

ROOK
ALLIE's WAR: BOOK ONE

~ *SAMPLE PAGES* ~

by
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Dedicated to Maya, Samantha, Naomi, Keeley and Allie and all of the other lights that came to
build us a better world.

“The meaning of events is the supreme meaning, that is not in events, and not in the soul, but is the God standing between events and the soul, the mediator of life, the way, the bridge and the going across.”

~ Carl Jung, *The Red Book, Liber Novus*

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Prologue

“Put it down!” A voice yelled. “On the ground! Right now!”

I blinked in confusion, staring at the bottle in my hand. The jagged end of broken glass looked like something out of a cartoon, or an old gangster movie.

Blood ran down the inside of my arm, not all of it mine. My muscles locked, bunched up with adrenaline.

Someone must have called the police. The young guy in front of me didn't have his gun out, but his hand held the holster menacingly, and his uniform brought a flush of panic, starting somewhere in my lower belly.

The other fire that had burned there—irrationally bright only seconds before—abruptly sobered. Without taking so much as a breath, I dropped the broken bottle, holding up my hands in a gesture of surrender.

I've never been a tough chick. I'd never done anything remotely like this before...but I knew enough to know that my arms covered in tattoos and my punky, bleached-calico hair weren't winning me any points with the men in blue. I looked around at the swath of cleared space around the bar.

“Hands up!” the cop yelled.

“They're up!” I said.

He walked up, grabbing one of my wrists. He spun me around so I faced the bar. I felt cool metal hit my wrist as my chest thudded into the lacquered wood.

“You have any weapons?” the young policeman asked. He cuffed me, then patted me down. “Don't fucking move!” he yelled, when I turned to look at him.

“No weapons!” I was shouting I realized, scared out of my wits.

All the while, my mind churned useless facts. People got shot doing stupid shit like this. More cops got shot in domestic disputes than during any other kind of call, which likely explained why the young cop's hands shook as he cuffed me.

My eyes swept the oddly bright space until they lit on the person who had inspired all this

drama, and that flame of irrational feeling ripped once more through my chest cavity, making it difficult to breathe, to think straight.

Jaden, my now ex-boyfriend, stood like a store mannequin, his eyes as wide as saucers in a pale face. He gripped the upper arm of his date, a voluptuous girl in a red vinyl dress, as if to steady himself. I looked at her, and the rage came back, intense enough to scare me. Breathing harder, I leaned against the wood, closing my eyes, trying to crush my own chest.

Feeling ripped through my center, animal-like—almost painful.

In my defense, I'd only heard about them that night, and the fact that their affair started three months earlier, while I'd been blissfully happy, thinking Jaden and I were mutually in love. According to his bass player, she'd started hanging out with them after shows, eventually winning him over with flattery, pouty lips and enormous tits.

She was babbling something to him and her friends now, half-hysterical, her arm bleeding profusely from where I'd slashed at her with the bottle, her red-painted lips another dark wound on her face.

I stared at them both, thinking, this can't be real. It can't be. This isn't me.

But it was.

“Fuck.” Revik clicked out of the Barrier, jaw clenched.

Briefly, he scanned options. Too many to push. She'd done it in public...in a bar, no less. He was too far away. And now the authorities were involved.

He should have been there in person.

But it was too late for that, too.

Rising abruptly to his feet, he walked to the dresser, reaching for the headset he'd left on the scratched wood under a mirror worn to metal around the edges. He barely glanced around at the dingy hotel room as he fit the organic around his ear, summoning a number with his mind.

“Yeah,” he said, to the person who picked up. “Tell him it's done. We start tomorrow.”

Without waiting for a reaction, he hung up.

Chapter One: Allie

My grandmother warned me once that nothing in life is ever secure. No matter how stable, boring or predictable the different components may seem, no matter how safe they seem...it was all, essentially, an illusion.

The change may not even happen all at once, but everything that you think you know about your life, even about yourself, can be gone in a single minute...hour, day, week. All you can do is try to pull the pieces together afterwards, and try to remember who you are, underneath it all.

Looking back on the week previous, I honestly couldn't decide how I'd managed to screw things up so badly in mine...and in seemingly so short a time.

My mother called me a "late bloomer." By that, I'm pretty sure she meant I act like a kid a lot of the time still, even though I'm only a few years shy of thirty. Granted, I hadn't fully embraced the whole get a normal job, get married and settle down thing, not like I hadn't tried, at least in my own way.

And okay, being a waitress still, at twenty-eight years old, wasn't the most ego-boosting thing to share with relatives or the dentist when I visited. Not like I did either all that often. But I lived in San Francisco, and you can kind of get away with that there, if you package it right.

Up until a few weeks ago, I even had a boyfriend, of almost six years.

I'd been pretty sure me and Jaden would get married, have kids, do the whole domestic thing, albeit with a bohemian-flavor maybe. But that's where my grandmother's warning...or curse...seemed to trip me up again. Jaden and I had been growing apart, sure. I'd seen it. I guess I hadn't wanted to see it, so when I found out I'd been replaced by the newer, sluttier model, I didn't take it very well.

In fact, I kind of went nuts I guess.

Now I had a tracker on me. One of those GPS numbers I had to wear on my wrist, and occasionally explain to customers at the diner where I worked...which usually resulted in higher tips, funnily enough. According to the State of California, I wasn't going anywhere for awhile.

Which was too bad, really. After everything died down and I realized Jaden really wasn't

coming back, I wanted nothing more than to leave town...take a nice long sabbatical from San Francisco, from men, even from my well-meaning friends and my brother, Jon...who I adore, but who can be a real pain, too.

He's just so much more...*solid* than I am.

Probably a good thing, too. He's like a fourth degree black belt. He likely would have killed Jaden, if he had my issues.

Truthfully, though, I'd been protected most of my life by Jon, my grandmother, my father, even my mother, in her way. There's always been something a bit odd about me. None of us ever talked about it, really but it was there, kind of an unspoken understanding. I even got why no one ever wanted to come out and say anything about it.

It was because of the whole seer thing.

There's so much paranoia these days about anyone who's different. It's getting worse now, with more and more seers showing up in the States. San Francisco even, you see them here and there. All collared of course...all owned, or "sponsored," as they called it, at least officially. But even with all of the racial category tats, the GPS trackers and implants, the blood screens at airports, borders, banks and government buildings, people got nervous.

Most of my life, it was easy to think of seers as a distant thing, something that happened only in Asia. Or as a historical thing, that was only really an issue in World War I and World War II, but didn't have much relevance today.

My brother, despite his tendency to be a bit of a conspiracy nut, made a good point, though. No government would ever be able to resist tapping into that resource at some point. No business would either...not if they had the money and the means.

So why was it that most of the seers I saw were still prostitutes?

The truth was, I didn't know anyone who could honestly say they understood much about seers. Like anyone, they fascinated me. They scared me, too...I mean, I'd read all the stories. I grew up on boogeyman tales of Syrimne, the seer who led the one and only large-scale rebellion during World War I. He'd blown up power mains, oil tankers, tanks...pretty much anything that could ignite with a spark. He killed a lot of damned people.

He'd been telekinetic. That was *really* rare, apparently.

In fact, he was the only one I'd ever heard of.

Supposedly, though, seers were really peaceful before we happened upon them. They hung

out in the mountains, talked to the animals and communed with the trees. Before we started messing with them, they mostly lived as monks, farmers, artists, musicians, scholars. They had families.

But that was more than a hundred years ago now.

The new generation of seers wasn't like the one that came before. And while a lot of those older seers were still alive, since they lived a lot longer than us, a lot of them were dead, too.

The new generation was the one that scared people.

Maybe we were even right to be scared.

I tried not to fidget as I stared around the room.

I hoped I wouldn't be called last. That desk jockey I spoke to promised me he'd try to get me put at the top of the list, but I was pretty sure he'd just been angling for my number.

The last thing I needed was to lose my job, on top of everything else.

Just as I was starting to wonder if I should call my manager, Tom, and give him a head's up, the court clerk appeared in the narrow doorway on the other side of the low wall, wearing a portable monitor. He unfurled it from around his wrist and spread it out on the podium-like table in front of him, squinting a little before configuring it around our names.

He looked up at all of us a few minutes later, and squinted at us, too.

I wondered if he needed eye surgery, or if it was some kind of facial tic.

He motioned at me.

"Verify identification," he said, indicating the podium across from him.

I walked up, feeling suddenly like I should have dressed better for this. I'd been told it was just a monthly check-in, to make sure I hadn't run off, or found some way to put my GPS tracker on my dog.

At his pointed gesture towards the microphone, I cleared my throat.

"Alyson May Taylor," I said.

"Place of residence?"

"2119 Fillmore Street, San Francisco."

"Race cat?"

I held up my arm, showing him the "H" tattoo on my inner arm.

"Speak into the microphone, please."

I cleared my throat again.

“Human,” I said.

“Birth parents?”

I hesitated. “Unknown.”

The man’s eyebrows went up, changing the shape of his thick face. The elongated skin pushed up the short bangs framing his square cheeks, confirming he’d had some kind of cosmetic surgery to tighten his skin. It struck me that he looked a bit like a cartoon pig.

“I’m adopted, sir,” I clarified.

“No registered birth family?” he said. He leaned closer, staring at me.

“No, sir. I was found.”

“Found.”

“Yes, sir. Under a bridge.” A little flustered, I amended, “...Overpass. Registered as a ward of the state, January 13, 1984. Status transferred August 19, 1984, birth parents unknown.” I hesitated again, feeling every eye in the room on me now. “My blood’s been verified. About a hundred times now, sir...”

The clerk continued to frown at me.

I glanced around at all the other house arrest criminals, like me, who sat in plastic chairs in the white, windowless room. Some of them were probably coming down off more deadly forms of domestic violence charges, statutory rape, petty larceny, drug dealing, assault, identity theft...God knew what else.

But I’m the freak, because of something I had no control over. Something that happened before I’d worn diapers.

“They weren’t able to track down birth parents?” the clerk persisted. “Through DNA records? Through medical records? Those were all international by then, weren’t they?”

“No, sir,” I said. “And yes, sir...they were.” When the clerk continued to stare at me, I felt my face flush a little. “Is this strictly relevant, sir?” I said. “I’m going to be late for work...”

“Place of employment?”

I felt my jaw tighten a little.

A big, biker-looking guy covered in tattoos winked at me, folding massive arms across his chest. The big guys always liked me for some reason. Maybe because I’m smallish for my age.

Then I saw the other guy. Starting a little when I saw his pale eyes on mine, I stared back at

him briefly, then forced my own eyes back to the front of the room. I took another breath, just as the clerk's voice sharpened.

"Place of employment?" he repeated.

"Lucky Cat," I said. "It's a diner on Divisadero."

"Other sources of income?"

"Freelance." At the clerk's quizzical look, I explained, "I'm an artist. I do tattoo designs for Fang's on Geary. Also Gorilla Joint, up on Haight..."

The clerk didn't seem to be listening though. His eyes had gone almost blank in the pause, like he was listening to a faraway tune.

I watched his face, fighting another flush of irritation. Was he just messing with me? Or did he have a VR implant?

He nodded then, marking something on the portable monitor.

At least he finally seemed to have gotten over his interest in my weird parentage. Peering down at my records, his eyes looked almost bored now. Or at the very least, preoccupied as he perused the relevant lines.

"Okay. Eight more months on your sentence," he said, motioning for me that I could leave the podium. "Same time next month, Taylor."

He crooked his finger at the biker in the chair next to mine.

"You, Daniels...front and center. Verify identification."

I gathered up my shoulder bag and my jacket, still feeling stares on me from some of the other people in the room. The one I felt the most was the hardest to ignore. I glanced at him again, even as I shouldered on my jacket, tugging my hair out of the collar as I turned.

That time, he didn't appear to be looking at me. His pale, lamp-like eyes stared straight ahead. He folded his arms, sitting almost too still in the plastic chair. His long form sprawled, but his legs made perfect right angles where his feet planted on the white, linoleum floor.

I had trouble taking my eyes off him.

I knew I shouldn't be staring. The guy had been following me for weeks.

Really, I should have reported him. Jon certainly thought so.

But somehow, I couldn't bring myself to want to.

I wasn't afraid of him, although I wondered about that sometimes, too.

In the dream, it's always the same.

Naked on the dirty sidewalk, I squall. Ants crawl on my face, on a different version of my arms and legs, still pudgy with baby fat and scraped raw by asphalt.

I scream louder, waving clenched pink fists. I can't get them off.

I feel big though somehow, in those dreams...a giant flame of light lost inside a useless body with unformed limbs. Above me, a river of cement eclipses my view of the sky. The clackety-clack of weight and wheels straining girders echos in my ears. Larger trucks cause silt to fall, and some of it lands on me, makes me sneeze and cough.

Around me, garbage lays in piles, rotting and damp. It smells bad, brings insects and birds. It brings dogs, raccoons, rats...humans, too.

I am terrified. Too terrified to be quiet. So I scream, echoing my fear against those cement girders, adding my sounds to the cars on metal, the off and on cacophony of horns and people, the cries of gulls fighting over fish bones and rats scuttling inside paper bags.

When the face appears, it shocks me into silence.

Gigantic, sweaty, red. I remember it, even details...well enough to draw it. Dark, bloodshot eyes and a coarse beard hang above jutting collarbones brown with dirt. Stains pattern his teeth. His breath smells of death. He wears a checked blue shirt and pushes a shopping cart that looks like a cage.

He's surprised to see me, too.

He licks his lips, and his eyes shine with hunger. Pictures fill my head, glimpses of twists in his emotions and wants.

I scream louder...

And suddenly, all I see is light.

Light everywhere; it reflects in the man's eyes. A small, raised, hairless face with two searchlight beams of jade emanating out of squinting pits. There is a folding sensation...and then he holds his ears, screaming, his grimed fingers tipped with red. He stumbles back, screaming his old man screams.

Grief rises in me, a feeling of familiarity.

Above us, the Pyramid blackens the sun. It begins to move, a mechanized toy in a scripted dance. At the top sits the man with no face...

...but another man looms between me and it.

Black hair frames an angular face. Colorless eyes focus on mine. I feel the silver light around him, too, like a scent almost, but a brighter light courses behind it, warm as a sun.

His light glows brighter, pulling at mine.

I am reaching for him, but he disappears like smoke...

...and I opened my eyes.

For a moment I had no idea where I was.

I looked around me for the man with the clear eyes, but time had started me up again, and I was some place else. I fought to focus, but my mind remained completely blank. I couldn't remember what I'd been doing, what had happened to me.

I couldn't remember where I'd been.

Then an arm curled around me, squeezing me to a body half-wrapped around where I lay.

I yelled out in terror, jerking away from his touch.

"Jesus!" Nick grabbed my wrist in alarm.

I met his gaze, blinking at him.

We were curled up together on a couch. To my right, a movie played on the flatscreen. My flatscreen. My couch. Looking around, I recognized more of my things, scattered around my apartment on Fillmore. Wooden puppets Cass brought back from Thailand for me. Candles on the old fireplace. Paintings I'd done, some finished, some half-finished. An illegal black and white picture of me and Jaden in New York I still hadn't taken down.

The flat screen television pulled my eyes. Music swelled from my buzzing speakers as a man in a mask held up a bloody knife on the screen.

I must have been asleep. But how the hell did I get here?

I frowned at the television.

Nick said, "What's wrong, Taylor?"

Most of my friends call me Allie, or Al, like my brother. Nick the bartender liked calling me by my last name. He'd always done that, long before we started sleeping together. But then, I was one of those people who everyone liked to give a nickname to for some reason.

"Sorry," I mumbled.

I gave another quick glance around the room. I think I half-expected the black-haired man to

jump out of a shadow, or from behind a door. When he didn't, I forced myself to relax.

"Sorry," I said again. "Bad dream."

He stroked my hair. "Aw. Sorry. I didn't know you were asleep."

I settled deeper against his body. I'm embarrassed to admit, once out of Nick's line of sight, I held my free hand to my face, looking for any hint of reflected light.

Of course there was none. I checked the GPS bracelet on my arm in rote. But I knew where I was. We were at my flat, on Fillmore.

What I didn't know was how in the hell I'd *gotten* there...or even when.

I looked back at the screen, watching the killer drag the girl off camera by one ankle. Even that wasn't weird, though. Nick had a slasher movie fetish; he'd been torturing me with B horror flicks for weeks. Forcing another exhale, I leaned back against him, blowing hair out of my face. He continued to caress my hair, then my neck.

Nick was all right. We weren't anything, really. But he was a nice guy.

I kept thinking it would come back to me, the longer I remained awake. I waited for memories to surface about the last however-many hours that had passed since I got out of the shower after work.

But they didn't.

I glanced down at my forearm below the GPS bracelet, where my state-mandated barcode lived in the form of a black-ink tattoo. Hesitating another heartbeat, I ripped off the last piece of bandage to look at the design I'd added around its solid lines. The leafy vine subtly obscured the harshness of the official tat, without actually touching it, of course. It was a felony to tamper with any of the lines the government gave me.

The "H" designation, for human, was still prominent, too. None of the colored lines touched any part of that. I wasn't stupid.

"Hey." Nick traced the vine with his finger. "I like that."

When I glanced up, he kissed me.

He deepened the kiss when I returned it, and I felt another shiver of that pain, almost as if it came from somewhere else. As if he felt it, too, Nick kissed me harder, pulling me tighter against his body, and the pain worsened. I felt another part of him responding as well, pressing against me from behind...

But I couldn't handle that, either.

I separated our bodies.

As I did, I felt a whisper of relief from somewhere.

For a moment, I questioned that, too...it hadn't felt quite like it came from me.

But that train of thought didn't want to stay. It wafted away from me like smoke.

I'd had to stand in line for hours to receive the barcode itself, from Seer Containment, or SCARB. I still remembered my grandmother complaining about humans being branded like farm animals. I even agreed with her, in principle.

Still, I'd queued up like everyone else the day after I turned eighteen. The only option was to stay with the implant I'd been given when I was adopted, and no way was I doing that. Only narcs and paranoids wanted the government to know where they were 24/7 for the rest of their lives.

"You okay?" Nick said, stroking my hair.

I nodded. "Yeah. Just a long week, you know?"

He kissed my cheek, then grabbed the comforter, pulling it around us both. I watched his wiry, tattooed arm recede under the blankets.

Sighing, I laid my cheek on his chest, shifting around until I got comfortable.

For a moment, I almost forgot he wasn't Jaden.

The sickness returned briefly...

Then it was gone.

Chapter Two: Summons

He waits for death. He counts the days, like a soldier counting backwards through a tour of duty...

Colors are sharp inside the Barrier, each tint a thousand beaded lines like tiny, sharp drips of paint. Those lines can be arranged by a highly structured mind into landscapes, mirrors of life teeming with presence...a bush holding one vibration, a bird another, a mountain or stretch of sky, another still.

With a less-skilled seer, one might see flaws, gaps, even blank spots where the seer's memories or ability to hold detail failed them. Or the land might simply feel off in some indefinable way—a taste absent from the air, a vibration that hums off-key, a sliver of shadow that falls in a place that should carry light.

Scanning the view of the Himalayas before him, Revik can find no such flaw here. As one who has spent time in the actual, physical mountains as a boy, visiting his aunt on the horse plains of Tibet, he feels himself eligible to judge.

He has not been to Asia for a very long time, however.

Members of his own kind treat him well enough when they happen upon one another in the newer parts of the world, but Revik knows that most are equally happy to see him go. His Aunt Tarsi tells him it is because his ghosts follow him.

Fix this, she sends to him, when they meet. Find a new wife...have babies. They will forget all of this nonsense. You will, too.

Revik smiles at this advice.

Despite her sight, she is old-fashioned, and while she means well, impractical. The old women of the clan would click their tongues to one another and shake their heads if they heard her. Most would think it cruel to tell him such a thing, given who he was...but Tarsi only laughs, pinching his cheek inside the Barrier with wind-worn fingers. She spends most of her time in snow caves, communing with the Ancestors.

Her added insight means she is allowed to be eccentric, even when it comes to consoling the family's black sheep...which is him.

But these are memories.

The being beside Revik now is more solemn than Tarsi. Like Tarsi, however, he provides solace.

He picks up on Revik's gloomy mood, touches his arm with a hand of light that here, inside his construct, feels like flesh and bone and paper-thin skin, finely wrinkled with age.

It is the details that show Vash's mastery: the slight discoloration of one fingernail, the odd gray hair among the brown ones sprouting on his forearms, the different-colored freckles. The scar from when Vash was a boy in China.

Revik even knows the story. Humans discovered he could read minds and branded him, back when seers and humans remained strangers to one another's worlds.

Things have not really changed all that much.

Seers still live unseen among humans, trying to pass. Only now when they are found, often as not, their powers are sold at auction, unless they can prove they belong to one of the Seven Clans, or that they already have a human "sponsor," or owner.

Only Rooks escape this kind of slavery. To do so, they must adopt a new form of servitude at the hands of other seers.

A bee circles them, pollinating mountain wildflowers, holding that precise vibration of Asian bee-ness Revik knows. Grass whispers down the hill, ending in a crystal blue lake that shows sparkles in different parts of a glacial ice surface. The sun moves in perfect time across the sky, stretching and shortening shadows.

Vash holds all of this together in his mind, although the place itself lives inside the Barrier. The Barrier itself is only a platform, a place of making...a place of morphing light and shifting dimensionalities. The Barrier holds everything because it is essentially nothing. Raw material to be shaped, a place of passage, but also a place of pure being.

Vash is a master of the Barrier, one of its adepts.

The bee alights on the old man's hand and Vash raises it higher, so that the bee is level with his dark eyes.

They are dying, brother.

Vash sends his words directly to Revik's mind. No trace of sadness lives there, only joy.

...Just as it is written.

The bee grows quiet on his hand. Tiny, webbed wings beat slower...slower still. They beat a final time. The bee lays in the gnarled hand, a small child fallen asleep.

Revik knows it is a construct bee, not a real one, but cannot stop the wave of sadness in his chest.

It is too soon, is all he says.

Warmth fills him. He realizes it is from the old man, too.

It is always too soon! Vash says, clasping his arm. *At the dawn of every Displacement, they say, "It is too soon!" We protested the same when our end approached...perhaps even here, in this beautiful place!*

The old man laughs. The sky and wind seem to laugh with him. Revik tries to smile but somehow only feels himself more of an outsider, more a ghost.

It is up to you now, brother, Vash says. *It is time. You must feel it.*

Revik frowns; he cannot help it.

I meant it is too soon for me, he says. *I am not ready. Send another for the rest. I have laid the groundwork...you do not need me for this.*

Vash smiles, but doesn't speak to the lie.

You are our best infiltrator, brother Revik. His smile widens. *It is time to put your talents to good cause.*

Am I to kill her then? Revik says bitterly.

You always knew that as a possibility, my son.

Revik nods, gazing over the snow-covered peak of a distance. Mount Kalaish stares back at him, formidable even here.

Report to me when it is done. Vash smiles again, patting Revik's arm.

He bows to him formally then, using a hand-gesture of respect, although it is not necessary, or even appropriate with him.

Revik appreciates the gesture, and the intention behind it, but he also knows what it means.

Their meeting is at an end.

Bowing his head in return, Revik returns the gesture.

As he does, he changes the frequency of his light, experiencing the same regret he always does upon leaving Vash's world. Around him, the vision of his childhood mountains dissipates.

Despite his love of this place, Revik could not create them so beautifully himself.

The Himalayas of his youth will always exist here; Vash will recreate them as a courtesy every time Revik is called to private audience, which is never as often as he would accept them.

The new frequency permeates his light.

The mountains and fields melt and Vash with them, and behind it all lies the Barrier proper. In this, its natural state, the Barrier is a deep black sky, endless in its dimensions, cold and yet alive. The forever night churns in all directions, housing clouds for as far as the eye can see...farther. Clouds chiseled in white and black stand silent in a steep curve of indigo. Stars shine like ice shards lit from within, close enough to touch, but the overall feeling is of depth, vastness, a size and complexity beyond measure.

In his unadorned Barrier state, Revik is also made of light.

He stands out from the sky, his body made of tiny geometrical structures that roughly approximate his physical form. And yet, Revik's living light, or *aleimi*, in the seer's tongue, is more real to him, more precious to him, and more closely guarded by him than his own physical body.

He travels through clouds, noting landmarks. The threads of light and dark are only indiscriminate to the novice. He adjusts the tenor of his light and a vortex appears like a tornado in the sky. He enters the gaping mouth and immediately begins to move very fast.

Then, it is done.

He emerges on the other side, and finds himself gazing at the Barrier image of his physical home. Earth rotates beneath his feet, snarled and ensnared in the lights of several billion beings. Revik feels Vash there, and the light of the Seven. He also feels the metallic, silver light of the Rooks. Beneath it all, the sprawling mass of humanity covers the rest of the globe in a mist.

He watches the world rotate as he descends, shielded, through those crossing lines of light. Inconspicuous now, one light among many, he seeks his physical form, aiming through the tangle of lights and connections until the continent of Europe rushes nearer.

Upon entering England, and then London, the trip is short.

He sees his body inside the tall apartment building not far from Belgrave Square.

But he is already too close.

There is a glimpse of his reclining form, eyes closed as in sleep, black hair framing an angular face, long legs sprawled untidily, a flash of brightness, and then...

...he opened his eyes.

A swirl of plaster met him on the high ceiling, shaped like a gnome's face. An angry gnome, riding a deformed donkey.

Revik rolled off the worn leather, rotating his neck to remove a crimp. Walking to the telephone, he lifted the receiver. Like most seers, he avoided headsets whenever he could. They tended to mess with his light, and were far too easy to trace.

"Sir?" the voice rose.

Revik wasn't big on preliminaries. "A plane ticket, Eddard. San Francisco."

Only the slightest of pauses met this. Then Eddard's tone turned dry.

"Ah, America. That is exciting, sir."

He hesitated. "No messages for me?"

"No." Eddard's smile grew audible on the line. "They won't miss you this time of the year, sir. You're welcome to fraternize with Yanks all you like." He paused. "You've spent a lot of time there of late. Is there a Missus Dehgoies I should be aware of? Or are these visits somehow culinary in nature?"

Revik ignored this, too, unwilling to dissect the humor he heard in the other's voice. Social intercourse had never been his strong suit, especially with humans.

"Make it for tonight," Revik said. "I'll pack my own gear. Inform airport security I'll be carrying a weapon on board."

"Very good, sir. I'll ring you when the car is expected."

Revik hung up the phone.

The 'sir' was a courtesy only. Eddard was a gift from his human employers, there to spy on him as much as wait on him.

He walked to the window of the study, noting the part of him already constructing equipment and packing lists in his mind as he fingered aside the heavy curtain. Sightlessly, he gazed down the row of neat white buildings.

He avoided it a few seconds longer, then glanced backwards, staring at the photograph that graced the polished mantle over the study's fireplace.

On it, a young girl with green eyes beamed from the arms of a man with gray hair. The old

human already displayed signs of the wasting sickness that would eventually take him, yet his sunken eyes shone with love as he squeezed the little girl. The woman on his arm laughed up at the two of them, dark hair falling in ringlets down to her shoulders, her bangle earrings catching the light between the child's clutching fingers.

Walking to a large china closet, Revik unlocked the hutch doors with a key he stored beneath a Tibetan vase. He pressed the button concealed behind a faux wooden panel.

His mind remained blank as the panel slid back, pushing forth a velvet-cushioned tray with a silent motor.

Nestled in the blue cloth lay his primary home store: two Finnish Glock 17Pros, a Beretta 93R, homemade silencers for the Glocks and the Beretta, a Mark XIX Desert Eagle, and, on the far right, a Ruger P345. In the back lay a few antiques he kept around for reasons he didn't articulate to himself fully: a Lugar and a Browning HP, both oiled and loaded, same as the rest.

Extracting a Glock and the Desert Eagle along with one of the silencers, he hit the panel again, removing and checking both clips as the electronic tray slid shut. Shoving one of the guns in his jacket pocket, he stared out the window a last time, exhaling in a slow breath.

Sending up a muttered blessing, he surrendered some of his light.

He had to remember the reasons they'd given him this assignment. It wasn't meant to be pleasant, but a way to wipe the slate clean, to compensate for some measure of wrong he'd caused in his past.

Finishing the ritual, which he'd done now for more days and mornings and nights than he could count, he left the room. His mind fell back into line, too, leached of any residual thoughts or regrets that might have gotten in his way.

He'd agreed to do this thing. He'd given Vash his word.

That meant doing all of it.

Chapter Three: Mr. Monochrome

That guy again.

Tall, black hair, white as death, he carried an expression and posture that went beyond indifference, venturing into pure lack.

As I squinted in the morning light, watching him through one of the windows in the front door of my apartment, I noticed that he'd changed his clothes.

He wasn't looking at me, as usual.

As usual, I could feel his attention on me anyway.

The knowledge that he cared enough to stalk me really thoroughly was a little unnerving, even with my track record.

Still, he hadn't actually done anything to me, not yet anyway. He hadn't even tried to talk to me, much less threatened me or anything. Of course, it only took once for the whole "doing something" thing, and then it was too late.

I contemplated leaving out the back door, but that wouldn't work well as a long-term strategy, either. Sighing, I dug the headset out of my canvas shoulder bag and slung it over my ear, summoning a digit. Unlike most of my friends, I didn't like having the thing glued to my head 24/7. Jon thought I imagined it, but I swear I could hear it, even when it wasn't on.

Jon picked up after two rings. My hope plummeted when I heard synchronized yells in Chinese in the background.

"You've got a class?" I said. "You're teaching right now, I mean?"

"Yeah. What's up?" Jon was in kung fu master mode.

"Nothing." I hesitated. "That guy. You know. Mr. Monochrome. He's here."

Jon's tone immediately changed. "Where are you?"

"At home." I peered out the window again. "Mom's expecting me. Am I being stupid? He's just standing there. Outside, I mean."

Jon exhaled. I could almost see his hands on his waist where the belt wrapped around his gee.

“Look,” he said. “You’re going to have to let me talk to him, Al. Like, today.” He hesitated. “Is, um...anyone else there?”

Internally, I sighed. Jon didn’t approve of me and Nick’s whatever it was. He saw Nick as a crutch, at best. At worst, as a lame attempt at revenge. In any case, he said, any relationship that turned me into a homicidal maniac deserved a good, long, healthy mourning period.

I didn’t really want to think about whether he was right.

“No,” was all I said. “I’m alone.”

“Okay.” I felt him thinking. “Why don’t you get a cab...I’ll split it with you, Al. If he shows up again, call me. I’ll just talk to him, okay? If that doesn’t work, you really need to bust him for stalking.”

I rolled my eyes a little, even as I acknowledged that he was right.

The bossiness thing bugged me. Still, that was probably the longest Jon had managed to go in years before lecturing me on being a freak magnet.

He had the big brother thing in spades, for a lot of good reasons and some that weren’t so good. He couldn’t seem to get it through his head that nothing I did made any difference. It didn’t matter what I wore, or if I’d spoken a word to whoever it was. Really, it didn’t matter if I’d even noticed the other person existed. Half of them weren’t interested in sex, or in dating me; I got straight women following me, trying to read me scripture. It was just one of those things.

Anyway, going to the cops wasn’t high on my list right then. They’d take one look at the GPS bracelet and tell me to take a hike. They probably wouldn’t even bother to scan my barcode. Not like it would help, if they did. “Parentage, unknown,” was about the same as painting “potentially dangerous freak” on my forehead.

As if he’d been reading my mind, Jon said, “I’m surprised you’re not dating a cop by now. Between your pheromone for psychos and your anger management issues, they’re probably your primary social group...”

“Cute, Jon.” Failing to not react to the dig, I tried to turn it into a joke. “Do we need to have this conversation again? Really?” Hearing him smile, I said, “Gotta go. Come by when you can. I’m on for dinner shift. Six o’clock.”

Without waiting, I hung up.

Hesitating only another handful of seconds, I glanced out the window at the my new, most dedicated non-friend.

With a real sigh, I summoned the headset's entry for "Taxi."

By the time I hung up with the dispatcher, Mr. Mono was gone.

Riding down Divisadero towards my mom's, I leaned against the cab's window as we paused at a red light. I'd been spacing out when I realized I was staring at someone—a heart-shaped face framed with stiff, dyed braids that came off her head like a white and orange headdress. I read the name of the fetish bar on the marquee behind her, and realized abruptly what she must be. I'd heard about the place opening up, but hadn't been by to see it like everyone else. It just felt weird to me, gawking at them, like they were animals.

The woman's opaque blue eyes drank me in without apology or fear. Her hands rested on her hips over a white lace body suit.

I receded into the cab's seat so I would be less visible.

I caught the cabbie watching me in the rearview mirror and blushed.

"Yeah," he commented flatly. "They got a few of them now."

"I know...just forgot."

He didn't seem to hear me, or care maybe. "They just keep bringing more of them over here," he said. "Like we need our own damned iceblood army. Fucking animals. I don't trust 'em...collared or not." He glanced at me in the mirror. Looking over my tangled hair and hastily applied makeup, he smiled. Maybe he thought the dishevelment was deliberate.

"You seen one before, honey?" he said.

"Yeah." I glanced out surreptitiously, but the seer was no longer looking at me. Smiling seductively at a man on the street, she touched his arm as he passed. The man jerked away as if burnt, glaring at her.

The seer laughed, but I saw her eyes turn cold, predatory.

"Really?" the cabbie said. "Where?"

"At the Coliseum. With my dad." I couldn't take my eyes off the seer. "On the street too, you know. Downtown."

The man nodded, absently. He'd already lost interest.

I ventured, "They're allowed to just walk around like that? What if she, you know...hurts someone?"

The cabbie pointed, tapping his window. "See that collar?"

I followed his finger to the circle of brushed metal around the female's neck. Finger-width, it

had no markings I could see other than the pulsing blue light at the base when she turned her head.

Feeling the cabbie watching me, I nodded.

He said, “They’re coded to the owner, see? They can’t do nothing with that on...blinds ‘em. They take it off when they’re, ah...you know, working.”

I nodded again.

I knew about the collars, of course. Seers had been around since the early 1900s, in one way or another...ever since they first found them living in those snowy caves in Asia. I’d read about them in high school and college, too. History mainly. Studying the wars, of course, but also the history of SCARB, the World Court, organic machines, sight ownership, the trade wars in the East and in Europe.

Lately though, everyone with money seemed to have one.

Sex and fetish shops specializing in seers were popping up in all the major cities. If the laws changed or SCARB was loosening its controls, no one bothered to say so on the feeds.

I wondered that some of them wouldn’t be smart enough to figure out how to get the collars off.

I almost understood the driver not being thrilled with the sudden influx of seers all over the city. Heck, maybe Jon’s conspiracy theory stuff was true, about how the government was in secret collaboration with seers to mind-warp the rest of us. He was convinced we all might wake up one day inside a dream created by a bunch of seers to keep us all docile.

Looking at that seer though, I had trouble seeing her as colluding with anyone, much less a bunch of guys in suits who wanted to feed us all mental straightjackets.

No, she looked like she’d rather just shoot me in the head.

The cabbie dropped me off on Fell Street. He pulled up in front of the familiar, purple Victorian, and I transferred money to his cab number from my headset as I was sliding off the back seat.

I slammed the door and promptly tripped over a dented juice bottle. Bending down to pick it up, I tossed it in my mother’s neighbor’s yellow recycling carton, then noticed that the neighbor’s bin was empty, along with my mother’s section of curb.

Great. Another week of week-old garbage.

Digging my keys from my red vinyl jacket, I righted them to insert in the dead bolt lock...but the door was already open. A prickle of nerves ran up my spine. Had she been out today already? Or had the front door really been open all night?

Walking inside, I heard the television.

I shut the door behind me loudly.

“Mom?” I headed for the sound of the t.v., dragging the bag of donuts and coffee I’d brought with me. Passing the dining room, I saw that she’d closed the drapes, which was strange, too. Mom liked to watch the birds, even in the fog.

“Mom, you forgot the garbage again,” I said. Pausing, I raised my voice. “Tuesday, Mom. Remember? Every Tuesday. It never changes...”

No answer.

A prickle of fear touched my spine.

“Hey, Mom...” I stepped out into the living room, stopping when my eyes met a shock of skin sprawled on the paisley print couch. “...Oh.”

Sighing, half in relief and half in irritation, I crossed the remainder of the room, kicking aside an empty bottle that at least partly accounted for the smell from the faux-Indian carpet. Sitting on the squishy couch I’d loved as a kid, I sank so low I nearly got dumped on the floor.

I set down the coffee cup I had surfed to safety, and dropped the crumpled bag of donuts to the carpet. Sighing again, I leaned over to tap my mother’s bare back. The skin there was smooth and somehow younger than the rest of her, marked with tan lines from working in her garden.

“Mom? What are you doing?”

I looked around at the open photo album, the crushed cigarette butts that she’d sworn up and down just two days ago that she no longer smoked, the faded, Mickey Mouse drinking glass that had once been Jon’s. I counted five butts in the plastic Waikiki ashtray with the hula girl painted on it, and at least two more in the bottom of Mickey’s glass.

The only thing I didn’t look at was the television, where the familiar voice of my father could be heard amid kid laughter and cheers.

The birthday video.

I had been four. That was right before dad’s MS had been diagnosed, before he started losing weight, before he gave me the ceramic dolphin music box and promised he would never leave me. The day after he died, I smashed the box to a million pieces on the curb outside of our house.

The next day, I moved out. I had been seventeen.

“Mom?”

A muffled voice emerged from against my mother’s arm.

“You are an evil, evil child.”

“You going to church?”

“I don’t belong in church.”

“Sure you do.” I patted her back. “Where else does an old drunk go for repentance?”

My mother, Mia Taylor, raised her head. Bleary-eyed and pale, dark circles under her eyes, she looked old to me suddenly, in a way that brought a rush of what felt oddly like anger.

She also looked hurt. “You *are* evil. Did you bring coffee?”

“Yup. With the requisite sugar fat explosion, dunked in chocolate-flavored lard...your favorite.”

She was already reaching for the bag, her eyes faintly quizzical, like they always were when I cracked one of my dumb jokes. She unfurled the crinkled paper and peered inside.

Her voice grew timid. “Will you go with me?”

I failed to completely stifle a snort.

“Come on, Mom. Conversion? This early in the morning? I’m way too young to fear death that much.”

As soon as I said it, my eyes made contact with the television.

There, my father held me in his arms, beaming so wide, his eyes so shining that I couldn’t help but feel him, hearing his laugh through the middle of my chest. Only after I could breathe again did I look at my mom.

Her deer-like eyes were wide as she munched on the edge of a donut, chocolate frosting coating her small fingers.

“You’ve got to get past this,” I said, hating myself for saying it, knowing how often I’d said similar things, bludgeoning my mother with them, who despite all her apparent frailty was the more resilient one. It was me who covered myself over in sharp laughs and dismissive shrugs.

Or, in the words of the boyfriend before Jaden, a Puerto Rican from New York, I was “a cold white woman, made of ice.”

The nausea returned briefly, a pulse of warmth.

I disagree, a voice said.

I jumped violently, enough to make my mom look over.

“What’s wrong?” she said. She never seemed to hold a grudge over my cracks. She was a better person than me. She patted my leg.

“Are you okay, Allie-bird? You look like a goose walked on your grave...”

I forced my eyes to the television, watched my dad lean down to help my four year-old self blow out four pink candles on a cake with white, fluffy frosting. Four year-old me looked up at 28 year-old me and beamed, wanting to be my friend. But watching my younger self wrapped in the gnarled, work-worn hands of my father, I felt nothing but envy.

I got back to my house without incident.

I had a few hours before I had to be at work. As I clomped up the stairs of the old Victorian, my mind toyed with the painting I’d been halfway through finishing for a few weeks now. A part of me felt like I should work on that, but I wasn’t sure I had it in me. Like most days, I really just wanted to brew some coffee and curl up in the window seat with a view to the street below.

Jiggling the key in the back and forth pattern it took to get the lock to open, I jerked the handle once it finally unlatched. I walked inside, half-stumbling on my mail in the entryway. I had already closed the door and was taking off my jacket when I glanced up.

The black-haired man stood just inside the door.

I let out a cry. Before it could turn into a full-blown yell, he pinned me against the wall by the coat rack, clamping a hand over my mouth. One of my arms remained stuck in the jacket, and he pinned it there, too, at my side, with his elbow. His other hand held my wrist.

Within seconds, I could barely move at all.

“Quiet,” he said, soft. His voice was deep, faintly accented. “Quiet. I won’t hurt you...I promise I won’t, Allie...”

I felt a kind of calm trickle down over me, but I fought it, still trying to get my arms free. He tightened his hold, pressing his body against mine. I felt flickers of that pain, which seemed to worsen as soon as I noticed.

God. Was he going to rape me?

“No. No, Allie...”

Did he really just say no? Did he fucking *hear* me just then?

“Yes,” he said, soft. “I can hear you.” He paused, as if waiting for that much to sink in. He

gauged my eyes once it had. “You understand?”

My body went rigid. I felt myself going into a full-blown panic as my mind clicked through what he’d said, pulling the pieces together.

He was a goddamned *seer*.

I struggled harder against his hold. His grip tightened, even as he pressed his body tighter into mine. Within seconds, he had me totally still again.

“Relax, Esteemed Bridge...relax...shhh...”

Esteemed *what*?

He didn’t answer that.

When I continued to struggle, he made a kind of purring sound, likely meant to be soothing. I struggled harder, but he crushed me against the wall until I could barely breathe, using his legs and arms to pin me almost entirely. I was forced to go still, his face less than a foot from mine.

I stared at his eyes, still in shock.

My eyes flickered to his neck. But no, he wasn’t wearing one of those collars. How the hell had I managed to get on the radar of a *seer*? I’d never even spoken to one before.

And what had he called me exactly?

“Allie,” he said, still a murmur. “You won’t remember this. Please. I won’t hurt you. I’m sorry for doing this this way...but you won’t remember it...”

Fear coursed through me as my mind wrapped around his words, the blank spots in my memory over the past few weeks. Then I was fighting him for real. He was strong though. His arms and hands were like iron where they held me. He seemed to know exactly where to lean his weight, his knees, elbows, shoulders and thighs, to keep me completely immobile against the wall. I felt that pain again when he tightened his hold.

“I need you awake,” he said softly. “I can’t push you too much, because I need you aware for it. I’m not going to hurt you, Allie. Do you believe me?”

I shook my head adamantly, under his hand.

Nodding, he seemed unfazed. “I understand.” Hesitating a little, he said, “I’m trying to protect you, Esteemed...” He hesitated. “...Allie.”

I wondered what the hell that meant.

“You’re starting to show,” he said. “I can’t push every judge who questions your parentage into forgetting about it. I can’t be everywhere...”

Judge? Wait. Was he talking about the clerk at the reg office?

“...I have to pull you. You’re at risk...”

Pull me?

“You can’t stay here forever,” he said. “You can’t pretend to be something you aren’t. You’re already at risk...” He fingered my wrist by the GPS bracelet, a near caress. “...You’re becoming conspicuous, Allie. It’s just a matter of time now, before they notice...”

Notice? *Who*, notice? The government?

He made a soft clicking noise with his tongue, and I stared up at him.

“Not the government,” he said. “Although they are part of the problem, yes.”

Who the *fuck* was this guy?

“I was sent here by friends,” he began.

I let out a short laugh behind the hand over my mouth, and he fell silent. His expression didn’t change at all, either in emotion or understanding.

“We’ll talk more later,” he said.

Later? Like when later?

He hesitated again, as if thinking about whether to answer.

“You should see more after this time,” he said. “I’ll open you more. Then we can talk...” He caressed my wrist again, and it struck me he meant it to be comforting. “I’m sorry I can’t explain. It’s just so much easier when you can see. Once we can talk the other way, things will be clearer...”

Clearer? What would be clearer?

I was still staring up at those colorless eyes, trying to decide if this was another one of my dreams or if it was really happening...

...when the world seems to explode somewhere inside my mind.

It throws me into nothingness, an expanse of dark and light. I can’t see...I can’t comprehend anything but that endless sky unfolding. The man with the black hair disappears. The apartment disappears, too.

I find myself surrounded by clouds...shapes defined by crystalline colors, by absence as much as form. The clouds grow into thunderous mountains, expanding in the purple-black of an

endless sky.

I feel myself pulled apart, redesigned, as if undressed by rough hands. Every touch feels like it meets raw flesh. There is nothing to push against, no muscle to flex. Pain meets me there, in that place. I feel so alone, but at the same time, I have never felt anything so familiar, so much like me.

I see a red and orange valley.

An ocean made of diamond lights.

I see mountains covered in jagged snow. I hear singing...

Not long after that, I cease to exist.