

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—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, okay?" 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 seventhy 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.