

Prologue

THE OLD WOMAN WATCHED BECKY settle into the seat beside her. She'd been sitting alone under the deep porch in her favorite rocking chair since before dawn, enjoying the approaching storm and waiting for the girl to wake up. It had been raining off and on since around midnight, but the lightning and strong winds had begun just a half hour before. The woman felt it when the thunder awakened her granddaughter. Becky was uneasy about the storm's violence and flinched every time a network of lightning streaked across the sky. She'd count the seconds in her head between the lightning and the thunder to see if the storm was getting closer.

"I'm glad you could come this week. You're probably wondering why your mother sent you to stay with me." The young girl nodded, looking mostly at her grandmother, but also casting an occasional furtive glance toward the clouds. "Well, I thought it was time you and I got to know one another a little better. We see each other during holidays, but it can be a little distracting when everybody's talking all at once."

Becky stared at the ground for a moment, and pushed herself up higher in the seat.

"But aren't you pretty busy?" the girl asked. "I mean, you're kind of important."

The old woman smiled, but didn't answer directly.

"It probably feels strange not to be in school, doesn't it?" Becky nodded. "A lot of things are important, especially time with family. Don't you think?" Again, the girl nodded, but didn't say anything; a

small frown made its way to her face. "I think you'll see that this time we have together is important, too . . . for both of us." Thunder cracked suddenly, surprising Becky. She looked even more uncomfortable now that the storm's heart was almost on top of them.

"I love the rain," the old woman said, almost to herself. "It makes everything smell so nice."

"I guess so," the girl said, her frown deepening. "But that's mostly when it stops." The old woman laughed and reached across the space between them. Her deeply veined hand closed briefly over the girl's arm.

"You're right, of course. But did you know that the water we see falling has been doing a kind of dance for millions, even billions of years?" The girl shook her head. "It's made this . . . this incredible journey time and again. See that drop?" the woman pointed to a ripple just formed in a puddle near the bottom of the steps. "It might have been part of a glacier in the Western Mountains just a hundred years ago.

"Glaciers are constantly changing. They advance and retreat with the seasons, and move slowly all the time, like the thickest toffee. When the ice melts, water trickles down their slopes, collecting and forming into pools and streams. These join with other streams, until they become rivers that flow across the Land and on to the sea.

"That drop we saw was certainly part of an ocean at one time—who knows for how long. Eventually it evaporated under the sun's warmth, becoming part of a cloud that drifted through the sky—and it may even have gone all the way around the world. Later, cool air caused it to condense into the drop we saw, and today it fell to give us something interesting to talk about.

"Everything and everyone we see is connected in one way or another—and they're all constantly changing, too. It's amazing when you think about it. That such a small thing—a drop of water—can go through so many changes, be part of so many different things, so many times. And yet somehow, it always manages to come back as a drop of water." Becky's frown faded while she listened. "A lot of people think *we* go through something like this too—they say we

return repeatedly as one person or another. I don't know if that's true, but it's interesting to think about while you watch the rain fall."

The woman knew that the girl was more relaxed now, and no longer paying attention to the flashes in the sky.

"You probably know something about my life, and at least a few of the things that happened to me." The abrupt shift in subject startled Becky. She could see the surprise in her eyes.

"Yeah." Becky looked down, and her voice was almost a whisper.

"One reason you're here this week is so that I can share something with you. It'll be just the two of us."

"Will it hurt?" Becky asked unexpectedly. The old woman tried hard not to laugh, but a tiny smile escaped her control anyway. "Because I've heard some of the stories about you," the girl clarified.

"No," the woman said, trying to put as much reassurance into her voice as possible. "Not at all. There'll probably be times when you'll feel afraid, and there'll be things that you'll find confusing—you may not understand them right away. But your mother and I waited until we both thought you were old enough for this." The woman touched the girl's mind with a thought, and then paused before asking the next question. She wanted to give her time to absorb everything.

"Is that all right with you—do you want to go on?" she asked. It was important to her that Becky be given the choice, but the old woman also knew that the girl's time was running out. Before long things would begin to happen to her—terrifying things that no one should have to face alone.

Becky thought a little longer. "Okay." And then she asked, "What will it be like?"

The old woman took a deep breath, and let it out as a long sigh. "Like a dream, one that will seem very, very real. But you should know that I'll be with you all the time."

Becky swallowed, and then stared directly into the old woman's gray eyes for several seconds.

"Okay, I'm ready,"

CHAPTER 1

Is This Real?

PHOEBE STUMBLED AND FELL. HER hands were already bleeding from before, but now they had all new stones and dirt embedded into them. She lay on the ground coughing, trying to decide whether to get up, or just give up. But then something flared in her chest—a toughness, or maybe just plain stubbornness. She gathered herself together and pushed forward. One quick look over her shoulder was all she could spare. It wasn't possible to see who was chasing her, but what she did see made her gasp—the sky was burning.

Thick clouds hung over the valley where she lived, and beyond the surrounding mountains. Dark columns of smoke rose up to meet this dense canopy, like giant pillars, and at the base of each one was an enormous fire. Light from the flames was reflected in the clouds, painting everything in a dim red cast.

Phoebe's legs ached from climbing, every step hurt more than the one before—she prayed her legs wouldn't cramp up and make her fall again.

Need to stop, she thought, coughing, just for a minute.

She'd been climbing a long time, but still didn't know exactly where she was. The trail zigged and zagged its way up the mountain, following the hill's contours. It was hard to spot anything through the smoke, let alone a clear landmark, or to even see where the city was.

A horrible smell filled the air—the odor of rotting fish. Millions of them had been washing up on the shores of the harbor for weeks,

and the east wind carried the odor inland. But without the breeze, her eyes would have been burning from all the smoke, and it would have been hard to breathe.

How did I know that—about the fish? Phoebe wondered. She felt dizzy, and it was so hard to think clearly. *Where am I? Why the hell are those people chasing me? Is this real?* Phoebe wasn't sure it was happening at all. The last thing she remembered was going to bed, but that hadn't always meant she was just dreaming. Lots of horrible things happened to her while she slept, but never anything quite like this.

This has got to be someone's dream! she thought. *But it doesn't make sense. It's too real—even the people.*

Anger poured out from the mob of people behind her, fear and hatred—all directed at her. The men and women in dreams she shared had never been like this before, with emotions so strong that they caused her pain. Dream people usually lacked presence, and they didn't have thoughts. These people were real. But there was no time to stop and think about why she was here—it was run, or die.

For now, Phoebe concentrated on the path, and on each step. The trail was barely visible in the darkness. The only illumination came from the firelight reflected in the clouds. The path was badly damaged, its edge crumbled, and sometimes half of the trail was missing altogether. One wrong step could mean a very long fall.

Rocks in the soil helped to hold the soil together, but they were a problem too. Wherever the dirt had washed away, these same rocks became dangerous trip hazards. She overlooked one, her foot caught on it, and she fell face-first into the ground. The salty, metallic taste in her mouth triggered a memory of the bright copper pennies her father used to give her for ice cream on Saturdays. Phoebe swore out loud and got back up, confused, but angry too.

Why is this happening? she wondered, stumbling forward again.

As if to answer her question, familiar images and sensations—like a lost memory—flooded into her mind. Everything around her changed all at once. Time on the trail slowed to a crawl as her mind raced ahead—whole minutes were experienced in the moment between two footsteps.



Now Phoebe was standing on a hill, just under one of the torches that ringed a little hollow, and she was looking down into a crowd. Hundreds of people had gathered and were kneeling around a hooded man. He stood inside a small circle of torches speaking passionately, his arms spread out wide, gesturing as he spoke. Other figures, also wearing robes but with bare heads, moved among the kneeling people. Each carried a torch in one hand and what looked like a coil of rope in the other. The kneeling people were dressed in ordinary street clothes, but many had dark streaks on their backs.

The speaker's face was hidden in the shadow of the hood. His head turned side to side as he looked around, slowly rotating to face different parts of the crowd, but then the man abruptly stopped to stare in Phoebe's direction. He pointed a finger at her, issuing some sort of command. Everyone turned to look at her and, after a shocked pause, picked up his words, repeating them. Phoebe could feel the fear spreading through the crowd. A few individuals sprang to their feet and rushed toward her, the rest followed more slowly. Everyone was yelling the same words over and over. After a moment, she understood what they were saying: "Kill the demon!"

The memory ended as suddenly as it had begun and she was back on the hill, climbing again.



What was that? she thought. The abrupt shift in time made her stumble and almost fall again. She paused for a moment to get her bearings, and finally saw two landmarks that she recognized: a glint of steel high above her in one direction, and the muted glow of the town in another. She knew where she was now, and the trail took on an all-too-familiar look. She'd climbed here with her father years before. The town's shape was more obvious when she zigged west at the next turn—it was across the harbor. She couldn't escape this way—the trail was a dead end!

She was heading east along a peninsula—the rocky appendage of a mountain to the north of town. This trail ended at the top of tall cliffs overlooking the sea. *Crap*, she thought, almost ready to cry. But the others were getting close, and she had to go on.

After a while, the path ended and the ground opened onto a broad shelf facing the east. A sharp line of rock was at her feet and nothing but a vast emptiness beyond it. She could hear waves breaking on the rocks far below, but it was too dark to see much detail.

Individual voices were beginning to emerge from behind now—they'd reach her soon. She looked west and saw the torches they carried, a line of fire snaking its way up the hill toward her. Ominously, the sound of several hundred feet pounding on the earth was getting louder, too.

"Crap!" Phoebe breathed again.

All at once, a new sensation ignited from deep inside of her. It started as an icy chill in her stomach and then changed, tearing across her chest and to her arms and legs and fingertips. A blistering heat and unearthly cold passed through her all at the same time—intense, and getting stronger.

"What's happening to me?" she yelled.

The pain seemed to double every second and she fell to her knees screaming in agony. The mob was forgotten, the smoke and the fires and the smell of rotten fish all faded away. But the pain kept on building higher and higher until Phoebe was sure she'd pass out. Then everything changed again. A strong presence touched her from inside—a woman. It felt as though warm arms were holding her, and helping to keep her mind and body together. Finally, the burning dissipated, slowly at first, but soon she was free of the pain.

What the hell was that? she thought, weaker than before. She managed to climb back to her feet, and almost fell over the lip of rock before catching herself. But now her executioners were arriving.

The hooded man was in the lead, just cresting that last rise. He'd have her in a second or two. Desperate, her mind raced ahead, evaluating and choosing in an instant. And as his hand reached toward her, she leaned out over the cliff and jumped.

Phoebe looked up as she fell, her arms flailing. She stared back into the shadow of the hood where the man's eyes *must* be. Just then, a woman's voice spoke into her mind.

I love you, Phoebe.

CHAPTER 2

Burnt Toast

THE SUN HAD BEEN TRYING to peer through the window but was frustrated until a helpful breeze started playing with the curtains. Each time they parted, light splashed on Phoebe's face. The alternating bright and dark pattern reached into a different, more pleasant dream, stirring her consciousness. Not fully awake, her mind strayed to that curious place we all sometimes go, a world between dream and reality where our senses and imagination blend. It was natural for her thoughts to wander back to the cliffs high above the sea, and to the moment when she'd decided to jump to her death. Phoebe awoke with a start. Her eyes were drawn to the familiar pictures on her walls, anchors that always brought her back to the safety of her own bed.

Her room was simply furnished. A narrow bed was centered on the north wall, with a wooden nightstand to her right. It held an oil lamp, still lit, but turned down very low. This way she could have light quickly, without struggling to find a match in the darkness. A tiny flame was still visible, but only when the curtains met to block the sunlight. A battered but sturdy wardrobe was set against the west wall. Dresses hung in its left-hand side, and there was room below for shoes. The right-hand door hid a column of different-sized drawers and shelves. Phoebe kept folded clothes, linens, and her personal belongings there. The wardrobe had originally belonged to her uncle before he left for Central City, some twenty-five years ago.

It was difficult to tell what color the walls might originally have been. Every available surface was covered with pictures—charcoal and pencil drawings, watercolor and oil paintings. They hung without apparent plan or order, and the pages were many layers deep in most places. Each morning her eyes sought out these familiar images—reminders of a thousand nights of terror. But for Phoebe they were strangely comforting, a record of the many things she'd survived.

Her father, Daniel, was asleep in the old rocking chair near the window, his head rested on his chest, and he was snoring softly. The sound of his breathing had let her know he was there through the night, and helped her sleep again. Daniel had come when he'd heard her screaming—just as he always had.

The rocker stood sentry in a triangular niche attached to the east side of the room, where the walls came together in an unusual mixture of oblique and sharp angles. To Phoebe, the area had always seemed an afterthought, an eccentricity added to an otherwise normal space. She thought that it made for an odd room and was well suited for her—an odd room for an odd girl.

She watched her father sleep, wondering—not for the first time—how much better his life might have been without her. Phoebe noticed how thin his hair had gotten, and how much it had changed. No longer the brown she remembered so well, it had faded to an indeterminate color, one that most people call gray, even though it really isn't.

The sound of hooves on stone and the creaking of wooden wheels under load came through the open window. It was late. That was probably the sound of the milkman finishing his rounds.

Phoebe climbed from the bed with a deep sigh, hating to get up, not wanting to disturb her father, but they had to get moving. Her legs were like rubber, as though she'd actually climbed the trail last night, but phantom feelings were nothing new to her. Phoebe moved in her sleep, tensing muscles and reacting, as though physically experiencing what happened to whomever she touched telepathically. If that person experienced trauma, she felt it too. She could remember a beating shared with a woman from

the neighborhood, and awakening with blood on her face and pillow. At the time, her father guessed that she'd hit her own nose, thrashing around while asleep, but she wasn't 100 percent sure that pain was the only thing that could be transferred through her mind.

A loose floorboard protested as she crossed the room. Phoebe froze and gently removed the offending foot to sidestep the board and kneel beside her father's chair. "Dad, wake up," her voice was just above a whisper. She gently put one hand on his shoulder and his eyes opened, but his head moved up much more slowly. An expression of pain and confusion gradually changed to recognition and then concern.

Morning, Princess, he said in their silent language.

Why didn't you go back to bed? she scolded silently.

I slept, he thought at her, yawning. "What time is it?" aloud.

"About six-thirty," Phoebe admitted, trying to avoid his stare. She knew how much he hated to rush in the morning.

Her father closed his eyes and pushed up from the chair. His teeth were tightly clenched, trying to hide the pain he felt, but a tiny groan escaped anyway. "Okay, I'm up," he said, taking a breath to recover. "Can you make coffee while I get ready?" Phoebe stood too, nodding. The guilty look on her face made her father swallow.

"Sorry Dad," she mumbled, looking at the floor. He put a hand on her shoulder, and a twisted half smile made its way to his face as he put his forehead against hers.

"Hey, kiddo. You know, I'd almost forgotten how comfortable that chair could be. Let's get ready, OK?" Phoebe tried unsuccessfully to smile back, and nodded again.

Phoebe walked unsteadily through the apartment's main room to the front door; her muscles still stiff. Outside, on the landing, was a wood and metal box, from which she retrieved milk and butter. The glass bottle was still ice-cold; condensation had formed on its surface and drops of water ran over her hand. She handled it gently, not wanting to disturb the cream on top. Back in the kitchen, she stood on her toes to retrieve two matches from a can on the shelf above the stove then used one to light the gas lamp. The other one would be used to light the stove's burners. Next, she

poured out half of the cream that had collected at the top of the bottle into a small jar for their coffee, and then mixed the rest back in with the milk.

The percolator was in pieces; its parts had been left upside down on the counter beside the stove to dry. She hadn't put things away after washing up last night, but at least everything was clean. Once the coffee was on, she started breakfast.

Yesterday's bread was in its box. The dark, heavy loaf gave off a nutty aroma, but she'd forgotten to wrap the end again and it had hardened overnight. *Oh well*, she thought, picking up an oversized bread knife. *Toast is supposed to be hard*. Three thick slices went onto a metal plate that covered two of the stove's burners.

While the water was heating, Phoebe set the table. Their dishes, the table, and pretty much everything they owned were old. Most things dated from the pre-comet era and bore the unmistakable uniformity of industrially manufactured products. There used to be twelve plates, but time had taken its toll and now there were only five. This established a limit to their guest lists, but that had never been a problem since only her grandfather, Jacob, ever visited anyway. Not paying attention, Phoebe burned one side of the toast. *Well, it isn't really-really burned...besides, the butter will spread better this way*, she told herself, nodding. Once everything was ready, she called for her father.

Her coffee was strong but not bitter. Phoebe had added a pinch of salt to the grounds—a trick her grandfather taught her. As she stirred the first mug of coffee, her mind drifted back to the strange dream again, and to the presence of the woman she'd felt at its end.

The woman was just as confusing as the dream. Phoebe had connected with countless people before, especially when she was asleep and her mind wide open. She'd shared people's waking thoughts, their dreams, their experiences, and much more. But none she'd touched in this way had ever been aware of her. And no one besides her father and grandfather had ever told her that they loved her.

Last night was very different from the other experiences she'd shared. The Land and everything in it was so strange—and far too

real. It felt much closer to how things were when she lived through them firsthand.

Most people don't notice everything they see, and remember even less. They don't pick up on the little things around them, details and subtle variations in surfaces. Then, when something draws their attention, they forget everything else—like how the air is moving or the scent it carries. When Phoebe connected with someone, she could only perceive what that person's mind noticed. But the Land in last night's dream was absolutely complete and incredibly detailed—as real as the kitchen was right now.

She'd seen bits and pieces of what the Land had been like just after the comet, fuzzy images of chaos still present in older people's dreams. But last night's vision of the Land was as though she'd been there herself. It was all stored in her flawless memory now, seductive and inviting—and easy to slide back into without conscious thought. Even now, Phoebe's mind drifted back—she'd just stepped up to the edge of the cliff and could feel the humid breeze from the sea blowing her hair. The sound of a door closing brought her back.

Her father came out wearing his court robes. He had an early case today. The robes were black, of course, with blue piping on the sleeves and at the neck. The color identified his role in court, and this exact shade of blue had always been Phoebe's favorite color.

Everyone in court wore black robes. Blue piping was reserved for the defenders; red piping meant you were a prosecutor; gold signified that you were a judge. The Justice Keepers wore white piping. They were the police, the soldiers, and the executioners. Only Council elders, the eight members of the inner circle, were permitted to wear the solid red robes. These had been adopted from the distant past, from a church or order that no longer existed.

After sitting down, her father frowned at the toast and glanced at Phoebe, but didn't say anything. She pretended not to see his look, and smiled to herself. Neither mentioned the previous night's drama. This was one of the things Phoebe really loved about her dad—he respected her feelings and her privacy, even though the privacy of his own thoughts was under constant threat. But she

always did her best to stay out of his mind, and had never, ever, probed his deeper, more painful memories.

After her father left for work, Phoebe cleaned up the mess and then got ready for school. She brushed out her dark hair, working to constrain its disorder into a simple loose braid. It really needed to be cut, but she hated doing it and, somehow, always found one reason or another to procrastinate.

The girl in the bathroom mirror was shaking her head at what she saw this morning. The long black hair and gray eyes were familiar enough, but Phoebe was still getting used to the new school uniform. It was mandatory, and reflected the classic Council fashion elements: dark, shapeless, and uncomfortable. But its uniformity helped her to blend in better. Stepping out of the bathroom, she put on the Council-approved shoes, grabbed the lunch she'd made last night, picked up her books from the table near the fireplace, and left for school.

"At least it's Friday," Phoebe sighed as she closed the door.

CHAPTER 3

The Steel Tower

THE TOWN OF NEW BRIGHT SEA HARBOR rests on a shelf of land created over millions of years. One by one, mountain-sized slabs of rock had broken off from vertical slopes and tumbled into what was once a much larger harbor. These fallen cliffs formed the valley's foundation. Over time, the Scythe River carved a path back through the mountains from the west, and its regular flooding had covered the bare rock with soil.

The Ring Mountains had been created long before. They stood like ripples in the earth's crust, as though some enormous object had been thrown down into the sea, causing the land to liquefy, buckle, and flow, creating waves of rock that had frozen in place. But as soon as they formed, the mountains began to tilt, splinter, and fall into the ocean. Peaks closest to the town were tallest. Subsequent rings were farther from the epicenter and gradually lost height until they blended with the central plains, farther west. Valleys formed between the concentric heights and collected soil over the millennia, nurturing trees and creating rich farmland.



Phoebe walked toward school on the west side of the street, the sunny side for now. The air was cooler than it had been for days, but there was no breeze between the buildings. The sun felt warm on her face. Later today, the air would grow hot and sticky. She

paused a moment to look back toward the hills she'd climbed in her dream. Tree-covered slopes rose up sharply just north of town giving way to fractured bare rock about two thirds of the way up.

The hills where she'd been last night were farther east, an extension of the large mountain directly to the north. It was a part of the semicircle of mountains that hedged the town against the sea. The mountain's extension stabbed out into the ocean, creating a peninsula that formed the north side of the harbor. As she climbed, Phoebe had run back and forth along its slopes, and then out toward the cliffs overlooking the sea.

Directly north of town stood the highest point of that same mountain. She could make out the tall metal structure that rose from its peak and gleamed in the morning sun. Phoebe had often stared at the tower, thinking about the mother she never knew.

Becky had been a member of the Order, the organization that built the tower, and other towers like it. Most had been removed or destroyed by the Council, as a part of their effort to erase all trace of the Order's existence, but this one had frustrated them. Years before, it had served as a communications link to other parts of the Land. The Order had lifted the entire structure whole, and planted it deep into the rocky peak. They'd used technologies that the Council never possessed. But the Order destroyed their more advanced tools and machines as they fled the Purge, leaving only older technologies from before the war. This lone monument to the past was a landmark she'd spotted last night. Phoebe sighed and then turned south, toward school.

Daniel and Phoebe Lambert lived in a two-bedroom apartment at the north end of town, along East Third Street—and three blocks east of Main Street. By tradition traffic on odd-numbered streets flowed one-way, north. A number of private carts passed by as she was walking south, toward the town's center. The sound of hooves on stone pavement was somehow reassuring. These carts were mostly single-horse affairs, often used by well-to-do citizens, but the ones going by were making deliveries. Street sweepers were already busy collecting manure left by the horses, moving quickly before it had a chance to mature in the afternoon heat. But it was

the smell of fresh bread that filled the neighborhood now. The sound and feel of the town waking up were helping to put last night's dream behind her.

As she reached the second corner below her building, the seven-thirty trolley made its turn from Fourth Street, to head over to Second and turn south again. A team of horses strained against the streetcar's weight and its metal wheels, rolling on iron rails, made a thumping sound every time they hit a seam. The bell rang to announce that the trolley would stop at the corner, but Phoebe didn't hurry. She'd decided to walk to school today, preferring open space to being crammed into a trolley with everyone else.

Wading through people boarding, she turned west to make the one-block jog over to Second Street. The town was wrapped around the curve of the harbor's shoreline, as were most streets close to the water. But here, near the center of town, the streets lost most of their bend and she could see all the way downtown to the park.

It was the first of September and summer vacation had already faded to little more than a memory. Phoebe read somewhere that students in country schools didn't start classes until October; their hands were needed at home for the fall harvest. Here in the city, they didn't have a good excuse to delay classes. She complained to her father that he should have been a farmer so she could skip a month of school, too.

"You could always go with your grandfather on the September fishing run—it's the last of the season and I'm sure they'd understand," he offered, trying not to grin, but the look on Phoebe's face was too much, and he sprayed coffee all over the table. Her father chuckled every time he looked at her that night, remembering the expression of horror.

As Phoebe drew close to the school, other students were visible; she could see them up ahead, in groups of twos and threes—all part of the same sad march, and each one dressed in the same drab garb. She kept a good distance from them, not wanting to speak with anyone. It was easy enough to hear their thoughts—if she wanted. Most of the time Phoebe struggled to *not* hear their

endless chatter. She was far from perfect, but being able to silence the voices had been essential for survival.

The Land was a very dangerous place for Phoebe. People would notice her if she wasn't careful—if she made too many mistakes. They would think she was different or strange, and being different or strange in the Land could cost you your life. But Phoebe was used to it; she lived with the threat of death every day. Her biggest challenge had been blocking the continuous stream of images and feelings and fears and words—they never stopped. But she was much stronger now, stronger than the little girl who screamed in terror when surrounded by crowds. Last night's unwelcome connection had been a big setback, and one she couldn't explain.

Still, strength alone couldn't keep her safe, and it had never been a reliable defense. So Phoebe practiced the Discipline, a way of life that didn't depend on her being perfect all the time. The Discipline had been drummed into her day after day, year after year, until it was second nature. But it imposed severe restrictions. There were a lot of things Phoebe couldn't do that other people her age took for granted. Most of the Discipline could be summarized in just a few phrases: Go slow. Make sure. When in doubt, remain silent. But the most important, and heaviest to bear, was: Avoid other people as much as possible. The Discipline had kept her alive and out of the hands of the Inquisition for years, but she paid a heavy price.

A familiar mind was approaching. Phoebe felt the girl's presence long before hearing her footsteps, or her greeting.

"Morning, Phoebe." She turned, making sure she'd actually heard a voice before replying. The expectant look in Sarah's eyes meant that she was waiting for her to say something.

"Hey Sarah. You ready?" she asked quickly—questions kept other people talking and minimized other questions they might ask.

"I think so," Sarah replied. "My father...*helped* me." Phoebe didn't see, but felt Sarah's eyes roll. "The interrogation lasted more than two hours! How 'bout you? Ready?" She didn't turn to look at the girl this time, but nodded slightly, which she might have done anyway, even if she was just thinking.

In school, Phoebe was ‘the quiet, slow girl’. People made jokes about her, but she pretended, for her father’s sake, that she didn’t mind anymore. He’d held her many times while she cried about the names they called her that first year.

“Sorry, Princess,” he’d say. “I wish there was something else we could do.” But the ridicule was a small price to pay to avoid being killed.

Sarah was pretty and thin, although in the shapeless robes it was hard to tell. Her hair was somewhere between brown and red—auburn. Sometimes Phoebe wished her eyes were like Sarah’s, an ultra-clear blue that reminded her of shallow water over the sandbars in the harbor. But it wasn’t her eyes, or her looks, that Phoebe really envied—Sarah was normal.

They walked side by side the rest of the way to school. Sarah prattled about the other girls in class. Phoebe listened, nodding now and then to keep Sarah talking. She’d tell herself that she didn’t care what the others were up to—who was with which boy, or if there was a get-together this weekend. None of that would ever apply to her anyway. It had never bothered her much before, but lately she’d been feeling more and more lonely—another fact she tried to hide for her father’s sake.

CHAPTER 4

Classes

THEY REACHED THE SCHOOL'S GATES at first bell. Everyone hurried to pass through the narrow portal, and they pressed in around her. It was times like this that Phoebe felt the most vulnerable and likely to make a mistake, so she looked down and clamped her mouth shut. It was an unnecessary measure. The others had long since been ignoring her. It made her feel almost invisible, but a little safer, too. They made it to the church before last bell, and Mistress Judith shot Sarah and her a warning glance for cutting it so closely.



The school was originally built as a monastery, centuries before the war. It had once been famous for its extensive library and for the music skills of its monks, but over time the role of the church in people's lives declined, and with this loss the ranks of monks also dwindled. Eventually, the bishops felt that they could no longer justify the expense of the monastery's maintenance and closed it down. An industrialist bought the property just a few years before the war and donated it to the town, to be used as a library and fine arts center. In the aftermath of war it was converted into a high school, jointly staffed by the Council and the Order. Following the Purge, the Council severely restricted the school's curriculum, removing many of its books and other teaching materials, especially

those related to the sciences or engineering. It remained a school, but with these changes the campus began to echo the feel of a monastery again.

The school had offered morning services since it was founded. A renaissance of faith and trust in the church for its leadership in the aftermath of the war increased attendance. But as the Council grew more authoritarian in its approach, attendance became mandatory. Now there were severe penalties for students who failed to participate.

The Council maintained separate schools and churches for each of its three founding faiths: Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. People of similar belief tended to collect into separate enclaves. It was not unusual to find a town that was predominantly populated by people of one religion—the population in Southport, for example, was mostly Muslim, while a village just to its north was overwhelmingly Jewish. New Bright Sea Harbor was primarily a Christian city, and Phoebe's school was one of three Christian high schools in town.



Throughout morning prayers, Phoebe's mind kept drifting back to the dream, and to the overwhelming surge of pain during its final moments. She wondered about the woman with whom she'd shared the experience—a consciousness that Phoebe had not directly touched before, still there was something vaguely familiar about her feel. These thoughts distracted her throughout the service. A short night with little sleep added to her exhaustion making it difficult to stay awake.

The students moved to their first class once the service ended. Phoebe and Sarah were assigned to Mistress Judith's room for the twice-daily Council announcements. She tried to listen, but soon found herself back on the cliffs.

The stream of imagery and sensations was as sharp and detailed as it had been last night. Her vision kept jumping from place to

place. Once again, Phoebe could see the sky glowing red behind a man's hooded face as he reached the shelf, and she could feel the intense anger of the mob. It was all so clear to her. A humid breeze from the sea stirred her hair, and brought the odor of rotting fish. The ache in her legs and palms had returned, too, along with wetness, as blood trickled from cuts on her knees. Her memory jumped in time again, to the point where she was turning away from the ocean to see the torches making their way up the hill. That strange cold sensation began to form in her stomach, as if triggered by the memory....

"...Miss Lambert. Phoebe!" Judith's voice was angry, urgent—it brought Phoebe back to the present, breaking the spell.

"Huh?" Phoebe muttered in a voice that was brittle and frail. But even in her confused state of mind, she was able to probe what Judith was seeing. The teacher was standing directly over her, glaring—a mixture of anger and worry. Phoebe had been very close to losing control, right in front of everyone. *Crap, what's the matter with me?*

"Are you with us, or sleeping?"

From Judith's mind, Phoebe saw that the teacher had been thinking to speak with the headmistress about her, but—somehow—couldn't bring herself to add to Phoebe's problems. Judith was especially nervous today. There was a Council observer in class and she couldn't show tolerance for misbehavior.

"Sorry," Phoebe said wiping a hand across her face, still unable to meet Judith's eyes.

"I'll see you in detention," Judith snapped, before returning to the announcements. Phoebe acknowledged the punishment with a stiff nod, and quietly sighed. Judith went on with the day's announcements.



Phoebe's first regular subject was art. It was the only class that always went by too quickly. She thought of time as an enemy, one

who conspired to slow down when she was stuck in classes she hated, but rushed by when she was having fun. Art had always been therapy for Phoebe, and drawing a way to explore and disarm the more terrifying things she'd been through. Somehow, drawing reduced the power fear had over her.

She worked on two drawings today—things she'd seen that morning. She would put off the images from last night's dream for later, when she could be alone. This was the agreement made with her father after that time she'd made a big mistake in school.



When Phoebe was a little girl, her mind was completely defenseless, and her consciousness would wander outward from her body as she slept. People who broadcast strong emotions attracted her, like a moth drawn to the brightest lights. Strong feelings of fear, pain, and sometimes love could lure her in, and she'd be trapped inside of someone, sharing his or her life, a part of them. An incident happened one night when she was almost nine years old; the event had terrified and revolted her. She'd been so embarrassed by what happened that she even hid it from her father.

Phoebe had recently been forced to attend regular school with other children. She understood what was happening to her during the telepathic connection—it wasn't her first exposure to that kind of thing, but she'd been unprepared for the level of violence and pain that accompanied it, and how it had made her feel. The next day, any little reminder brought tears, and she'd just experienced a flashback before art class.

Still shaking as she sat down, Phoebe felt compelled to draw what she'd been through right away. She began a sketch of one of the more disturbing parts of the experience. She'd been looking through an older woman's eyes, and feeling everything the woman felt—they'd both struggled to escape, but couldn't move. Phoebe believed that if only she could draw what the man was doing to her, it would help a little bit—even if she couldn't see his face clearly.

The woman knew who the man was, but wouldn't look directly at him, as if avoiding his eyes would help. She lay helpless, bleeding, and stunned from the many blows she'd already sustained just before he started to rape them.

Phoebe drew quickly, adding detail, highlights, and shadows—almost without thinking. Everything was so clear now. She had to keep going, to exorcise the experience from her mind. A teacher was walking around the classroom and paused to look over her shoulder, wondering what the girl was working on so frantically. She turned pale and her hand latched onto Phoebe's shoulder so tightly that it hurt, but the girl kept on drawing, unable to stop now. Finally, the teacher snatched the paper from the table and dragged Phoebe by one arm, toward the headmistress's office. It was too soon! She needed to finish, and kept screaming: "No! Not yet!" Her cries echoed in the hallway, and the despair in her voice frightened the other children.

The detail of the drawing was exceptional—near photographic quality—but the violent and sexually explicit image shocked the teachers. It was especially unnerving having come from such a young girl. The Keepers brought her father from his office after they'd been summoned to investigate. Daniel couldn't explain why or how his daughter could have drawn such a thing. The man's face in the image was just a blur and the Keepers assumed it must have been him.

Phoebe quickly realized her mistake. She'd drawn from fear and a sense of violation. It occurred to her, too late, that whatever she drew in school could never be private—so she told a lie. Phoebe told them that she'd found a photograph that looked just like that lying in the street on her way home the previous day. She was taken to the hospital and forced to submit to an uncomfortable and embarrassing medical examination. There, different people kept coming into the room and looking at her with pity in their eyes—she hated it. Afterward, she showed the Keepers exactly where she'd seen the picture.

It was a place she'd noticed trash being dumped in the past, a little out of the way from her path home, but not unreasonably so.

The photograph was not there, of course, but after that day the site was always kept clean. A sign warned people against leaving trash there. Eventually, the Keepers let her go home with her dad.

That night, her father spoke with her about the kinds of things she should and shouldn't draw at school, explaining that other girls couldn't see things the way she did, that her visions frightened people. Then he tried to engage her about what happened to her.

"Why didn't you tell me about this? You always talk to me about things that bother you." But she was still upset from the day's ordeal and didn't want to talk about it. She wouldn't look him in the eye, and kept staring down at the table, gripping her small hands into tight fists. He noticed she was drawing blood.

"Not all the time," Phoebe said in a whisper he could barely hear. She stood in front of him as tears streamed down her face

Phoebe knew that her dad never fully appreciated how intense the connections were—that they weren't just visions, but experiences she lived through. It was a hard thing to explain; how do you describe the sky to someone who's never seen light?

"It's all right, kiddo," he said, gently bumping and resting his forehead against hers.

There were a lot of incidents like this that she wasn't able to share, not even with her father, but she'd found a way to cope. He'd see her working on a drawing, so dark and disturbing that he had to leave the room. From that day on, she made sure these images stayed at home. They hung on the walls of her bedroom and greeted her every morning.



Phoebe wasn't considered slow in art class, and her silence was accepted. Instead, people thought of her strange behavior as a kind of artistic quirkiness. Although she restricted her work to inconsequential subjects, its quality was breathtaking. Her teacher, Grace, often praised her drawings and paintings, and several examples of her work hung in the Council's offices. Phoebe didn't

seek the added exposure, but since it made Grace happy, and her own life in school easier, she tolerated the visibility in exchange for a little peace.

She sat at the table with Sarah. Her friend had never been very interested in art and was easily distracted. Lately, she'd been obsessing over one of the boys in their class, Caleb. Sarah wasn't the only girl who found him interesting. A number of the others seemed to find one reason or another to wander by his table, or to accidentally bump into him in the hallway. Phoebe suspected that Caleb might be interested in Sarah, too. He visited with her now and then, but Phoebe didn't care much for his type—Caleb was from a Council family.

Certain families had strong connections with the authorities. Following the Purge, many of these had gained a tangible benefit from the alliance. Their wealth had increased significantly over the intervening years. Phoebe was frequently forced to interact with children from Council families. Whenever the Curia of Law—the Council office responsible for the courts—had their little get-togethers, her father and she went. Technically, they were invited, but attendance wasn't actually voluntary. She also met Council kids at church, which was equally mandatory. Most seemed rather superficial and arrogant, not the kind of people she wanted to be around.

To be fair, Phoebe had never seen Caleb behave like a jerk, and had never directly probed his mind. She didn't normally do that sort of thing. Deliberately intruding on a person's mind didn't feel right, and staying out of their heads was a part of the Discipline—it was safer that way. Besides, Phoebe liked to learn about people the ordinary way; it made her feel a little less like a freak and more like a normal person.

She watched Caleb leaning on their table from the corner of her eye. He was asking Sarah about the best way to mix a shade of yellow for a sunrise—not that Sarah would know. But Phoebe wasn't really focused on what he was saying as much as how he was treating her. She could see what the other girls liked about him; he *seemed* nice enough. Phoebe peeked at him just as Caleb looked

her way. She barely had time to look down again, pretending to be engrossed in a drawing, but she thought he'd been smiling at her.

Once he'd gone back to his own table, Sarah reached over to lift Phoebe's drawing to reveal what she'd been hiding underneath it. The picture of a trolley was just camouflage for what she'd wanted to draw: a fully rendered image of Judith's hostile face from that morning. The eyes were intense, with just a touch of fear, and they glared out of the picture. But Phoebe had also included a hint of softness behind the angry look. She knew Judith had protected her—still, the angry look had stuck in her mind.

"That's a great drawing! Are you going to show it to Judith?" Sarah asked, snickering. Phoebe paused for a long time, looking between Sarah and the drawing several times before answering.

"I don't think so." The blank expression on her face was too much. Sarah couldn't help laughing, and when she snorted, Phoebe started to laugh too. They both lost control for a while, only stopping to gasp for breath. Grace started walking toward them, frowning. Phoebe quickly hid Judith's picture under the sketch of the trolley, realizing how reckless she was being. Still, it was hard not to chuckle at Sarah's red face a few more times. Other students in the class looked at Phoebe with confused expressions. Most had never heard her laugh before.

Their next class was history—there was a test today. The exam was on the origins of the Council's formation. Phoebe made sure to miss just enough questions to maintain her reputation for mediocrity. She wanted to be considered an average student, even a little slow—but not too slow.

It was imperative that she stay in 'regular' school; Phoebe would receive far too much attention in the 'special' school for slow learners, and it would be much harder to hide her strangeness. The opposite was true as well. Top students might well wind up in an advanced program where—once again—there was a lot of individual attention. Blend in. Don't stand out. All part of the Discipline.

CHAPTER 5

Lunch With Sarah

MORNING CLASSES FINALLY ENDED. THE day had begun with a shaky start, but Phoebe had recovered well and was quietly proud that she'd made it through the morning without accidentally overhearing anyone's thoughts. Other than the strange connection with the woman in the dream, Phoebe felt she'd been doing pretty well at suppressing unwanted intrusions. It hadn't always been that way.

Blocking out thoughts had never been easy. As a young child she had no idea how to do it at all. She may as well have tried to stop her own heart at will—how would you even begin to do that? The first glimmer of an idea had come by accident when she tried to draw. The concentration needed to get a picture just right seemed to numb her senses a little—it was a start.

She tried to copy that same degree of mental focus during everyday situations and it worked—a little. But she found herself tripping over objects and missing things when people spoke with her. Plus, it wasn't possible to maintain that same level of concentration all the time. Even after she'd finally come up with a crude but usable technique, based on the same principle, the effort of holding multiple people out at the same time consumed more and more of her attention. Phoebe told her father that it was like trying to balance a tall stack of books in each hand and another on top of her head while trying to do everything else. When she was very young, it seemed impossible. And the greater the number of people she had to block, the harder it was to do.

In the Land, every child is required by law to attend a Council school. Her father managed to get her a delay of almost three years. He told the authorities that Phoebe was slow and needed more time at home to grasp the basic skills that other children took for granted. They didn't want to listen, but he pulled in favors through his connections at court and secured the delay. Still, the Curia of Truth, the office responsible for the education of the young—and for the Inquisition—made it clear that 'more time' didn't mean an indefinite time. They demanded a plan and regular progress reports. A representative from their office even visited their home every six weeks or so, and at the end of each visit, he'd remind them that there were special schools for the very slow. They were in a race against time; it forced Phoebe's father to push her very hard, much harder than he wanted.

He and Phoebe used the extra time to discover and develop different techniques to control, or at least numb, her senses. It was a slow, painful process, especially at first. Her father had no idea about where to begin and felt helpless. The tiny bit he'd gleaned from conversations with Phoebe's mother weren't of much use. Back then the subject hadn't seemed important since it was assumed that Becky would be there for her. Worse, nothing could have prepared him for the agony Phoebe went through. He often felt that they were wasting time, but there weren't a lot of alternatives available.

Phoebe first began sensing other people's feelings when she was just two years old; deeper connections started just a few months later. Her father tried isolating her from people as much as possible, but her rapidly growing sensitivity soon made that impossible. Instead, he began exposing her to others in controlled ways, hoping that her mind would find a way to cope on its own. He worked relentlessly every day, letting her gradually adapt to thoughts from different people. He started with his own mind first, but soon began inviting one or another of their neighbors to their home for short visits. It was surprising to see how well Phoebe did—she was able to function even when two or three people were present. But he soon learned it was a false progress.

Phoebe had always been tough, and able to tolerate a lot of pressure. She wanted to make him happy. She knew what he wanted to see. But then he took her to the crowded market near the center of town, and it was a much different story. She bore the pressure for as long as possible, but the prolonged assault from the voices and images, emotions and fears of so many people were too much. After a while, she closed her eyes and covered her ears, hoping that would help, but before long she was screaming.

“What’s it like, Princess?” he asked after they’d returned home that first day.

“Daddy. It’s like the whole world is inside of me. Everyone is there. It hurts and ...and there are scary things, too.”

“Scary?”

“Please don’t make me remember!” Her thoughts and awareness had returned to the market. She was reliving something that terrified her, and was unable to break free. Phoebe rubbed her eyes and then started digging into the skin on her face. Her father grabbed ahold of her hands to stop her.

“Why do you do that, why do you hurt yourself?” he demanded.

“I don’t know,” Phoebe said closing her eyes tightly and crying. “Just to make it stop.”

They worked hard, but it was almost a year before she could be around large groups of people for more than a few minutes at a time. The immersion test at the market was the best tool her father had to measure Phoebe’s progress. She could fool him sometimes, pretending to be doing better than she really was, but large crowds were his test of truth.

Just before her ninth birthday, the inspector from the Curia of Truth let them know that Phoebe’s extra time at home was coming to an end. By then, her father had gained confidence that she could be among crowds without becoming catatonic. She could do better, but they’d run out of time. The authorities demanded that she attend regular school within one week, or enroll in a special program—one where students stayed overnight during the week. To help her survive, her father began compiling a set of rules to guide her, which he called the Discipline.



Phoebe headed to lunch carrying a book and the sandwich she'd made the night before. The school's main building had been constructed around a central courtyard, which served as a lunch area during good weather. A portico ran along three sides of the open quadrangle and provided cover when it rained. Phoebe ate alone, but liked to be in the open area, too. Her favorite spot was in the northwest corner of the courtyard. Lonely and exposed to the sun, Phoebe shared the location with what she thought of as a steadfast, silent friend—an exposed fragment of a large underground boulder. The rock had been so deeply rooted that the builders chose to incorporate it as part of the monastery's foundation rather than digging it out. Phoebe normally perched on 'her rock' with a sandwich and a book, and was headed there when Sarah intercepted her.

"Phoebe, would you sit with me today?" Sarah spoke quickly, her eyes darting nervously toward the east door. She pointed toward a place at the table that ran along the north portico.

Why? Phoebe thought unhappily. Sarah knew that she didn't like big groups of people, and usually left her alone for lunch, but something was different today. Sarah oozed anxiety, biting her lip and almost bouncing with impatience as she waited for an answer. Sitting with Sarah would mean having to interact with a lot of people at the same time. The confusion might cause her to make a mistake. But Sarah was the closest thing Phoebe had to a friend. "Alright," she agreed, sighing.

"Don't listen to everything I say today, okay?" Sarah advised, as she hurried them both along. Phoebe frowned, but nodded, trying to steel herself for the coming hour.

They took a place about three fourths of the way down the table, near its east end. People were still trickling into the courtyard and gradually filling the tables. Phoebe looked down as the others took seats nearby, trying not to make eye contact with anyone. A few girls looked at her strangely, their eyebrows were raised in surprise.

One girl stood on the other side of her table, frowning; Phoebe was in the seat she usually used.

Sarah had chosen their spots with care, near a group of boys who always sat near the end. One by one, their minds occupied the empty spaces to Phoebe's right, and on the other side of Sarah. Boys had a different mental feel than girls and Phoebe usually avoided them.

She had come to accept that she'd always be alone, unable to date, or even to let herself fantasize about it. It was better that way, less painful, and far easier if she just pretended that those kinds of relationships didn't apply to her. Phoebe knew what love meant through other people. Not all of her experiences had been like that horrible rape incident. She'd lived numerous lives through surrogates already—experienced love and loss, passion and companionship, everything that men and women go through. But she couldn't allow false hope for herself—love was for other people, not her.

Who the hell wants to be with a freak? she thought bitterly. Sarah interrupted her thoughts, speaking more loudly than necessary, and directing a question at Phoebe.

"I maxed-out the test, even the essay. How'd you do, Pheeb?"

"I...uh...I did okay." She was taken aback by the new nickname, but didn't complain. Sarah wasn't acting like...Sarah, exactly. Phoebe listened to her hash out every detail and nuance of the test before moving on to the other things that had happened that morning. When she started to describe the incident with Judith, Sarah noticed her flinch and stopped.

As she'd been talking, Sarah had also been stealing glances at someone near the end of the table, across from them and to the right. Phoebe recognized the boy's feel right away. It was Caleb, the boy from art class. *I should have known.* She glanced his way quickly, making a show of turning in her seat as if to be more comfortable. They locked eyes for a moment—his were a deep blue. The moment passed so quickly that she didn't have time to feel self-conscious, but her heart was beating faster. *Sarah really likes him,* she reminded herself. *Anyway, it's impossible.*

By the time she realized that Caleb was the boy Sarah was so nervous about, her friend had launched into her family's plans for winter break. Phoebe brought a hand up, releasing her braid as she masked a second surreptitious glance his way. Caleb was talking to someone next to him. Meanwhile Sarah, still agitated, was babbling even more than usual. Phoebe peeked in Caleb's direction a third time, and again their eyes met before she could look away.

She took a deep breath and tried to feign interest in what Sarah was saying, but she couldn't help thinking about the boy. She wondered what Caleb thought about Sarah—and if he was listening to her. Movement from the corner of her eye made her think that he had looked in their direction again.

Would it be so bad if I connected to him? she wondered. *Just a little?* Phoebe debated the matter for several more moments, and made a snap decision.

She concentrated on narrowing her senses in his direction and opened her mind a tiny bit, ever so slightly and for just a fraction of a second. It was like taking a drink from a fire hydrant; she might hope for a small sip but had to take whatever came through. A stream of thoughts and feelings flashed through her mind—including how hard Caleb was struggling to not look at her. Phoebe's eyes widened, and she looked at him again, trying not to stare.

She'd blocked many of his thoughts, but had a sense that he was focused on her. Was it possible that he'd seen her make a mistake? Worried and confused, she decided to connect with him again.

Phoebe tensed her body in anticipation, ready to stop the flow if it became too much, and touched Caleb's mind—this time for a whole second. Her face burned and she slammed the door on the connection, self-consciously slouching down beside Sarah. *Idiot*, she thought, knowing what these feelings could do to her.

Phoebe had seen fantasies like his play out before, but they had always been about someone else—and always sensed through another person. No one had felt that way about her, and she was lost, unsure of what to do or think, so she put her head down. Her

long hair was free now and formed a curtain, covering her face. She wanted to leave, and maybe find a classroom where she could hide.

“What’s wrong, Phoebe?” Sarah wanted to know.

“Nothing, I don’t feel well.” She could see Caleb looking at her now; his eyes unsuccessfully tried to peer through her hair.

Phoebe kept her face hidden the rest of the period, and put her elbows on the table. Her heart was beating fast again—part of her desperately wanted something that could never happen. Whatever may have remained of her appetite vanished as that reality sank back in. *No one will ever want to be with me*, she thought, biting her lip hard. She wanted to cry, but didn’t of course—part of the Discipline.