward the front of the boat.

Standing just feet away from him were the two black-robed figures. They were illuminated by an electric lantern hovering in the air. Caden panicked for a moment but forced himself to not make any sudden movements. He remained still, head extended down, trying to hear what they were saying over the sound of crashing waves.

“—really don't like this, Five,” said the smaller one. Her voice was high-pitched and whiny like a little girl. The taller one replied.

“You just keep them sleeping, Six,” he said coolly. “I'll take care of the rest.”

“Where are we even going?”

“Somewhere safe.”

“Safe? Nowhere's going to be safe if Metl hits us.”

They both looked to the sky. Metl was so close Caden could practically feel the heat radiating off the fiery red X.

“I don't think they're going to let that happen,” Five said.

The two of them stood in silence as the boat continued through the ocean. Questions burned inside Caden's head. So the tall one wasn't the electric-wielding Eleven, he was

Five? That meant Eleven was still out there somewhere. Caden wished Jadice were here to help.

“That boy’s ANGEL weapon, is it the same as yours?” Six asked in her squeaky voice.

Caden hadn’t noticed it before, he’d been too busy running for his life, but Five’s palms glowed gray. It was hard to see, especially since Five’s hands were cupped over one another, but the gray glow was definitely there.

“That robot box said the boy has the same power as you,” Six pressed on. “Does he have telekinesis too?”

Again, no response. Caden almost felt bad for Six, until he remembered she had helped capture them.

“I didn’t think there was more than one of each ANGEL weapon,” she said after yet another silence. That finally elicited a response.

“There isn’t more than one of each,” Five said. Both Six and Caden waited for more, but there was only the sound of lapping waves.

“What should we do about the girl?” Six asked. Silence again. “Should we take care of her first?”

Caden tensed. They were going to kill Annika. Six’s ANGEL weapon was what had knocked them out, and now she was going to crank up the intensity. Five said something to Six, she gave a nod, and then walked back to Annika with her frowning mask on and her purple palms out.

Caden balled his fingers into sweaty fists and concentrated on his human parts, like Watson had taught him. He thought about Annika who had saved him from the Basement, and Clops who had helped them so much and paid the price, and Deber who was just about to get healthy again and was now

probably blown to bits with the rest of the underground.

Heat exuded from Caden, not just from what was building up inside of him, but off his skin too. Warm little bits surrounded him, like grains of hot sand clinging to his skin and clothes. Were those what was holding him up in the air? The Planck particles that Watson had mentioned? He couldn't believe he hadn't felt them before. They seemed so weak and tiny. How had they held such power over him? He wasn't going to be controlled by them any longer!

Caden erupted out of his invisible confines with a growl that shook the boat. The warm grains he'd felt clinging to him flew off and he was suddenly standing face to mask with Six. Annika fell to the wooden deck, and Six aimed her purple palms toward Caden.

"Don't you touch her!" Caden yelled. Prickling, sticky heat built up inside of him to a boiling point, begging to be released. Caden didn't hold it back.

The invisible blast of energy shot out of Caden's palms and right into Six. She screamed and flew backward through the boat's wooden bulkhead. It burst into splintered fragments and she splashed somewhere far off in the blackened water outside of Metl's reflection.

"Six!" yelled Five. He ran to the edge of the boat and peered into the ocean. The paddles had stopped rowing and slipped away into the water. The only sound was Six's far off splashing and screams for help mixed with the crashing waves.

"Who are you?" Caden demanded. He held out his glowing red palms at Five like weapons ready to fire. He wasn't sure if he could summon the same power again right

away, but he wasn't going to let Five know that.

"I should've done this before," Five grumbled. He turned to Caden with his smiling white mask and stretched out his arms to show off the bright gray Xs on his palms. Caden tried to visualize sending Five out into the ocean, but before he could concentrate on anything, Five ran straight at him.

Five's sudden rush shocked Caden into numbness. All he could do was push out his hands and hope for something to happen, but nothing did. Five was just inches away from strangling Caden around the neck.

*PSHEW!*

A blast rang out in the darkness so loud that Caden thought he'd been hit in the head with a rock. Five went flying backward and slammed against the head of the boat. He slouched to the ground and groaned in pain. Behind Caden stood Annika with her crackling magnetizer still poised and aimed at Five.

"You okay?" she asked, looking Caden over.

"Yeah," he said, rubbing his forehead. "How about you?"

"I'll feel a lot better when this guy's swimming with his friend. You want to do the honors?"

Caden nodded. "Gladly."

Caden leered at Five, still curled up on the deck. His hands were pressed against his leg. Grunts of pain came from behind the smiling white mask.

"Who are you?" Caden asked again. He was determined to get something out of him before he tossed him into the ocean.

"Caden ..." Five panted. His cool demeanor was gone, replaced by what Caden imagined was a lot of sweat and saliva.

“What do you want from me?” Caden blurted out. He glared through the eyeholes in Five’s mask, ready to rip it off.

Another scream came from the ocean—Six calling for help.

“Five!” she cried from far away. “Help!”

“Must be pretty hard to swim with a metal weapon inside of you,” Annika chuckled.

“The sooner you talk the sooner you can go help her,” Caden said.

“Caden ...” Five said again through pained breaths. “You don’t understand ...”

“What don’t I understand?” Caden yelled. “That you’re trying to kill me? That you’ve been hunting me for thirteen years? That you just blew up the whole Basement so you could—”

It happened so quickly Caden didn’t know what to think. One second Five was lying on the deck, the next he was up in the air. He landed somewhere in the dark water with a splash and disappeared. Caden turned to Annika and shrugged. The boat was now theirs.

“Well that was easier than I expected,” he said. “What do we do now?”

Annika pointed her magnetizer behind the boat.

“It looks like we’re about a mile out from shore,” she said. Caden squinted to see off in the distance. He could just make out the lights from the church and a few other fires blazing through the darkness. Caden hoped they weren’t ones venting from the Basement.

“All the paddles are gone,” Caden said. There was nothing left on the boat except the two of them and the electric lantern. They couldn’t just sit around drifting in the water.

Five and Six might be back soon.

“Well it’s not like we can swim back,” Annika said. “The water’s dark and freezing cold.”

Caden took a deep breath. “I think I can move the boat.”

“Really?” Annika asked. “I don’t want you to blow it up or anything. Then we’d be in real trouble.”

“I can do it,” Caden said, not feeling as confident as he wanted, but they didn’t have any choice. “I moved Watson without destroying him. I can do this too.”

“Aye aye, captain,” Annika said. She sat on the deck and grabbed onto the side. “I’ll just be over here bracing for impact.”

Caden focused on the boat. With no paddles and a gaping hole in the side that Six had been blasted through, it was little more than a large wooden plank now. It should be easy to move. Caden imagined it turning around in the water and speeding back toward Salem. That’s where they were going to find Jadice, where they were going to find his dad, and where he was going to figure out once and for all why he’d been created.

The boat shook. Annika let out a small cheer as it spun around to face toward shore. Caden grinned. This was easier than he’d thought. He visualized the boat zooming through the water as fast as Deber galloping through the fields. Just like Caden would never do again. Because Deber was gone. And the Basement was gone. An Iltech wonderland that had been around for decades, gone in an instant. And it was all his fault, for merely existing.

“Uh, Caden!” Annika yelled.

The boat was no longer on the water. The waves had



stopped slapping against the wooden bulkhead. The only thing surrounding the boat was air.

Because it was hovering above the ocean.

It was only a few feet above the water, but it was rising higher and higher by the second. Caden panicked. He'd lost track of his thoughts and it had brought them in the completely wrong direction.

Panicking was a bad idea. The boat shot forward as if it were an arrow soaring through the sky. Higher and higher up it flew. Caden collapsed onto the deck and held onto the side for dear life as the salty wind seared past them at blistering speeds. One slip and they'd fall into the ocean far below.

"Caden, stop this thing!" Annika shrieked.

"I'm trying!" Caden yelled back. The boat kept rising higher and rocketing forward. Caden was trapped. If he stopped it, then they'd fall into the ocean. But if he didn't, then eventually they'd crash into hard land. Caden might be able to survive the impact, but there was no way Annika would. There was only one option.

"We're going down!" Caden shouted.

"What?" Annika yelled.

"Hold on!" Caden closed his eyes and tried to think calm thoughts. Panicking had shot the boat into the air like a pig on fire. Maybe if he could gain control of his thoughts again, the boat would slow down.

Despite his rampaging heart, Caden tried to remember happy memories. He thought about the photo of his dad, still tucked away safely in his overalls pocket—the boat came a stop in midair—he thought about Mother Mildred first teaching him how to saddle a horse—they started to free fall

toward the ocean—he even thought about Dom, for the first time without any hatred, and simply wondered where he was right now and what he was doing.

“We’re going to crash!” Annika yelled over the sound of air whooshing past them.

“Just hang on!” Caden said. Then another thought came to him: he didn’t know how to swim.

The boat slammed into the ocean with an explosive blast. Caden was thrown into the air as salt water rained down on him and fragments of wood splattered everywhere. The bulkhead he’d been gripping burst into pieces, and when he hit the water, there was nothing for him to grasp.

Not that it mattered. He was too busy drowning and freezing to death.

Caden immediately started sinking. The dense Iltech inside him weighed him down, and his head plummeted straight under. He had to fight just to keep his mouth barely above the lapping waves. He gasped for breath, struggled against the engulfing wet darkness, went under, and flailed to try and get back to the surface. Each time he went down, the water blocked out all sound; the coldness blocked out all feeling. It was like the ocean was telling him just to give up and let go. He felt so, so heavy.

“Caden!”

Annika’s voice rang out. Caden tried to yell back but only got a mouthful of salt water before plunging under again.

“Caden where are you?”

He tried shoving his bright red palms into the air above the black water, but the second he stopped treading water, the icy grip of the ocean pulled him down into the all-

consuming silence. Caden tried to swim back up, but he couldn't. The Iltech inside of him refused to float, refused to do anything except weigh him down deeper and deeper into the cold ocean depths.

Caden held his breath as the light of Metl above became dimmer. His lungs burned, and his muscles begged him to open his mouth and let in some air. But if he did, that meant certain death. Caden struggled and fought to get back to the surface, but Metl's light only grew fainter and fainter.

Finally, Caden's body forced his mouth open, and the salt water came pouring in. It was strange though, Caden thought as water filled his lungs, it didn't hurt. He'd expected dying to be a lot more painful. Frozen numbness reached down his throat, but gently, as if stroking him while singing a lullaby. Caden could almost hear the water whispering to him that it would all be over soon.

Caden's vision went blurry. Then fuzzy. Then black. Then he felt nothing. He was dead.



But then, the next second, he wasn't. From nowhere, Caden heard a metallic voice that sounded like Watson's.

*"DEVIL mode activated."*

There was a jolt in the back of Caden's head and his eyes popped open. He was still underwater, still drowned to death, but something was different. He couldn't breathe, but

his head told him that didn't matter anymore. He wasn't even sure if his heart was beating. But he was alive.

He tried moving his arms. They flowed through the water beautifully. But something felt wrong. It was as if something else, not Caden's brain, was controlling them. He tried kicking his legs—same thing. It was like he was pulling on strings to control his own limbs.

With his glowing palms extended upward, Caden saw a shadow swimming down to him from above. It was coming fast. Caden moved to get out of the way of whatever it was, but then he saw the shadow's face: it was Annika.

She reached down and grabbed Caden by the arm, yanking him toward the surface. She swam upward furiously, and Caden tried to do what he could to propel himself with his legs. He was shocked to not feel her pulling him. Or the icy embrace of the water. Or anything at all. It was like he was filled with air, floating through air, tugging on ropes to control where he was going like a kite. It didn't feel right.

When Caden burst through the surface out of the water, there was nothing. He'd expected a gasp of breath filling him up, the sweet refreshing feeling of being back in the air. But there was nothing. He felt exactly the same above water as he'd felt drowning beneath it, heavy and detached from his own body.

Annika was a different story. She clung to a large piece of scrapwood from the boat, coughing and wheezing and spitting out water. Her lips were blue, and she turned to Caden and tried to smile but couldn't get it out through her violent shivering.

"Y-y-you're ok-k-k-kay," she stammered.

Caden tried to speak but nothing came out. He tried to breathe but couldn't. It was an unnerving feeling. Something that he'd taken for granted, breathing, was gone. Nothing was going in or out of him. He felt like he should be panicking, but even that didn't happen. All he did was mechanically grab onto Annika's scrapwood and start kicking toward shore.

They'd gotten a lot closer to Salem than he'd thought. They must've flown nearly the whole way back before they'd crashed. It only took a minute of kicking before Caden and Annika reached the docks. They bumped into a wooden rowboat tethered to the pier and hoisted themselves inside. Caden sat there, feeling like he should be happy that he was out of the freezing water, but he didn't feel anything at all.

Annika lay on the floor of the boat shivering in the fetal position. Her clothes were soaked, her teeth were chattering. Caden had to do something. She needed dry clothes.

He climbed out of the rowboat onto the pier and scanned the docks. There were boats of all sizes attached with thick ropes to wooden posts. Drunken laughter rang out from one of the larger cargo ships. Caden's head involuntarily jerked over to it. Candle lights lit up the shadows of nineteen sailors and docksmen sitting around talking with each other on the deck. Suddenly Caden knew what he had to do.

He didn't even walk over to the ship—he flew. He rose into the air, as if it were as natural as walking. He hovered over to the cargo ship, landing lightly on the bow in front of a group of sailors sitting in a circle drinking and eating.

“What in the steel is that?” howled one of the men. All of their grizzled heads turned to Caden in shock and anger.

“Get ‘em!” yelled another. All nineteen men rose to their

feet. Three of them had wooden clubs. Five of them had stone daggers. One had a crossbow. The rest had hairy fists.

This would be easy.

Caden held out only his right palm. The men stopped in their tracks when they saw the bright red X. In the time it took them to react, it was already over.

A hot invisible burst erupted out of Caden's palm and all nineteen men collapsed unconscious on the wooden deck. Not wanting to be inefficient with time, Caden immediately stripped the clothes off the smallest two sailors, grabbed another's leather satchel, then leaped off the side of the ship back onto the pier, landing as lightly as a feather.

When he started back to the rowboat with Annika inside, Caden felt like something was wrong. Very wrong. Only a few steps in, something hit him hard right in the gut. Caden doubled over in pain. It was like a rock had suddenly entered his stomach and was demanding to be let out. The same Watson-like voice echoed in his head.

*"DEVIL mode deactivated."*

Caden ran past the rowboat and threw the clothes and satchel down to Annika, not stopping until he reached the edge of the pier. He crouched over the side and seawater began pouring out of his mouth like a fountain. It burned as it came up, the salt scratching against his throat and mouth. For Caden, who hadn't been able to feel anything for the past several minutes, it was agony. Icy-hot water gushed out with only a second between bursts for Caden to gasp for breath. He could breathe again, but he wished he couldn't.

After he felt like he'd puked out the entire ocean, Caden coughed and coughed, spitting the remaining salty bits from

his mouth and searing throat. He tried to catch his breath, but his heart was racing too fast. At least it was beating again. His wet overalls and pants clung to him like ice cubes. He was freezing, shivering all over.

Annika walked up from behind. She was wearing one set of the stolen clothes: an oversized shirt, a pair of pants, a vest, and leather shoes. Her soaking green dress and bonnet were tucked away in the satchel. Her lips were still blue, but she wasn't shivering anymore.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

There was something about her question that set Caden off.

"Am-m-m I ok-kay?!" he roared through chattering teeth. "I d-died, Annika! I drowned to d-death down there and now, somehow, I'm s-still alive!"

"Caden, calm down," Annika said. But Caden was just getting started.

"You d-don't know what it was like! My heart stopped, and I wasn't b-breathing. I wasn't even controlling myself. S-something turned on inside me, a DEVIL something. I f-flew up onto a ship and I knocked out nineteen people like ... like a machine! Without even thinking about it. I couldn't stop it, and I didn't even care when I did it!"

Suddenly Caden realized something. Everyone who knew the truth about him—Jadice, Watson, even Tooby—they'd all said the same thing that up until now, Caden hadn't paid nearly enough attention to. They'd all told him that he was going to destroy the world. He wasn't just part robot, he was part *weapon*.

Caden gripped the sides of his head. He'd been shot in

the leg, blown things up, made a ship fly in the air, drowned to death, somehow survived, and had taken down nineteen men without blinking. What was he? Caden knew the answer, and he hated it. He was an unstoppable killing machine built to do one thing—destroy the world. He didn't even need Metl to crash into the Earth. He could do a perfectly fine job of it himself.

“I don't want anyone else to die!” Caden cried out. He thought about Tooby, Clops, Jadice, Deber, and everyone else who was gone. And yet he was still here. “I'm the one who should be dead! Nothing would've happened to them if I'd never existed. I'm just a weapon that should have never been—”

Annika grasped Caden's shoulders and focused on him with the most serious face he'd ever seen on her.

“Listen to me, Caden. I don't know what you are. And you don't know either. But I do know that I would've died a dozen times if it weren't for you, either by the butcher or those Apostles or freezing to death just now. I don't care if you're a devil-robot or whatever. You saved me. You may be a weapon, Caden, but sometimes you can use a sword to cut bread, okay? Don't go all crazy on me now, not when we're so close to finally finding your dad and my mom.”

Annika let go of Caden's shoulders. He knew she was right. But still ... he wanted to know.

“Why was I created?” he asked softly.

“I don't know,” Annika said. She pointed to the massive lit-up church, a little way from the docks. “But the one person who does know is inside that building. Let's go find him.”

She handed him the other set of dry sailor clothes. One of



the sailors who he'd taken down without even trying. Without even caring. Caden took them from her, but he didn't change into them. There was still one thing on his mind.

"Annika, I have to ask you to do something," he said quietly.

"What is it?"

"You're not going to like it."

"Out with it already!"

Caden took a deep breath. "After we find my dad, and your mom, and we stop Metl from hitting us, I need you to ... I need you to destroy me."

Annika glared down at him. "Caden, don't be stupid. I'm not going to—"

"If you can't promise me this," Caden said, "then I'm not going any farther. It's just like Jadice said. The same weapon that destroyed the world two-hundred years ago is inside me. And now I know that I can't control it all the time. I don't want to cause another apocalypse. Or even hurt another person. It's not worth it, Annika. So please, promise me while I'm in control of myself enough to ask you."

"Caden," she said, "there's no way I could ever—"

"If you don't promise me, then I can't help you find your mom," Caden said, unblinking. "I'm sorry, Annika. But I need you to do this."

Annika stared at Caden in silence. But only for a moment. The next she reached into her pocket, ripped out the magnetizer, and pointed it at Caden.

"Arrows can't hurt you, falling ten stories can't hurt you, and drowning can't hurt you. But remember what Clops said about this magnetizer? At max power, it doesn't care what

you're made of, stone or steel. Level five turned that metal lock to shreds. Level nine will blow whatever Iltech is inside you to bits."

"Promise me," Caden said, "that when the time comes, you'll do it. For me."

"I promise," Annika said.

Caden stood back up, finally feeling relieved, even though the pain from drowning was catching up to him. His insides felt like they were made of stone, his outsides like they were caked in a layer of ice, and his head like it was floating away. But that was good; he was feeling again. Whatever robot-part of him had taken over was gone. For now. It was time to use it to stop Metl, and then destroy it forever.

He quickly changed into the sailor's clothes. With a dry puffy shirt and pair of pants on, he took the satchel from Annika and slipped his wet overalls and the picture of his dad inside. The photo had rainbow discoloring around the edges now thanks to being drenched in water, but his dad's face was still visible. And the writing on the back was clear as ever:

*"I'll always love you."*

"We need to find Jadice," Caden said, feeling more determined than ever. "If she survived the Basement, then she can lead us into the church to find our parents."

"We don't have time to find her," Annika said. They both looked toward Metl. It nearly filled the whole sky. "If what that spider told you is true, then we only have a few hours left before Metl hits us. For all we know Jadice is dead. We can't wait around for her."

"Then what do we do?" Caden asked. "Just ask the Holy Police and hope they let us in?"

Annika smirked. “I have an idea. There’s more than one way into the church, and with everything that’s going on, I don’t think they’re guarding all of them. Let’s go.”

Annika led and Caden followed. They walked down the pier, past the ship Caden had attacked. It was silent now; the laughter was gone. Caden didn’t look over. There was only one way he could prevent that from happening again, and he was on his way to do it.

At the end of the pier was the harbor. Wooden shipping crates were piled on top of long stone streets, and tall brick lighthouses had roaring fires on top, illuminating the area for nighttime work. But no one was there. The harbor was abandoned. There was only the sound of waves and seagulls.

As Annika led them closer to the church, Caden saw where everyone was. Over a hill past the harbor, hundreds of townspeople were gathered in Salem’s town square with blazing torches. Even from far away Caden could feel the tension rising. There were screams and cries as people pointed up at Metl in fear and mothers clutched their children close.

“—doing everything we can,” echoed the voice of the small Father through the wooden cone. Caden couldn’t see him, but his amplified voice boomed throughout town. “There is nothing to fear. This is a blessing sent by Gotama. We should be thankful for his—”

“Thankful for the flood that took my husband?”

“The fire that burned down my house was not a blessing!”

Yells from the crowd drowned the Father out. People were angry. And scared. Caden didn’t blame them; he was too.

“Where are we going?” Caden whispered to Annika. They’d crouched behind another hill on the backside of the

church, bringing them down into damp darkness. Angry shouts from the crowd mixed with the crashes of the waves against the rocky coast. It felt like they were in the middle of nowhere.

“We’re going to one of my favorite old hangouts,” Annika said. “It’s just up ahead. There’s a tunnel that comes out of the church and right into the ocean. It’s where all their garbage goes. I used to steal some stuff from it. It’s not usually guarded, so we might be able to get in.”

Caden followed as they crawled along rocks, until they came to the peak of a jagged slope and peered over the top.

“There. Do you see it?” Annika asked. Below them, just a moment’s run away, was a perfectly circular stone opening in the side of the cliff. Goopy liquids in a variety of colors were leaking out of it onto the small sandy beach and then into the ocean.

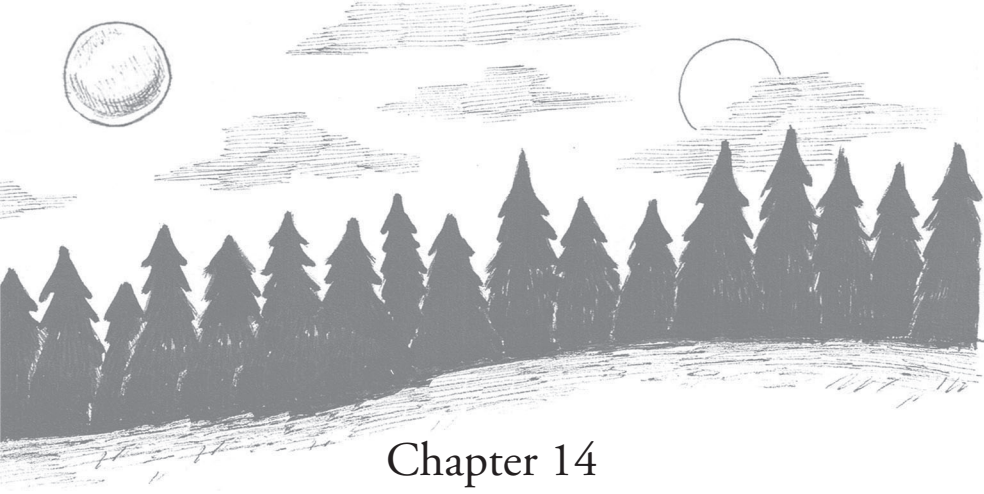
“Don’t tell me you stole food out of there,” Caden said, slightly disgusted.

“I washed everything first, obviously,” Annika said grumpily. “Let’s go. It looks like no one’s—”

But there was someone guarding the entrance. A red stallion came clopping out of the shadows with a white-clad rider. It was a member of the Holy Police, lantern in hand, keeping watch.

Caden readied himself to use his ANGEL weapon, hopefully for the last time. But then the Holy Police turned toward him and Annika.

It was Dom.



## Chapter 14

### Into the Church

Caden did a double take. How could Dom, the potato-shaped bully, be one of the Holy Police? He looked again, just to be sure, but it was really him. Dom may have been completely covered in the white uniform from head to toe, but Caden would recognize that freckled face anywhere. The puffs of curly red hair sticking out from the top of the hood were even more of a dead giveaway.

“Is that Dom?” Annika asked in disbelief.

“Yep,” Caden said, doing his best to stifle a laugh.

“He kind of looks like an egg riding a horse,” Annika snickered. “And I think he’s alone down there too.”

“Well then,” Caden said. “I guess we’d better go say hello.”

The two of them climbed over the rocky hill and made their way down the other side to the small beach. As they walked, tiny pebbles dislodged from the path and clinked down the slope, getting Dom’s attention.

“Who goes there?” he demanded. He tugged the horse’s reins and held his lantern out toward Caden and Annika, looking just as shocked to see them as they had been to see him.

“Hello, Dom,” Caden said calmly.

“Stop right there!” Dom said. He reached behind his back with his free hand and pulled out a crossbow. “I’ll ... I’ll shoot if I have to.”

Seeing the crossbow made Caden and Annika stop, but only for a moment. Caden put out his palm, visualized the crossbow sliding right out of Dom’s hands onto the sandy ground, and it complied right away. It landed with a soft bump; it wasn’t even loaded. Suddenly Dom was empty-handed and looking quite scared.

“Run, Milchama!” he yelled, snapping the horse’s reins. Caden was one step ahead of him. He imagined Dom stuck in the air while the horse galloped away, and that’s exactly what happened. Milchama sped off like he’d been stung by a bee, but Dom remained hovering in the air, still in saddled position.

Until Caden released him to collapse on the sandy ground.

He fell on his rear with a thud. Caden and Annika ran over, magnetizer and palms out, standing above him as he lay on the ground, hands up in surrender. It was hard to imagine that this was the same person who had threatened Caden with a sledgehammer just two days ago. If only he’d known how to use his ANGEL weapon then.

Annika let out a laugh. “The Holy Police must be pretty hard up for help if they’re letting you join them.”

“I’m ... I’m not even supposed to be here,” Dom said, sweat dripping down his reddened face.

“Then why *are* you here?” Caden asked.

“Everyone else is out looking for you,” he said. “The whole Church is trying to find you. And anyone left over is doing crowd control to prevent a riot in town. They just threw a suit on me and gave me a fake crossbow and told me to guard over here. I’m not an official Holy Police yet. I ... I barely even know how to ride a horse!”

This was getting pathetic. Caden and Annika exchanged glances.

“What do we do?” Caden asked.

“Toss him in the ocean with your power,” she suggested. “Then let’s get going.”

“No!” Dom cried. “You’d better not do anything to me. Or else I’ll tell my brother and he’ll get you good! He isn’t afraid of your stupid weapons or anything.”

“Your brother?” Caden asked. This was the first he’d heard of Dom having a brother.

“Yeah, my brother Freid,” Dom said. “He’s inside the church. I just found out today that’s where they’ve been keeping him. You’d better get away from me before he comes after you!”

“Your brother isn’t a prisoner?” Annika asked.

“He works for the Church,” Dom said. “I mean, he has to stay there as punishment for using Iltech, but he’s super smart. They use him for lots of stuff.”

Caden’s heart leaped with excitement. If Dom’s brother was there, then his dad had to be there too.

“Can you help us get in?” Caden asked. “I need to find my dad.”

“No way!” Dom yelled. “You’re a criminal! You’re the

most-wanted sinner right now. I don't care what kind of weird powers you have, you'd have to kill me before I'd help you."

Frustration burned through Caden. They were so close. He didn't have time to explain everything to Dom that he'd learned about how the Church was wrong and Gotama wasn't real. He just needed to get through Dom's thick head with something quick.

"Listen, Dom," Caden said. "You see Metl up there?"

Dom quickly glanced up at the shining gray ball and red *X* filling the sky.

"Yeah."

"Metl is going to hit us. It's going to kill everyone. You. Me. Your brother. Anyone you've ever cared about will be dead. The only way to stop it is if I meet my dad. I don't know why, but I have the power to put an end to this. You've seen what I can do. I just need my dad to tell me how to do it."

Caden could see the gears turning in Dom's head. The idea of helping Caden was causing him extreme mental anguish, but the idea of being smashed to pieces was probably worse.

"You can really stop Metl?" he asked.

"Yes," Caden said. "If you help me find my dad."

"And my mom too," Annika added. "Please help us, Dom."

Dom turned to Annika and his face softened. He stood, brushed off his white uniform, and picked up the lantern from the sand.

"All right," he said. "Follow me."

He hopped into the tunnel carved into the cliff and



started walking down the dark, damp corridor. After a quick exchange of surprised glances, Caden and Annika followed. Annika kept her eyes narrowed in suspicion and followed behind with her magnetizer drawn. Caden wasn't prepared to trust Dom either. He kept his glowing red palms ready to go at any moment.

The journey through the tunnel was disgusting. The circular pathway was just low enough that they had to walk crouched, careful not to scrape their heads along the gooey ceiling. The floor was even worse. The stone pathway was coated in a thick layer of slime, and liquids of every gross color imaginable flowed by. Caden did his best to avoid the larger pieces of garbage that came floating past, but he did step on a few of them. They were disturbingly squishy.

And yet, Caden felt the same internal tug as before when they'd walked through the tunnel to the Basement. He had to be sensing electrical signals. But this was the church, the last place on Earth that should have any Iltech. It didn't make sense.

"Just what is that power of yours anyway?" Dom asked, his voice echoing through the cramped stone passageway.

"It's kind of a long story," Caden said.

"Try me."

"Well, it's called an ANGEL weapon. It—"

"Yeah yeah, great. Were you born with it or did you steal it?"

"Uh, well, I was born with it. But I've met others who had them installed later."

"Huh," Dom said. "I wonder if after you stop Metl from hitting us, my brother could rip that angel thing out of you

and put it inside me instead.”

Caden didn't say anything. The thought of Dom, or anyone like Dom, with an ANGEL weapon was horrifying. He was glad he'd made Annika promise to destroy him when they were done.

“Are your parents inside the church too?” Annika asked.

“Even if they were, I wouldn't know,” Dom said. “It was always just me and Freid. He'd work all day at the stonemith, then tinker with his Iltech inventions at night to sell underground and make a little money. It worked well ... until the Police found his workshop.”

“I'm sorry to hear that,” Caden said, feeling sympathy for Dom for the first time ever. Dom just grunted.

“Whatever. Anyway, we're here.”

They had reached a dead end. There was nothing except a stone wall illuminated by Dom's lantern. It was wet with putrid-smelling liquids like the rest of the tunnel.

“Where are we?” Caden asked.

“Hey, relax will ya?” Dom said. He grabbed hold of one of the stones in the wall and shoved it to the side. As if by magic, it slid across like the lid to a wooden box, revealing a large red light with numbered buttons. Dom pressed one of the buttons and the light turned yellow.

“What is this?” Caden asked.

“The way inside, duh,” Dom said. “Now be quiet, I have to put in the password.”

Caden and Annika were silent as they watched Dom's thick fingers press button after button. Again. And again. And again. Dom must've pressed them over one-hundred times before he finally stopped.

“It’s a ... it’s a really long password,” he said. “Now wait a second.”

The yellow light turned green and the wall started shaking, as if there was a mini earthquake.

“What’s going on?” Caden asked.

“Can you go five seconds without asking a stupid question?” Dom groaned. He grabbed another stone in the wall and pulled. The wall swung open like a door. Inside was a small white room, so small in fact that it wasn’t a room at all.

“Is this an elevator?” Caden asked, remembering the lift in the Basement.

“I don’t know what it’s called,” Dom admitted with a shrug. “But I know what it does; it goes up. Get in.”

The three of them filed inside. The cramped elevator was barely big enough to hold them. Dom closed the stone wall from the inside, sealing them in the four white walls.

“Are we moving yet?” Annika asked anxiously.

“Trust me,” Dom said, “you’ll know when we’re—”

The elevator lurched upward with a jolt. Caden lost his footing and fell to the floor, and Annika accidentally grabbed onto Dom.

“I gotcha,” he said to her. Then he turned to Caden. “You lose your balance? Huh. Would’ve thought an Iltech sinner like you would be right at home in this thing.”

Caden didn’t say anything as he stood back up and the bumpy ride continued upward. This elevator must’ve been what he’d been sensing in the tunnel. But why did the church have an Iltech elevator? And how high were they going in the statue-church? Up to Gotama’s beard? The human-ant’s antennae?

He didn't have to wait long to find out. The elevator convulsed to a stop and there was a pleasant "bing" sound, like Jadice's tea maker.

"Oh, by the way," Dom said with a smirk, "I'm sorry."

The elevator doors opened, and Dom ducked down as Caden and Annika were suddenly face to face with a dozen Holy Police all pointing crossbows at them.

"Down on your knees!" they yelled in unison.

Caden reacted instinctively. He thrust out his palms and Annika reached for her magnetizer, but they were too late.

*BZZT!*

One of the Holy Police fired, but there was no sound of arrows piercing the air. It was a blast of something worse—magnets.

The weapon shot out a magnetic field, sucking Annika's weapon right out of her hands and into the Holy Police's possession. Caden felt the full impact of the weapon ripple through his body, as if he was a puddle someone had splashed into. He collapsed to the elevator floor on his knees, suddenly losing the energy to even stand.

"Excellent work, Dominic," came a voice. The group of Holy Police parted and a tall, slender man in a blood-red Holy Police uniform strolled up to the elevator. He had the same freckles and curly ginger hair as Dom, and he was carrying a magnet-bow—the weapon that had sucked away Annika's magnetizer and disabled Caden.

"Thanks, Freid," Dom said. "It took a while to input that message to you guys. But it was worth it, huh?"

"I would expect no less from my genius little brother," Freid said. He handed the magnet-bow to a nearby Holy

Police, helped Dom up, and led him away with an arm behind his back.

“Mr. Freidric, sir,” said one of the Holy Police. “What do we do with these two?”

“Put them in the cell,” Freid said.

Dom turned to his brother. “Hey, remember it’s only the boy that’s the sinner. The girl didn’t do anything wrong. She was kidnapped.”

“No worries, Dominic,” Freid said. “We’ll let Father Yohan deal with them when he gets back. Until then, we’ll keep them safe.”

Caden still felt weak, as if the magnet-bow had ripped out his will to live. He couldn’t even stand. Two Holy Police lifted him under his arms and carried him into the room. Right behind him Annika was kicking and screaming, requiring four Police to subdue her.

Despite feeling dizzy and hopeless, Caden forced himself to look at his surroundings. This was where his dad was. It had to be. He knew it from the tugging sensation inside of his stomach, now stronger than ever. Tooby had told him to follow the electrical signals, and Caden felt like the electricity in the room was gripping right on his insides. He’d come so far to find his dad. He couldn’t give up now.

The room was big, at least the size of the Home, and it was filled with Iltech. But unlike the Basement where junk Iltech was piled up randomly, the Iltech here was in pristine condition and organized beautifully. Bright white rectangle lights lit up the ceiling, and there were screens and panels lining the walls, constantly displaying information. In front of each one was a person in a red uniform like Dom’s brother,

furiously taking notes on paper or a handheld device.

Caden was nearly brought out of his stupor by seeing what was in the center of the room. There were at least twenty people lying unconscious on elevated tables, their heads and limbs attached to metallic sensors. They only wore white sheets, and they were immobile aside from twitching when one of the red-clad researchers came over and adjusted a knob attached to their heads.

Caden wondered what was going on. Who were these people? Were they—

“Mom!” Annika screamed. She somehow managed to yank herself free from the four Holy Police and ran over to one of the unconscious women. She looked nothing like Annika—pale skin, round face—but she had to be Annika’s mother.

Annika shook her, trying to wake her from whatever sleep she was in, but after just a few shakes, Annika was pulled away by Holy Police. Caden swallowed down his nausea and garnered enough strength to look over the unconscious group of parents, trying to find his dad. He looked for anything that he could remember from the photo—blond hair, tan skin, lanky frame—but he couldn’t find any that matched.

The Holy Police brought Caden and Annika to a jail cell built into the wall on other side of the room. With the touch of a button, the metal bars slid open, and Caden and Annika were thrown inside. Like the rest of the room, the inside of the jail was white and sterile. Another push of the button and the bars closed, locking the two of them in. The Holy Police turned their backs to Caden and Annika, keeping guard over them inside.

Caden felt dizzy and weak. Annika was crying into her hands. Agonizing, breathless sobs poured out of her.

“I couldn’t save her!” she cried. “I’m right here, right next to her, and I can’t do anything!”

The world around Caden was still spinning, but he tried to think of a way out. Annika’s magnetizer was currently confiscated by the Holy Police outside their cell, so that wasn’t an option. Caden tried to summon his ANGEL weapon to open the bars, but he couldn’t concentrate on anything for more than a second before it made him sick to his stomach.

“It’s ... it’s okay, Annika,” Caden said. “Don’t worry. We’ll ... we’ll find a way.”

Annika shook her head with her face still covered in her palms. “You don’t get it. You just don’t get it. This is all my fault, Caden. She shouldn’t even be here!”

“What do you mean?” Caden asked. Annika sniffed and lifted her beet-red face out of her hands. Tears were still streaming down her cheeks.

“Not all Homes are as nice as Mother Mildred’s,” she said, wiping her face on her sleeve. “Both my parents died when I was little, and I was sent to a Home. I was like you, Caden. I lived at a Home, but I wasn’t a Nobody. For years no one adopted me, and the Mothers saw me as just a useless leech. So I did them a favor and ran away.

“I lived on my own for two years, bouncing from farm to farm doing little jobs. But once I was ten I came to Salem and I found something I was good at: stealing. Salem was the first big town I’d been to, with shops and stores and everything. It was so easy to just walk beside someone, pretend to be their kid, and then tuck away a few apples, bread rolls, or whatever







else I wanted when no one was looking. I made a killing. It was great.

“I really thought I had it all. But then, during Ant Day, I saw a girl my age walking to the center of town to watch the fireworks with her parents. She walked between them, holding both their hands, and she was wearing this bright green dress. The way the three of them were laughing and smiling and just ... being a family, it made something click inside my head. I knew I could never have parents like her, but there was one thing I could have: I could steal the same dress.

“I found one just like it at a seamstress’s shop. It was just my size; I had to have it. I don’t know if I was getting overconfident and sloppy, or if I was blinded by desire, but I just picked up the dress and walked out of the store. The owner saw me. I ran, but she caught me. I figured my life was over, but the woman didn’t turn me in. She dragged me back to her store, sat me down at a table covered in fabric, bone needles, and thread, and told me I was going to learn how much blood and sweat went into making that dress, so maybe I’d think twice before stealing again.

“I laughed, but she was serious. Her husband was Holy Police, and she was going to turn me in if I didn’t do as she said. I obeyed. I cut the fabric all frayed, accidentally stuck myself with the needle a hundred times, and barely put together a single sleeve after hours and hours of work.

“When we were done, she told me to come back again tomorrow, or else she’d turn me in. I had absolutely no intention of coming back, I’d just make a break for the next town. But then she did something I didn’t expect. She smiled

and said if I came back tomorrow, she'd give me a snack while I worked. I mean, I didn't mind stealing food, but getting something guaranteed to eat without any danger of being arrested? Now she was speaking my language.

"I came back the next day. She walked me through making the dress collar and we ate oatmeal raisin cookies together that she'd made herself. She told me that whenever she made them for her husband to take to work, she had to make ten times the usual amount, so he could share, or else all the other Holy Police would be jealous. I laughed out loud when she told me, imagining the super-serious Holy Police being jealous of cookies. I think that was the first time I'd laughed in years. That was when the woman told me her name: Sandie.

"I went back to Sandie's house every day, laughing and sewing and eating cookies. I even stayed for dinner with her and her husband Wilhelm, and he'd tell me stories about all the mundane stuff Holy Police had to do sometimes, like investigate cat disappearances, or use their crossbows to help farmers shoo away crows. One night, when I was about to leave after helping clean up, they invited me to stay the night. It was the first night I'd spent in a bed in years.

"Sandie and I finished my dress a few days later. It was nowhere near as nice as the one I'd tried to steal, but she said it was beautiful. She said she liked it so much she'd trade the green dress I'd tried to steal for it. Before I could refuse, she gave it to me and said I was free to go.

"But I didn't want to go. I threw the dress on the table and wrapped my arms around Sandie and begged her to let me stay if I made another dress with her. She told me I didn't need to make a dress to stay with her. I could just stay.

“Sandie and Wilhelm took me in. They couldn’t officially adopt me since I didn’t have any records, but Wilhelm promised to pull some strings. And once I started living with them, they showed me the hidden parts of their lives: the Iltech. Sandie had a camera and a box full of photos, and Wilhelm had old Iltech weapons stashed away in the cupboard. We’d spend our nights together playing with the Iltech, making up stories about the strangers in the photos, and Wilhelm would explain all about the old weapons and how they worked.

“A wonderful year went by like that, all the way up to the day I was officially adopted. Wilhelm had made it possible, and to celebrate I wanted to get them something special to show how thankful I was. I couldn’t steal anything anymore, and I couldn’t afford anything either, so I decided to do something Sandie had never dared to try: taking a picture with her camera.

“I wanted to take a picture of myself, so we could add it to the box and I could be a part of the stories we made up. I snuck the camera outside at night when Sandie was asleep and Wilhelm was at work. I went into an alleyway next to the house. I had no idea how the camera worked, or even if it would work, but I had to at least try.

“But when I pressed the button to take a picture, a bright flash burst out of the camera, illuminating the alleyway like morning. The camera made a loud clicking and whirring sound, but all I heard was the sound of Holy Police horses suddenly coming in my direction. I ran back inside the house, threw the camera under the rug, and not a second later there was a banging fist on the door.

“I was paralyzed with fear. Sandie woke up and answered the door. When I saw who it was, relief rushed through me. There were two Holy Police, but one of them was Wilhelm, my dad. The other Police demanded to know what had caused the flash of white light. Sandie denied everything. I just stood there, glancing nervously down at the rug where the camera was hidden.

“At first it looked like everything was going to be okay. Wilhelm tried to laugh it off and persuade the other Police that nothing had happened. But he wasn’t convinced. He said something unnatural had made that light, and according to protocol, he had to search through every inch of the house until he found the Iltech that caused it.

“I saw the panic in Wilhelm’s face. He knew what a search meant: his Iltech weapons were going to be found. If that happened, we were done for.

“Just as the Holy Police took his first step inside the house, his foot hit the bump under the rug. He leaned down and dragged out the camera and freshly-printed photograph from underneath. My stomach sank. I knew what this meant—we were all going to be arrested.

“But then ... something worse happened. Wilhelm started screaming at Sandie, yelling about how she’d betrayed him and betrayed Gotama by using Iltech. I was horrified. This was his chance to help his wife, to stand up for her, or to knock out the other Police so we could escape together as a family. But instead he was just blaming her like ... like a monster.

“Before I could say anything, Sandie confessed. She lied and said she’d taken the photo of me with the camera, and

that she'd forced me to pose for it. She said that Wilhelm and I were innocent, and that she had a stash of Iltech photographs and weapons too.

"My happy life was being destroyed before my eyes. My mother was being arrested, my father was betraying us. The life that I'd thought would be mine forever was slipping away like water through my fingers. I didn't want to go back to another Home. I wouldn't go!

"I ran. I made it about twenty feet before a crossbow arrow shot through my arm and brought me to the ground. It was my dad who shot me. He walked up to me and I honestly expected him to shoot me again, right through the head. But he grabbed me by the elbow and dragged me back to where the other Police was arresting my mother. The only thing he said was a whispered, 'Sorry, kiddo.'"

Annika took a deep breath. As Caden had been listening, his vision stopped spinning, and he could feel his strength returning. He glanced at the satchel holding their wet clothes and saw Annika's lime-green dress peeking out. All this time, Annika had been carrying around a reminder of her mother, just like Caden had with the photo of his dad, and he'd had no idea.

Caden didn't know what else he could do for Annika besides talking to distract them from their predicament.

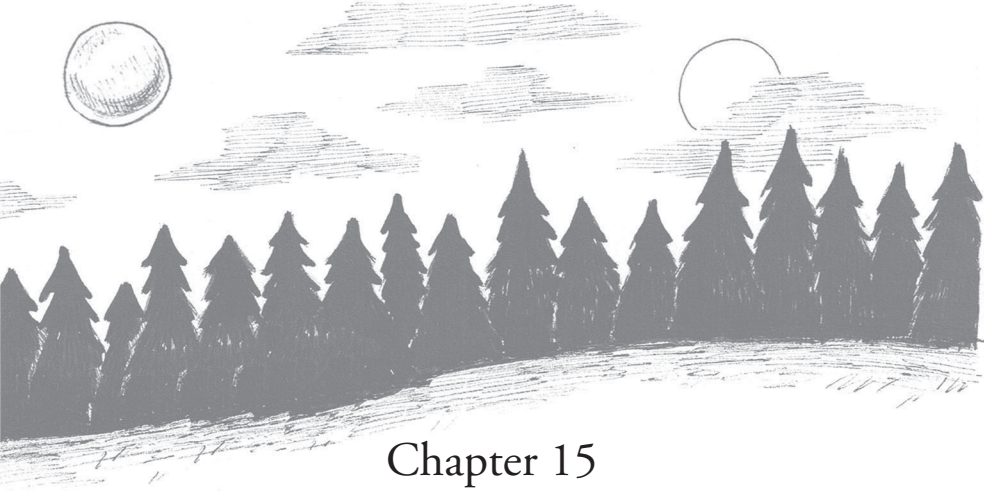
"What happened to Wilhelm?" he asked. "Was he arrested too?"

"I don't know," Annika said. "Maybe he was. Or maybe he's still in Salem. I bet he was transferred to some other town though. Having a prisoner and her jailer as husband and wife seems like a bad idea. But I don't care where he is. I'm going

to find him. And I'm going to blast him and see how he likes it. It's his fault my mom is here, being experimented on or whatever. I'll never forgive him."

The elevator door on the other side of the room opened. A figure in gray robes escorted by two Holy Police walked across the room to Caden and Annika, eliciting bows from everyone as he passed. Once he was standing in front of the cell, Caden recognized him. Even though he'd been far away when he saw him last, there was no mistaking that mane of white-fire hair.

"Hello there, Caden. Nice to meet you," said Father Yohan with a smile. "Well then, enough chit-chat. Now tell me. Are you ready to save the world?"



## Chapter 15

### Two

Save the world? What was this Father Yohan guy talking about? Caden was only supposed to be able to do that when he met his dad.

Unless.

“You’re not my dad,” Caden said timidly, “are you?”

Father Yohan chuckled. “Unfortunately not. Your father is not here, and none of us could ever hope to possess the same talent as that brilliant man. Myself especially, no matter how many lifetimes I’ve lived.”

Disappointment coursed through Caden. He’d suspected his dad wasn’t here when he hadn’t seen him, but now he knew for sure. Although Father Yohan was talking as if he’d known him. Did that mean he knew where he was? Before Caden could ask, Annika spoke.

“What do you mean ‘lifetimes?’” she asked. “How old are you?”

“Old enough to have seen humanity make many mistakes,

and to have made plenty myself.” Father Yohan showed off his palms. There were two glowing white Xs. “These have kept me alive far longer than I deserve. Do you know what these are, Caden?”

“Yeah,” Caden said. “It’s an ANGEL weapon. Are you one of the Twelve Apostles?”

Father Yohan raised his eyebrows in surprise. “Correct. In that organization I go by the name Two. Though, forgive me for asking, but where did you find out about us? I don’t expect Mother Mildred was giving lectures about ANGEL weapons, now was she?”

Caden almost opened his mouth to blab about Jadice and everything else he knew, but he kept it shut. There was a chance she was still alive, and that Father Yohan didn’t know she was here. He didn’t want to put her in danger.

“I learned about the Apostles in the Basement,” Caden lied.

“Ah, so you talked to Watson, then?” Father Yohan said. Now it was Caden’s turn to be shocked.

“You know about the Basement? And Watson and everything?”

“Of course. What happened down there was a horrible tragedy.”

“How dare you say that!” Annika shouted. “The Church is what drove everyone down there into hiding! If it wasn’t for you, then all those people would still be alive. You probably loved it when the Basement blew up.”

“My young lady,” Father Yohan said, “that is simply not true. If we went after every single person who ever used Iltech, then there would be no one left. Salem would be a



ghost town. Knowing when it's correct to turn a blind eye is one of the most important parts of ruling."

"Then why do you want to destroy me?" Caden demanded.

Father Yohan frowned. "It seems as though Watson must've been mistaken for once. We don't want to destroy you, Caden. We want you to join us."

Caden and Annika exchanged glances. They were both thinking the same thing: that's not what Jadice had told them. Did she lie? Or was Father Yohan lying to them?

"We need your help, Caden," Father Yohan continued. "We've spent decades rebuilding old technology, but we've just hit dead end after dead end."

"What are you trying to do?" Caden asked cautiously.

Father Yohan sighed. "We've been trying to figure out Metl. It has so many mysteries. What is controlling it? Why doesn't it affect our planet the way it should? *What* is it, exactly?"

"And you, Caden. You are the missing link. The same weapon that caused the Iltech Apocalypse and created Metl is inside of you, a weapon far more advanced than whatever we could hope to produce here. With your help, we can not only stop Metl, but learn its secrets too."

"How can we stop it?" Caden asked. "And where is my dad?"

Father Yohan smiled. "So many questions. How about this, Caden? I'll make a deal with you. You join us, we stop Metl, and I'll tell you everything you want to know. The Iltech Apocalypse. The meaning of life. Your father. You can know it all, Caden."

Caden gripped the jail bars so hard they rattled. Father Yohan was offering him everything he'd ever wanted. All he had to do was say yes. The only thing stopping him from joining right then and there was Annika grabbing his shoulder.

"Don't do it, Caden," she said. "They're lying. You know they are. If they really wanted to help, then they wouldn't steal parents away from kids."

Father Yohan gave a solemn nod. "You are right, young lady. I'll tell you what. Caden, if you join us, I'll let the Nobodies' parents go home. All of them. With your help we won't need them anymore."

Annika's hand fell off Caden's shoulder. She couldn't believe what she was hearing, and neither could Caden. If Father Yohan was telling the truth, then this was his chance not only to learn everything he'd ever wanted to know, but to reunite all of the Nobodies' families. He peered past Father Yohan to the tables of unconscious parents.

"What are you doing with them?" he asked.

"They're all experiencing their own worlds. HEVN virtual reality was one of the discoveries that led to your weapon's creation. We've been trying to rebuild it here for research, all in a safely-monitored environment of course."

Caden didn't know what to think. Even Annika looked like she was being swayed by Father Yohan's promise of her mother and the other Nobodies' parents going free.

"And if you let them go, they'll be okay?" Caden asked. "They won't be hurt or anything?"

"Of course," Father Yohan said. "And even if they somehow are hurt, it's not a problem. I can fix them."

“How?” Caden asked.

Father Yohan reached into the pocket of his robe and held out his palm for Caden to see. He was holding a single seed.

“My ANGEL weapon has the power to control time,” he explained. “I can speed up, slow down, or even reverse time for anything I touch. Take this daisy seed for instance.”

The white *X* on Father Yohan’s hand shone bright. The seed instantly sprouted a green stem, and dirt-colored roots wrapped themselves around his hand. The plant shot upward, blooming into beautiful white petals. It had only taken a matter of seconds for the seed to transform into a fully-grown flower, and for its roots to become tangled in his hand.

“Now watch this.”

The white *X* on Father Yohan’s hand shone through the roots. The daisy drooped, faded black and brown, then crumbled into ash.

“You killed it,” Annika said.

“All I did was speed up its natural process,” Father Yohan said, wiping his hands.

“But what about the Nobodies’ parents?” Caden asked. “What can you do for them?”

“Let me make you a show of good faith,” Father Yohan said. He jerked his head to one of the Holy Police, who then ran toward the elevator. The doors opened, and another Holy Police walked into the room, pulling something behind him. When Caden saw what it was, his heart leaped into his throat.

It was Deber. But she was in bad shape.

The arrow was still stuck in her backside. From rump to hoof she was covered in black infection. The leg didn’t even

move as she walked; it only scraped against the ground and spasmed. Even the saddle and reins seemed to be too much weight for her to carry. Deber moaned in agony as she was led across the room. When she saw Caden, she tried to whinny a happy greeting, but all that came out was a moan of pain.

“Deber.” Caden rubbed her smooth snout and she licked his hand through the bars. “I thought you were gone, girl.”

“A butcher boy brought this horse to the church,” Father Yohan said. “He seemed very anxious to have her healed no matter what. Apparently, he’d seen my ‘miracles’ before. Usually we have to turn away requests like that or else we’d be overrun with miracle-seekers, but in this case we decided to make an exception.”

“Can you help her?” Caden asked.

Father Yohan grinned. “Just watch.”

He gently placed his palm on Deber’s backside. She shook and groaned in pain, but only for a moment. The black tendrils on her leg immediately began disappearing like dark soup being slurped out of a bowl. In no time, all signs of the wound were gone, and only the white arrow remained sticking out of her backside. A second later even that too fell to the floor. Miraculously, Deber was completely healed.

She was the first one to notice. Deber smacked her tail against her rump, checking for the arrow that was no longer there. She trotted backward, using her back leg normally for the first time in days. At realizing she was no longer in pain, she let out neighs of joy and started bucking around in circles until the Holy Police restrained her. But she didn’t care, and neither did Caden. She was healed—that was all that mattered.

“Is Deber really okay now?” Caden asked.

“Of course,” Father Yohan said. “I merely reversed her backside to the way it was a few days ago. And if any of the Nobodies’ parents have been harmed by undergoing our tests, then I can do the same for them. If, of course, you are willing to help us.”

Deber gnawed gently on Caden’s fingers. She tugged on his hand, begging him to come out of the cage and go riding together. Caden knew that couldn’t happen, but there was one thing he could do. He took off the satchel with Annika’s dress and his dad’s photo in it and hung it around Deber’s head.

“I’ll come back for you, girl,” Caden said. “I promise.”

Father Yohan raised an eyebrow. “Does that mean you’re joining us?”

“I ... I don’t know,” Caden said. “I mean, I thought I was built to destroy the world. Not save it.”

“Destroying and saving aren’t all that different sometimes,” Father Yohan said. “To save your horse, I had to destroy the millions of bacteria that were thriving in her wound. Sometimes the difference between saving and destroying is just a matter of perspective.”

Father Yohan signaled with a nod to the Holy Police. They pulled Deber’s reins and led her back to the elevator. Father Yohan followed behind.

“What is your purpose, Caden Aire?” he said. “Will you destroy the world, or will you save it? Maybe there’s no difference, but it can’t hurt to try. Either way make your decision quickly. Metl will be making ‘contact’ with us soon enough.”

Father Yohan and Deber disappeared behind the elevator doors. The Holy Police bodyguards went down a staircase, leaving the original guards back in front of Caden and Annika's cell.

"What do we do?" Annika asked.

"I think we should help them," Caden said.

Annika grit her teeth in frustration. "That just feels wrong. I mean, look at what they're doing here. I don't care what good they think they're accomplishing, this is terrible."

"But he said they'll stop it. And he can heal your mom, just like he healed Deber."

"Yeah, and what guarantee do we have? They'll probably just put us to sleep like the rest of the parents and never let us wake up."

Now Caden was getting frustrated. He'd hoped Annika would be on his side. "That's what you said about Jadice, too. You thought she'd use us and then throw us away, and you were wrong about her. We don't have any choice, Annika. We have to trust them."

Annika lowered her gaze. "The last time I trusted someone, they shot me in the arm."

Caden was torn. He wanted to just tell the guards that he was ready to join them, and then do whatever Father Yohan needed him to do. But at the same time, he didn't want to abandon Annika. What other choice did he have though?

Before Caden could decide, the electric lights in the room flickered. All the researchers and Holy Police stopped in their tracks. Evidently this wasn't a common occurrence.

"What's going on?" came the voice of Freidric, Dom's brother. He gazed at the wall of screens with the other

researchers as the lights kept blinking on and off.

“There’s been a power surge by the garbage tunnel entrance,” one of them announced.

“That’s impossible,” Freidric said. “Nothing down there produces electricity. The only way that could happen is if it were struck by lightning or something.”

Caden and Annika shot each other a knowing look. Lightning? That could only mean one thing: Eleven. Didn’t he know that Caden and the Apostles were supposed to be on the same side now?

“What’s going on, Freid?” asked Dom, peeking over the shoulders of the researchers.

“Don’t worry about it,” Freidric said.

“Sir,” said another researcher. “It’s the elevator. There’s been an unauthorized use. It’s ... it’s coming up.”

“Well stop it!” Freidric yelled.

“I can’t, sir. It’s already—”

A loud clap of thunder exploded in the air. Bright, hot lighting flashed out of the elevator shaft and twisted its way through the room, electrocuting researchers and unconscious parents alike. The victims shook and collapsed, convulsing and steaming like meat over a flame.

“Call Father Yohan!” Freidric ordered. “Something’s gone wrong!”

There was another blast of lightning, this time even louder and more destructive. Sizzling electricity rippled along the walls, causing explosions of sparks and fires. Alarms blared, researchers fell to the ground, and all of the parents hooked up to machines started shaking violently. They were being electrified by the devices on their heads.

“Mom!” Annika screamed. Caden could only just make out Annika’s mother Sandie in the on-and-off darkness. She was trembling just as violently as the others.

Annika ran to the side of the jail bars and, to Caden’s surprise, threw them open. The electric lock had lost power. But Annika didn’t make it more than a foot out of the cell before she was stopped by the Holy Police guards.

“Let me through!” she screamed. “I need to save my mom!”

“Don’t let them out!” Freidric commanded. He and the remaining researchers ran to the guards and formed a human barrier between Caden and Annika’s cell and the rest of the room.

“Let us out!” Caden said. “We know who’s causing this. We need to get everyone out of here before he—”

“You’re not going anywhere!” Freidric yelled over the sirens. “Father Yohan has ordered us to keep you here at all costs.”

Caden stepped back and squeezed his hands into fists. His strength was finally back after having been drained away by the magnet-bow. All it would take is one blast to break through them.

“He’s going to do something!” Freidric called. “Shoot again!”

The Holy Police with the magnet-bow pointed it at Caden. It was now or never.

Caden thought about the joy of Deber being alive, the bittersweet disappointment of finding Annika’s mother, and the anger of having to join with the Apostles to stop Metl. But most of all, he felt the crushing, devastating failure of not



finding his dad. Warmth bubbled up inside Caden right to his fingertips, and he let it out with an explosion of air right into Freidric and the Holy Police.

They went flying across the room. The Holy Police slammed into the Nobodies' parents and Freidric smacked against the walls of monitors, right into a web of writhing lightning. He shook and fell to the ground.

"Freidric!" came Dom's voice. He appeared out of the staircase where he'd been hiding and ran over to his brother, desperately trying to shake him awake.

"I'm sorry!" Caden shouted. He wasn't sure why he'd said it. He didn't owe Dom anything. It was Dom's fault they'd been caught and put in the cell in the first place. But still, it wasn't as if he wanted to hurt Dom's brother.

Annika dashed to her mother. Caden trailed after her, picking up her magnetizer and charge belt from the fallen Holy Police.

"Mom!" Annika said. Sandie was lying on a metal table, sprawled out and shaking. Annika threw off the headband and straps around her arms and legs, freeing her from whatever devices she had been hooked up to. She stopped shaking, but she still didn't open her eyes.

"What do we do?" Caden asked.

"I don't know," Annika said. "I need to save her. I need to. If I don't then I'll never—"

Sandie opened her eyes slowly, like she was awakening from the deepest sleep imaginable. Annika pressed her face against her mother's, smiling as tears dripped down.

"Mom, you're okay!" she said. Sandie looked at Annika, at first as if she were unsure who she was. But then recognition

spread across her face, from her warm eyes to her bright smile.

“Annika,” she said softly. Her voice was hoarse, as if it hadn’t been used in months. She reached out with a weak hand and stroked Annika’s face with the tips of her fingers. “You’re so pretty when you smile.”

Annika laughed and wiped her eyes. She gripped Sandie’s hand.

“It’s okay, Mom,” she said. “We’re getting you out of here. Right now.”

But Sandie’s smile didn’t last. Her pale face turned a sickly gray, and she coughed in a rough, painful way. Blood splattered from her mouth onto Annika’s vest.

“Mom, are you okay?” Annika’s eyes darted all over her mother. She kept coughing, blood dripping down her chin with each agonizing outburst.

“Annika ... please ...” her mother wheezed.

“What can I do? Tell me what to do!” Annika begged. She looked to Caden. “Caden! Do something with your ... with your power or something!”

Caden didn’t know what to do. He could make things fly and explode, but he couldn’t stop someone from coughing up blood.

“Annika ... please ...” her mother repeated. “Forgive us. Forgive ... us.”

As the words escaped Sandie’s mouth, she convulsed, went stiff, and then succumbed. Her body hung limp and lifeless.

“Mom! No!” Annika grabbed Sandie’s shoulders and shook her, but all it did was lurch her head from side to side. Annika put her ear to her mother’s chest, listening for

a heartbeat. Caden could tell by the horror on her face that there was nothing.

Suddenly he had an idea. “We need to find Father Yohan now. You saw what he did for Deber. He’s the only one who can help your mom.”

Caden was worried that Annika wouldn’t leave her mother’s side, but she snapped to attention. She grabbed her magnetizer from him, snatched the charge belt, and buckled it around her waist.

“Let’s go.” The two of them dashed to the staircase.

“Stop!” came a voice behind them. It was Dom. “Do something about my brother!”

Caden kept moving. Stopping would only slow them down, and he didn’t know how long they had. If he could bring Father Yohan up to save Annika’s mom, then he could save everyone else too.

The two of them sprinted down the stairs. The steps twisted around and around like a never-ending spiral staircase. They passed by open doors to other rooms filled with monitors and Iltech and fallen researchers. Annika ran five steps ahead of Caden, who struggled to keep up with her.

Until they slammed into Jadice.

Annika pummeled straight into her, and Caden screeched to a halt only inches behind. He’d never been so happy to see blue and yellow hair.

“Jadice!” he cried. “You’re alive! You escaped the Basement.”

“Seems like you did too, Blondie,” she cackled. “I’ve been looking everywhere for you.”

“Eleven is here,” Caden said breathlessly.

Jadice glared. "I know."

"We need to save my mom!" Annika said. "We have to find Father Yohan."

"Where is he?" Jadice asked.

"We don't know. He went downstairs in the elevator."

Jadice's eyes lit up. "All right. Follow me."

The three of them continued spiraling down the staircase at breakneck speed. Caden felt a huge sense of relief. With Jadice here, they were finally safe. They could beat Eleven, get Father Yohan to save the parents, and then finally stop Metl.

At the bottom of the staircase was a thick wooden door with stone padlocks. Thankfully it was already leaning open. Jadice pushed it out the rest of the way, revealing the church's worship hall.

It was enormous. Dozens of rows of wooden pews all faced the stage that the three of them were standing on. High above them loomed a towering ceiling, separated into six ornately-painted sections, depicting each of the Six Virtues. Along the walls sprinkled with bark and leaves were tall stained-glass windows of rainbow-colored ants, letting in dazzling light from the rising sun outside. Behind Caden was a tapestry of Gotama's Ant, stretching all the way from the ceiling to the floor of the stage.

And on the other end of the stage was a podium, where Father Yohan and his two Holy Police guards were standing. Deber was there too, satchel still around her neck. She gave a happy neigh as soon as Caden stepped in.

"Father Yohan!" Caden called. "I'll join you! I'll do whatever you want. But we need your help!"

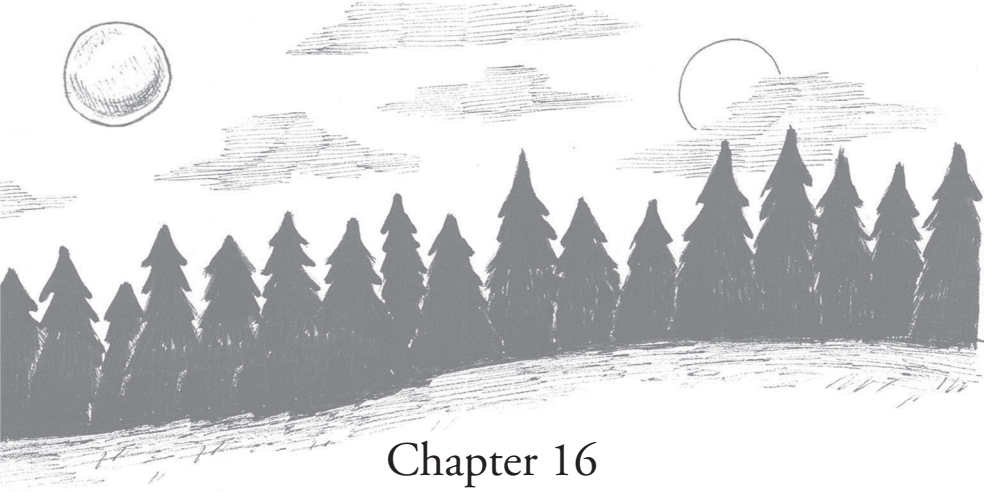
At first Father Yohan smiled, until he saw Jadice. His expression turned dark. He extended out his fingers, revealing the white *Xs* on his palms, as if ready to fire.

But before he could do anything, Jadice struck first. She kicked her boot in the air, sending bolts of crackling lightning across the stage right into Father Yohan and the two Holy Police, blasting all three of them backward into the rough, bark-covered walls. They slipped down and collapsed onto the pews, doubled-over and unconscious.

“No!” Caden yelled. “Stop! They don’t want to destroy me.”

Jadice turned to Caden with a sinister grin.

“Oh, I know they don’t, Blondie. But I do.”



## Chapter 16

### The Betrayer

**B**efore Caden could react, Annika had her magnetizer out, ready to fire. Jadice was even faster. Another kick and more lightning bolts flew out of her boot, crashing into Annika, blasting her across the stage and knocking her to the floor. But how did Jadice have electrical powers? Wasn't that supposed to be Eleven's weapon?

Caden didn't have time to think. He thrust out his palms, but Jadice was one step ahead. With her other leg she kicked the air, sending an electrical discharge right at Caden. Unlike the others, the bolts didn't send him flying, they wrapped around him, sizzling him like a sausage. The lightning rippled through Caden's skin, piercing him like hot needles and shaking him, bringing him down to the ground.

The electricity fizzled away, but he couldn't move; he only shook involuntarily. He burned all over, and his stomach felt like it was churning out acid. Deber ran over and nudged him, but all he could do was cough and try not to vomit.

Jadice slowly walked over, her heavy footsteps echoing on the wooden stage.

“I know that’s not enough to kill you,” she said. “But it should be enough to prevent you from interfering while I set up something that can.”

Deber gave a gut-wrenching growl and dove at Jadice. Jadice lazily put out her palm and a gush of water even bigger than Deber hit her smack in the face, pummeling her backward until she collided with the tapestry of Gotama’s Ant on the wall and collapsed.

Caden tried to ignore the burning pain all over. He scanned the room. Annika was still down, Deber was moaning, and Father Yohan lay bent backward over one of the pews. It wasn’t clear if he was alive, but he wasn’t moving.

“I ... I don’t understand,” Caden forced out. “I thought you ... I thought you were helping us.”

Jadice chuckled to herself. “I did make it seem that way, didn’t I? I had to be careful though. Lying isn’t my strong suit—killing is. And now I finally get to do it.”

“Everything you told us ... was a lie?”

“Sorry, Blondie. Like I said, I’m not good at lying. The Iltech Apocalypse, the Apostles, everything out of my mouth was the honest truth. Aside from a few things, of course.”

“But ... why?” Caden asked.

Jadice groaned. “I don’t have to tell you anything. Now excuse me, I have work to do.”

Jadice turned to walk away. Caden knew his only chance to stop her was to stall as long as possible and prevent her from doing whatever she had planned.

“I’ll bet you ... don’t even have a reason,” he yelled as

loud as he could. "Or you're just doing it because you want to open me up ... and use me in experiments, like the Nobodies' parents."

Jadice stopped. She stomped back to Caden, slammed her foot onto his back, and blasted him with another jolt of electricity. Sharp heat seared through Caden, inside and out, tossing him around like a helpless doll as he screamed.

Finally, when it seemed Jadice had her fill, she stopped. Smoke poured off Caden. His vision was blurry. He felt like he was smoldering over a pit of embers. Jadice gave him a kick and he rolled over onto his back, looking up at her.

"I'll tell you why I need to destroy you," she said. "It's simple, really. Remember the whole 'meaning of life' thing I told you and your brat friend? I lied about something. I *do* know what the meaning of life is. I *do* know what humanity discovered two hundred years ago. And it's *horrible*."

Even in his barely-conscious state, Caden could sense the fear in Jadice's voice. She was telling the truth.

"I devoted my life to rebelling against the meaning of life that humanity had discovered. But when I saw what the Apostles were doing, trying to find you so they could make the same mistake humanity had made in the past, I was disgusted."

"They just want ... to talk to Metl," Caden said through pained breaths. "They just want ... me to help them."

Jadice laughed. "Is that what Father Yohan told you? All the Church wants is power, Blondie. They want to know how to create their own Itech Apocalypse whenever they want, so no one would ever be able to disobey them. And the blueprints are inside of you."

"You're lying," Caden eked out.



Jadice shrugged. “It doesn’t matter. Metl is headed toward Earth because of you. The Church wants to control that power; I want you destroyed so no one can have it. Therefore, you and anyone who gets in my way needs to die.”

Caden expected Jadice to walk toward him and deliver the final blow, but her footsteps receded. She leaped off the stage and unleashed a burst of electricity onto Father Yohan, sending him flying up onto the stage, slamming down with a thud next to Caden. Burns covered his skin, and his head rolled over to look at Caden.

“Run ...” he gasped. Before another word escaped out of his mouth, Jadice propelled herself into the air using her water jets and landed on his back, discharging another barrage of lightning through him. This time, his eyes stopped moving and his body went limp.

“You killed him,” Caden gasped.

“It seems I did, yes. I need his ANGEL weapon if I’m going to destroy you before Metl hits us, and I don’t think he’d let me borrow it otherwise.”

“But why ...?” Caden asked. “If you wanted to destroy me, all this time, why didn’t you just do it?”

“Because I couldn’t!” Jadice snapped. “What could I do? Drown you with water? Electrify you? Please. I know you better than that. It might hurt your human parts, sure, but it would do nothing to your Iltech parts, the part that truly matters.”

“To destroy you, I needed something more powerful. I thought I could just get something from Clops to do the job, but then I saw the other Apostles there after you. I had to do something quick, so I promised Clops some ANGEL weapon

blueprints for the self-destruct codes. As soon as I got them, I drowned him and set the timer, barely escaping before it went off.

“I didn’t want to kill Clops and destroy the Basement, but it’d be worth it to take care of you. But when I saw Metl still up there, still getting closer, I knew you were still alive. And with the Basement gone, there was only one other way in this Gotama-forsaken town that I could destroy you—turning you to dust with Two’s power.”

Fear spread through Caden as he realized what Jadice meant. “You’re going to steal Father Yohan’s ANGEL weapon?”

“Exactly,” she said. “Just like I stole the ANGEL weapon from my old partner, Eleven. I knew he wouldn’t be too keen on me rebelling against the Apostles, so I drowned him in his sleep. He gave me these scars, but I’d say I got an even trade, wouldn’t you?” She stood on her heels and showed the ripped bottoms of her boots to Caden. Bright yellow Xs glowed inside the soles. “And once I have Two’s time ANGEL weapon inside me, I’ll finally have something that can destroy you.”

“This whole time,” Caden said, “it wasn’t Eleven chasing us? It was you?”

“Yes, yes,” Jadice said distractedly. She crouched down and picked up Father Yohan’s hand, revealing his palm. The X that had been glowing white before was now transparent like foggy glass. “But enough talking. Metl’s getting too close for comfort. I’ll rip the weapon out of this old man, take care of you and your stupid friend, and send Metl back into the sky where it belongs.”

Jadice gripped the colorless X on Father Yohan’s palm, ready to pull it off. Caden knew he had to do something. If

Jadice was right and destroying him would stop Metl, then so be it, but he had to stop her from hurting anyone else first. He could sense a little of his energy coming back. If he could just use his ANGEL weapon one last time.

There was a crash from across the hall. One of the stained-glass ant windows shattered, and standing silhouetted against the red and orange sunrise sky were two figures in white masks and black cloaks—Five and Six.

“The Betrayer!” Five yelled. He brandished the gray Xs on his palms at Jadice. She jumped to her feet and kicked a fury of lightning toward the window. Thunder erupted in the hall, but Five grabbed hold of Six and jumped to the floor just in time.

“Well if it isn’t Smiley and his little pet Frowny,” Jadice cackled. “Come to try and stop me? I’d like to see you try.”

Even from far away, Caden could see that Five was still hurting from the magnetizer wound earlier. He limped as he ran along the wall, pressing one of his hands against his leg and holding out the other toward Jadice, exposing the gray X.

The pews on Five’s side of the church shook and cracked out of their fastenings on the wooden floor. They careened through the air right toward Jadice, but she was ready. She held up her hands and summoned a wave of water out of her palms that pushed the pews back where they came from, landing on the floor with a deafening crash.

“How can you use two ANGEL weapons?” Five yelled from across the room. “No human is capable of holding more than one!”

“If you’re going to try and distract me from your pet,” Jadice shouted, “then you’re going to have to try harder than that.”

She thrust out her palm to the side and let out a blast of water that reached the front pew, where Six had been hiding with her purple Xs out. The water jet smacked her in the face, knocking her backward over the rows of seats.

“Six!” Five called. Jadice laughed.

“Trying to poison me, eh? Nice try. I’m looking forward to adding both of your ANGEL weapons to my collection when I’m done with you.”

As Jadice hurled another wave of water across the room, Caden found the strength to push himself up. It was like he was fighting against ropes tying him to the floor. When he finally stood, he looked at his arms for the first time. His skin was red with black scars running down. It burned like hot sandpaper all over.

Jadice let loose another blast of water at Five. He was already drenched and breathless from the previous wave, but he held out his palms and somehow managed to stop the torrent of water midair. It hovered there for a moment and then surged back toward Jadice. She tried to stop it, but she was too late. The wall of water crashed into her, knocked her off the stage, and soaked the entire front of the hall.

“Caden!” Five yelled. He hobbled over with his one good leg and hoisted himself onto the stage. “We need to leave. Come, there’s an exit in the back, through the staircase.”

He gripped Caden’s arm and started off to the door, but Caden didn’t move.

“I can’t leave ... without my friends.”

“We don’t have any choice,” Five said. “You’re too important to risk losing. You’re the only one who can save the world.”

Save the world. Destroy the world. Caden was sick of hearing it. He didn't know what to do. He didn't know what or who to believe anymore. Was Five telling the truth? Was Jadice telling the truth? Was Father Yohan telling the truth? Who could he believe? Caden looked over to Deber, still unconscious on the ground. The satchel with his father's photo inside hung around her neck. The words written on the back of it hit Caden.

*"I'll always love you."*

There was only one person Caden could trust, and he had no idea where he was.

"I just want ... to find my dad," Caden said.

Five stopped and looked at Caden with the hollow eyes in his smiling mask. "Your father, Caden," he said. "He's—"

A single bolt of lightning cracked into Five's stomach. It ripped through his soaking wet cloak and brought him to the ground, trembling. Jadice water-jetted her way back onto the stage.

"You want to know about your father, Blondie?" she snarled. "I'll tell you about your father. He's dead."

Caden's heart stopped. "No ... that's not true."

"Oh, yes it is, and believe me, there's no one happier about it than me. I knew your father back when we were kids, living here in Salem. He thought he was so great, even back then, always tinkering with Iltech and inventing things ... things that should never be invented. Everyone in the Basement loved him, but I was the only one who saw him for what he really was: a mad scientist, one who didn't care who or what got hurt so long as he got what he wanted.

"He showed his true colors when we accidentally learned

the meaning of life. Instead of being shocked and horrified like I was, like any decent human being should be, he was in awe. He wanted nothing more than to try and achieve humanity's purpose, just like they'd failed at two-hundred years ago. He couldn't see past his own arrogance to the danger right in front of him.

"And then he created you. You were the creation he was most proud of. All these years, I thought he'd just created a weapon, but no, he created a little version of himself. The narcissist. When I first saw you yesterday, all I could see was him—the blond hair, the gangly body. He even gave you his own stupid name. I couldn't bring myself to spit it out. It was like he was there in front of me again. Your dad was nothing more than a power-hungry psychopath who died to create you. And now, once I destroy you, I'll erase any evidence that he ever existed."

Caden gripped his fists so hard he was shaking. He couldn't feel the burns on his skin anymore, only the anger pumping through his veins.

"You're lying!" he shouted.

Jadice grinned. "Like I said, Blondie, I'm terrible at lying. Now, let me show you what happens when an ANGEL weapon is removed from a living human."

She pounced on top of Five and yanked his arm up. He groaned as she gripped the glowing gray *X* on his palm, ready to pull it out.

*BZZT!*

A blast rang through the hall. Jadice let go of Five's hand and fell to the floor, like she'd suddenly lost balance. Caden immediately saw the reason why: one of her legs was missing.

Dom stood right outside the door they'd entered the stage from, dressed in his Holy Police outfit, pointing his brother's magnet-bow at Jadice. Attached to the silver tip was one of her legs, as if it had been sucked right off her. But there was no blood. The only thing sticking out of the thigh was wires. Jadice lay on the stage, groaning in pain. More wires hung out of her right leg stump, and little sparks of electricity popped off the frayed ends.

Dom ripped Jadice's leg off his magnet-bow and pointed it at Caden. "What the steel is going on here?"

Caden tried to speak, but he couldn't. Jadice was part robot ... is that how she had two ANGEL weapons? It didn't even matter. She may have been defeated, but the world was still going to end. He'd tried every way to stop it and failed. He'd tried to find his dad and failed. He'd tried to join the Apostles and failed. There was only one way left to stop Metl.

"Dom!" Caden shouted. "I need you to destroy me."

Dom looked taken aback. He lowered the magnet-bow. "What are you talking about?"

"Please! Destroying me is the only way to stop Metl and—"

Lightning jolted out of Jadice's fallen leg, knocking Dom to the ground. Tendrils of electricity flew through the air, connecting Jadice's stump to her leg, summoning it back to her body. She stood up, and the leg reassembled with her torso, still sparking where the two were connected.

"What are you?" Caden demanded.

Jadice gave him a disgusted look. "Don't you dare say that to me! I'm a human, unlike whatever freak you are. I just needed to make some ... adjustments to my body to

accomplish what I needed. I'm glad to hear you've accepted your fate though. Now stay put while I destroy you and your annoying friends."

Caden couldn't let that happen. He wasn't going to let anyone else get hurt because of him. Summoning what little energy he had left, he marched toward Jadice.

"Still got some fight left in you?" she snickered. "Here, this should put an end to that."

She kicked toward Caden and stuck out her palm, unleashing a torrent of water and lightning together. The power of both knocked him to the ground, sucking the life out of him, drowning and burning him at the same time. Caden lay there, wet and sizzling, unable to move. Unable to breathe. He couldn't think. His vision went dim, then dark, then black.

A metallic voice went off in the back of his head.

*"DEVIL mode activated."*

Suddenly Caden was no longer lying on the ground. Just as when he'd drowned, it was as if strings pulled him up, standing to face Jadice. When she saw him, her eyes widened in shock.

"That should've rendered you unconscious," she grumbled. "Here, have a taste of Nephilia!"

She let loose with a waterspout as thick as a house. The head was shaped like a sea serpent laced with lightning, thunder booming as it roared. Caden merely extended his arm, sending the electric-water serpent crashing against the church wall. Jadice gaped at him in horror.

"Impossible ..." she gasped. She took another deep breath and a shield of electricity surrounded her, growing larger



every second. It engulfed Caden, but he felt nothing. The electricity was like air flowing past him. Without thinking, without feeling anything, he walked up to her, held out his palm, and raised her into the air, immobilizing and choking her. The electricity shield disappeared as she struggled to breathe.

“Is that all you’ve got?” Caden heard himself say.

With the flick of his other hand, Caden sent Jadice’s right leg flying through a stained-glass window. Another flick and her left leg was out another. All that was left was her upper body, hovering in the air, sparks flying from her metallic thigh stubs.

“Caden ...” she panted. “Please ...”

Caden tossed her toward the biggest glass window in the church, right at the front of the hall. She crashed through it, shattering the rainbow-colored ant into a million pieces, and disappeared into the bright outside.

As soon as she was gone, Caden fell to the floor on his knees. Suddenly all of the pain he should’ve been feeling was back, rippling through him like he was being crushed from the inside-out.

*“DEVIL mode deactivated.”*

With that voice, Caden collapsed. He couldn’t move, only shudder uncontrollably as the pain worked through him. At the front of the hall there were bangs against the giant entrance doors. A mob outside in the square was trying to get in. The door was barricaded with a long wooden plank, but that wouldn’t last long against the entire population of Salem.

“Caden!”

It was Annika. Caden could just barely make her out through his blurry, shaking vision. She crouched over him, one hand pressing against her side in pain, the other clutching her magnetizer.

“Caden, we have to hurry!” she said. “We need to get Father Yohan back upstairs to heal you and my mom and everyone else!”

Caden could only barely process her words. Father Yohan. Heal. Mom.

“H-he’s ... d-dead ...” Caden spluttered. Annika looked over and saw for herself. Father Yohan lay still on the stage, the color drained from his skin and ANGEL Xs.

“Annika ... p-please,” Caden begged. “I need you ... to d-do what you ... p-promised.”

Caden knew they didn’t have long. Metl was almost here. While he was still in control of himself, while there was still time, he needed Annika to destroy him.

Annika understood immediately. She looked at her magnetizer, for the first time not with excitement, but horror. Up to this point she’d used it to protect herself and Caden. Now, she had to use it to destroy him.

Slowly, Annika stood and aimed the magnetizer at Caden. Her trembling finger powered it on, then pressed “nine.”

Caden closed his eyes. *So, this is how it ends*, he thought to himself. He got to save the world, though not quite how he’d planned. At least no one else will get hurt, he reassured himself. Maybe it won’t even hurt him either.

But nothing happened. Caden waited. And waited. He finally opened his quivering eyes and saw Annika standing over him, crying. She was still pointing the magnetizer’s

green light at his chest, her finger shaking over “enter.”

“I ... I can’t do it!” she said through tears. “I’m sorry, Caden. I just ... I can’t!”

Caden wanted to rip the magnetizer out of her hands and do it himself, but he was too weak. Behind them was a crunching sound—cracks in the front doors. There was another crash and a log the size of a tree rammed through the doors, punching a hole big enough for the townspeople outside to start rushing into the church.

“We have to go!” Annika cried. She pulled Caden up and leaned him against her shoulder. The two of them hobbled back out the stage door they’d come through. They stumbled past Father Yohan, Dom, and Five all lying on the ground. Deber stood up slowly as they passed and followed them through the doors. Behind them panicked yells filled the hall.

“Where is Father Yohan?”

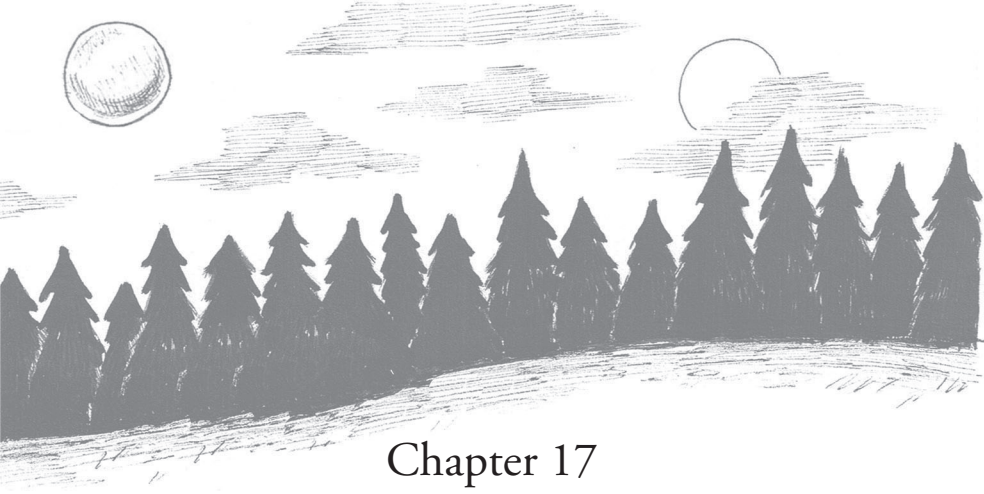
“Gotama has forsaken us!”

“Metl is almost here!”

Once Caden and Annika limped through the giant door to the staircase, they came to another door with a stone lock. Annika blasted the lock to pieces with her magnetizer and swung the door open to a balcony outside.

Annika stopped. Even Caden, only barely conscious, could see it.

Because it was everywhere. Metl took up the entire sky. It was about to hit the Earth.



## Chapter 17

### The End of the World

There wasn't any sky left. Metl filled it with its metallic surface and fiery red *X* as far as the eye could see. Only tiny slivers of blue covered in fear around its edges. All of Salem's bellrocks were ringing in panic as people flooded the streets, screaming and pointing at the sky.

"Gotama's Ant ..." Annika whispered. She lowered Caden off her shoulder and he slipped to his knees like a lifeless doll.

"Annika, please," Caden begged. "We're out of time. There's only one way to stop this."

Annika shook her head. "I'm sorry, Caden. I can't do it. If stopping the end of the world means I have to destroy my best friend, then screw the world—it's not worth saving."

The sky turned red. The glow spread out from Metl's burning *X*, rippling through the air as if the sky were set on fire. All of Salem was bathed in the blood-tinted light. Caden's heart raced, pumping sickness through his body.



This was it. It would all be over any second now.

But then the red started to shrink. Along the edges of town, the red color receded inward. It grew smaller and smaller, narrowing down around Salem, then the center square, then the church ... and then Caden.

A single beam of intense red light shone down from Metl's *X* right onto Caden. It was so bright he couldn't look into it. He covered his eyes with his hand, peering through the cracks. Everyone in Salem looked up at him, wondering what was going on.

Caden had no idea what was happening. What was this? Was Metl showing everyone whose fault it was that they were all going to die? Did it have some sort of sick sense of humor? His hand still covering his eyes, Caden stood up.

And then he realized he *could* stand up. The burning, the pain, everything awful that he had been feeling, was gone. He looked down at his arms—the burns and scars had vanished. Somehow, he was healed. Suddenly Caden found himself able to stare into the red light, and he did so with awe.

A voice spoke to Caden. It wasn't the metallic Watson-like voice he'd heard before in his head. It was clear, powerful, and human.

"Caden," it spoke, "you have a choice."

Annika and all the Salem townspeople looked at Caden. They could hear the voice too. It boomed across the town.

"You must choose, Caden. Are you willing to destroy your world, to sacrifice everything—your friends, your loved ones, and everyone else you've never met—to know everything? Or will you instead save your world, and know nothing?"

Caden waited for more, but that was it. The voice spoke

no more. Caden didn't know who it was or how he could possibly respond to it, but he knew what his answer was. So he did what he could—he shouted it.

“I want to save everyone!” he yelled into the red light. “I don't want anyone else to die!”

Caden gasped for breath. His throat hurt from yelling so loud. He wasn't even sure if the voice had heard him until it boomed again.

“You are not ready yet,” it spoke.

The red light disappeared and, perhaps it was Caden's imagination, but Metl seemed to grow smaller in the sky.

“Metl is shrinking!”

“It's going away!”

Cries of joy came from the crowds. Caden couldn't believe his eyes. Around the edges of Metl, blue sky was returning, growing larger every second as the giant metal sphere retreated. He had no idea how, or why, but Metl was moving away from Earth.

Cheers erupted from below and townspeople broke down in tears of happiness as Metl became smaller and smaller. After a minute it was half the size it had been, and another minute later it was back to its old size of the moon, except it still had the glowing red X.

“Caden saved us! Caden saved us!”

One voice rang out above all others in the crowd. Caden looked down. It was Evan, the giant butcher. He stood tall among the mobs of people and pointed up at Caden and Annika with his bandaged arms.

“Caden saved us!” he yelled again. “We are Caden's Ants! We are Caden's Ants!”



The crowd joined him, putting their hands together in prayer position and bowing nonstop, all of them facing Caden. They chanted and repeated the words over and over, lowering and raising their heads in unison.

It made Caden sick.

“Stop it! Stop it!” he yelled. He had to keep shouting before they finally listened. Everyone below gazed up at Caden in wonder. He knew what was happening. They’d seen him speak to Metl. They’d witnessed him save the world. They were going to turn him into a new god to replace Gotama.

That’s not what Caden wanted. He wanted them to know the truth.

“The Church is a lie!” Caden yelled to crowd. “For years, they’ve been lying to you! Go inside the church, go up the stairs, and you’ll see. They’re using Iltech. They’ve been doing experiments on the Nobodies’ parents. Gotama isn’t real, and Iltech isn’t evil. They’re just all lies by the Church!”

Caden wasn’t even sure if the townspeople could hear him. There were a few looks of confusion, but most just gazed at Caden with relief from not being smashed by Metl. Caden readied himself to speak again. He’d say it as many times as he needed to get through to them.

“There he is!”

From behind, a group of Holy Police spotted Caden through the doors. They ran toward him, but the townspeople who had rammed into the church barricaded their way.

“That boy saved us!” they shouted at the Police.

“He just stopped Metl from destroying the world!”

But the Holy Police didn’t care. They armed their crossbows.



“It doesn’t matter what he did!” one of them yelled. “He’s still a wanted criminal. It’s our duty to arrest him.” With crossbows pointed at them, the townspeople backed off, letting the Holy Police through.

Caden turned to Annika. “We have to go.”

Annika looked up to the top of the church. Caden knew what she was thinking: her mother was still up there. But Father Yohan was gone. There was nothing they could do to help her. And no good would come from sticking around Salem. The Apostles didn’t need Caden to save the world anymore, and the Church would probably just capture him and run their Iltech experiments on him. They had to leave.

Deber whinnied and trotted up and down excitedly. Caden hopped onto her saddle and helped Annika up behind him. She dug her hand into Deber’s leather satchel, took out the lime-green dress, gripped it tight, and then nodded to Caden.

“Let’s go.”

Caden held out his palms. He thought about Metl, now back where it belonged. He thought about Annika not keeping her promise, and how glad he was that she didn’t. He thought about what Jadice had said about his father being dead, and how in his heart—or whatever was beating in his chest—he knew that she was wrong.

He made Deber rise into the air. She let out a shocked cry and started running frantically as they soared over the town. The townspeople pointed and squealed as the three of them passed overhead. Even the squad of Holy Police on the balcony looked dumbfounded at what they were seeing. They didn’t shoot a single arrow.

It wasn't until they were far away from Salem that Caden let Deber touch down. She hit the ground galloping, happy to not be in the air anymore. Caden closed his eyes, to savor the wind rushing past his face ... and to better sense for any electrical signals.

His father was out there, and he was going to find him.



Inside the church, the Holy Police pushed back the townspeople from the front stage. There was no sign of Jadice, Five, or Six, but Father Yohan still lay there dead. Dom stood over him, examining his body.

"These Xs," he said, inspecting Father Yohan's ANGEL weapon. "They're what he used to turn Mr. Stercus into ash. And to heal my eye."

Another Holy Police came running down the stairs. He burst onto the stage, out of the breath.

"Are you Freidric's brother?" he asked Dom.

"Yes," Dom said, immediately turning serious. "Is he okay?"

The Holy Police didn't say a word; he just looked down at the ground. Dom gripped the sides of his head. Tears burned in his eyes. No ... not his brother. The one person who had cared about him. The one person who had loved him. The one person who didn't think he was worthless. He couldn't be dead!

Dom's sadness ignited into rage. This was all Caden's fault. He was the one who had knocked his brother into the electricity! He was the one who had brought those monsters into the church! Freidric shouldn't be dead, Caden should be!

Suddenly Dom had an idea. He crouched over Father Yohan and picked up his cold, pale palm. He brushed his fingers over the transparent *X* and slowly wrapped them around its edges.

Then, with all the strength in his body, Dom ripped the *X* off Father Yohan's hand. Following behind it came out a long metal tube coated in blood. It slithered like a metallic snake as Dom held it triumphantly up in the air.

Whatever this thing was, it was his now.



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**Scott Wilson** works as an editor and translator for the Japanese news-entertainment website *SoraNews24*. He runs *ScottWritesStuff*, a creative writing livestream on Twitch, and in his free time can be found playing video games and *Magic: The Gathering* with friends. *Metl: The ANGEL Weapon* is his first novel. He lives in the Japanese countryside with his wife.

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