

Chapter 2. A Caged Bird.

2 years later

“Where have you been, Vee?” Manie asked as soon as she saw her sister’s face. “I didn’t think I’d ever see you again!” The cold marble halls echoed with Manie’s excitement. Blue and silver flags flapped in the breeze behind her. White sunlight reached down from stone windows in a high ceiling so tall a giant could have easily strode beneath it without bumping his head, then gleamed off polished copper tiles stamped into the floor with an orange glow like the room had been cast aflame. The soldiers guarding the empty throne stared at Veronica like vultures tracking a dying wolf.

Veronica smiled, the joy on her face glowing like a sailing star. “There you are! I’ve been looking everywhere for you.”

Manie ran to Veronica and grabbed her in a tight hug, and Veronica hugged her back with all her strength. “I missed you,” Manie said. She felt good to be back with her sister, back with someone she could trust, someone who didn’t care about Mikhail’s Crystal or whatever powers it had inside, just her.

“I missed you too, Little Lightning Bolt.” Veronica leaned back and looked at Manie. “You’re taller.”

Manie looked up into Veronica’s eyes, the joy in her heart wilting like dying flowers. “Why haven’t you come to see me? I thought you forgot me.”

“I didn’t forget you... Umm... Dad told me that Mom tried to steal Mikhail’s Crystal and take you away to the North,” Veronica said, her eyes hesitating to meet Manie’s. When their gazes finally met, Veronica’s eyes sharpened. “He told me we couldn’t see each other until he was sure it was safe.”

“That was *months* ago,” Manie said. “But I didn’t let her take it, so the castle is safe *now*. It’s been safe this whole time,” Manie said, holding up her hands. “I kept telling Dad I wanted to see you and he would always say you were in Copper Lanes with Molly and Dylan.”

“I was...sometimes. Other times I was here in the mansion trying to find you,” Veronica replied.

“Then why wouldn’t he let us see each other?” Manie asked.

Veronica closed her eyes. “I don’t know... Father’s trying to protect you. Like I am. And so is Mom, in her own way.”

“It didn’t feel like Mom was trying to protect me when she threw me off her horse,” Manie said, rubbing her wrist. “I broke my arm.”

Veronica’s eyes fell. “Yeah, I don’t know why she did that... That was wrong. If I’d been there I wouldn’t have let that happen.” Veronica looked at Manie like she was begging for her to understand.

“Then why weren’t you?” Manie asked, remembering how afraid she’d been. “I thought you said family always sticks together.”

Veronica looked stabbed, like the burden of trauma had been transferred straight to her. “Manie,” Veronica pleaded, “I just... If I’d known what mother was going to do to you, I would have stopped her or...or found another way. Things aren’t as simple as they were before. To be truthful, I prefer life in Copper Lanes now. It’s less complicated.”

“I wish *I* could just walk away from everyone who depends on me sometimes too,” Manie said back, her tongue burnt with frustration. “Like you and Mom did.”

Veronica tried to look away, but her eyes came back to Manie’s. “I didn’t walk away from you.”

“That’s what it seems like,” Manie said. “I’m on my own now.”

“You’re not on your own. You have Dad, and your friends, and I’m always here—even if you can’t see me sometimes.”

Manie let a long sigh out of her chest. She wanted to respond, but she couldn’t say what she wanted. It felt too cruel to remind Veronica that she’d been locked in a tower after their mother fled, and now she hardly saw anyone except the guards. She wished her sister’s words were true, but they weren’t. “Yeah...”

“Look, let’s just forget about all that dumb adult stuff, okay? Today’s about you and me. I want to get you away from that empty tower so you and I can have some fun for once. What do you say, ready to go out on the town and have some fun with your big sister?”

Manie rolled her eyes and tried not to smile. “Yeah, I *guess*. As long as we don’t have to ride any horses.”

“No horses,” Veronica promised, nudging Manie’s arm. “I’ve got an exciting day planned. You know there’s a big festival in Denengear today called *The Gathering of First Sun’s light*. There will be mountains of food, amazing music, huge crowds.”

Veronica waved her arms in the air. “You’ll never believe your eyes when you see it.”

“Alaya told me there are giant kites flying over Copper Lanes that are as big as a house. Was she lying?”

“Nope, she wasn’t,” Veronica replied with a smile. “Some are even bigger.”

Manie tried to imagine it. "Can we ride on one?"

"Afraid to ride a horse but not a kite?" Veronica asked with an eyebrow raised. "I guess you'll have to follow me down into the city if you want to find out."

Manie sighed. "Then I guess I have no *choice* but to follow you," she said with a bitten smile. Manie lunged out and hugged her sister again, squeezing as tight as she could, the warmth of her love melting into Veronica as her sadness fell away. "I'm glad you came back, Vee. The mansion is never the same when you're not in it..." Manie didn't cry, but she wanted to.

Veronica put a hand against Manie's back and squeezed her. "I never left, Little Lightning Bolt... I'll always be here for you. No matter what happens. I won't let anyone hurt you ever again."

Manie looked up at Veronica, wondering if she could keep that promise. "I know," she said with a smile, hiding her doubts.

Veronica smiled back. "You ready to leave this big empty hall and go join the party?"

"I've been ready my whole life," Manie said.

Veronica pushed blue hair out of Manie's eyes. "That's my little sister. Let's go." She turned and led Manie towards the doors to the mansion. As they closed in on the entrance hall where the fountain of the three women and the dragon was, Captain Markus reached out and grabbed Veronica's wrist, stopping her.

"Hey, what's your problem?" Veronica snapped as she twisted back.

"Keep her safe out there, or you'll be answering to me," Captain Markus said, his voice torn by bitterness.

Manie had never heard anyone talk to her sister that way. She didn't like it. "You're not my father," Manie told him.

"Royalty doesn't answer to you," Veronica replied. "Now let go of me."

"You're on a short leash and everyone knows it," Markus growled.

"Just because I was close with my *mother* doesn't mean I've *become her*," Veronica said, biting off each word with a snap of her teeth. "We're going to a festival, not a hillside brawl."

"Yeah, Veronica's my sister," Manie said. "She can protect me better than you can."

"Hmph. I guess we'll find out." Markus let go of Veronica's wrist and retreated his hand. "I'll see you when you return."

Veronica squinted at the Captain, then turned back to Manie. "He's just angry that he's got a smaller sword than the rest of the guards." She put a hand up next to her mouth and loudly whispered, "*I think it hurts his pride.*"

“It’s a ceremonial weapon,” Markus grumbled from behind Veronica’s shoulder. “It’s not meant for fighting.” Markus glared at Veronica for a long moment, then smiled and said, “Enjoy your time with your sister.”

Veronica smiled back, but she looked soured. She grabbed Manie’s hand and hustled her towards the entrance hall. Manie turned and stuck her tongue out at Markus.

“What a complete horse patty,” Veronica said.

“I know. Why was he acting that way? Did something bad happen?”

“He thinks I shouldn’t be alone with you because of what happened with mother. I heard him arguing with father...”

“*What?*” Manie exclaimed. “That’s so stupid. Nobody ever asked me.” She felt betrayed knowing decisions like that were being made without her knowledge, that what she had to say didn’t matter because she was small. “I’m smart enough to keep the Crystal safe on my own.”

“People like Markus can’t understand that. He thinks you’re too young to know the difference between right and wrong. But I know that isn’t true. We’re sisters, and we’ll always come back to each other, no matter what anyone thinks. That’s what makes us sisters.” Veronica continued around the fountain of the dragon with Manie at her side.

Manie glanced up at Veronica from the corner of her eyes and smiled. She was proud of who her sister was. She was like a hero from out of a story. She turned to the dragon fountain and remembered the Torch-Wings and the pools of light they’d accidentally found two years ago. “We’re really going to see them?” she whispered. “We really are this time?”

Veronica put a finger against her lips. “Shh... So I guess you got the message I sent... You brought it, right?”

Manie reached up her sleeve to a hidden pocket and bit her lip to hide her excitement. She felt the warmth of Mikhail’s Crystal between her fingers and slowly dragged it out, the silver chain sliding over her wrist. When it came to the end of her sleeve, Manie paused to stare at its beauty, her love of the Crystal renewed now that it once again had a use. Within Mikhail’s Crystal danced a shield of Blue flame, twirling and leaning in the unseen winds of its dark chamber. Manie could see a reflection of her own eyes in the glass surface, and in them burned an identical flame as the one inside the Crystal. Manie looked up at her sister and smiled. “Last time, I used my fake crystal to trick Mom. This time, I used it to trick Dad.” Manie snickered under her breath, proud of herself for succeeding.

“Good job, Manie,” Veronica said with half a smirk. Her eyes seemed lost in the beauty of Mikhail’s Crystal like a ship on the sea. “I guess Father can’t control everything that happens on this island...”

Manie pushed the Crystal back into the pocket in her sleeve, still smiling. “Not anymore.”

When Veronica and Manie arrived at the entrance to the mansion, the guards in steel armor pushed the doors open and bowed, acknowledging Manie and Veronica as princesses before they went outside. Sunlight spilled into the hall, making the world outside look like an ocean of gold.

As the doors shut behind them, Veronica shook her head and shivered. “Don’t make me spill my lunch.”

“But you are a princess,” Manie said.

“About as much as you’re a knight,” Veronica replied.

“Maybe I will be one day,” Manie said, giggling. “Maybe I’ll slay a *dragon*.”

“Pfft, yeah right. If anyone’s going to slay a dragon it’ll be me. Come over here,” Veronica said. “Look. You can see Copper Lanes.” She approached the iron bars that snaked down the hill and pointed.

Manie looked out over Denengear, across hundreds of tall towers made of carved, white stones, each dressed in gold and glass windows, and the even more numerous tiny wooden buildings that covered the lower city by the thousands below. All of Denengear was enclosed within a ring of craggy mountains that bit the sky like a jaw of sharp teeth, and a dense pine forest that stretched for miles around their base, carpeting everything except the ridged cliffs in green branches. The air smelled clean and fresh, yet rank with the stench of adventure, drawing excitement into Manie’s heart, just like the day they found the Torch-Wings.

“That’s the spot down there,” Veronica said. “Where all the wagons are. Everything that happens in this city is planned in that square. Doesn’t matter if you’re a beggar or a king, everyone can have a chance. No one controls your future except you.”

Manie cocked her head to the side and squinted. Compared to her own life where her father seemed to make every decision for her, it sounded like paradise. “Everyone?”

“Everyone. It’s like a whole other world down there, little sis. And the people who rule over it can change their world however they want. Maybe that could be you and me one day, huh? The queens of Copper Lanes...”

Manie didn’t understand how that could be possible if their father was the king of the whole island, but she liked it. “Just you and me? With no one around to tell us what to do?” Manie smiled as her mind wandered into that future. A place where her life wouldn’t be tied to the Crystal and its blue flame. “*I wish*.”

“Maybe it can be real one day,” Veronica said as she put her hand on Manie’s shoulder. “Anything can happen when Crystals are involved.”

Manie looked around the city until she found the wagons at the bottom of their small mountain, in the center of the rows of wooden shacks and few tall towers that scraped the sky. There were dozens of stalls and stands, customers and merchants, but they were lost amongst a river of people pouring down the streets and into the city from the Ivory Gates, congregating in the large open square.

Veronica backed away from the iron fence and pointed down the white, stone roads that wound into Denengear. "Okay, enough looking. Let's go join the party."

Manie let go of the bars and went to her sister's side. "Finally."

Veronica took Manie's hand and laughed, then led her down the stone path, going between marble statues of powerful mages and forgotten kings outlined by gardens where red and gold flowers grew. They came to the gates where Royal soldiers were standing guard and went past them, disappearing into the canyon of towers. The shadow of the city came up around them like a dark sea rising beneath a stone jungle.

"That's where Allaya lives," Manie said, pointing at a white stone villa that rose six stories into the sky.

"So, she's one of those silk dresses and jeweled earrings types, huh?" Veronica asked as she looked at the majestic building. Dozens of people in fine clothes and fur coats were passing by in all directions.

"Yeah, she never goes anywhere without her servants," Manie said as she giggled.

"Is she the type of girl you like to hang around, now?" Veronica asked with a bite.

Manie screwed up her face as the insult sank in. "*No*. Dad won't let me see anyone else. The only other kids my own age I get to talk to are those drivellers at the dinners at the long table."

Veronica shook her head. "I hate that table... Doesn't surprise me though, I guess. What mom did really scared everyone. I guess Dad thinks you can only be around *civilized* people now, not the rabble in Copper Lanes."

"What's so different about them compared to us?" Manie asked. "They can't be worse."

"*What's so different?*" Veronica repeated with a laugh. "*Look around us, this* is where all the gold in the city flows. The people in Copper Lanes get nothing. We get robbed and starved and killed in the streets while your half of the city eats roast duck and pheasant for supper. I think Father and his council would rather forget Copper Lanes even exists."

"How can he forget? He's always telling me that we have a responsibility to protect Talmorians."

"Because father only cares about Talmorian's who are his friends. And Copper Lanes can't offer him anything expensive. So we turn to a different leader for help."

“Who?” Manie asked.

“A guy named Darko,” Veronica replied. “He’s like, in charge down there. But that might not last long with the way things are going.”

“Father should help everyone,” Manie said. “Not just the people we eat dinner with.”

“We should, but father doesn’t agree,” Veronica replied, her tongue like acid.

The slap of shoes on cobblestones followed Manie and Veronica as they went deeper into Denengear. Manie twisted in all directions to see the massive city rise around her. It was never as fun to see it from above in her tower as it was down below. Here in the streets she felt like a pebble in a vast valley of boulders and mountains of stone.

“What is this festival about?” Manie asked. “I’ve never heard of it before today.”

“*I don’t know*,” Veronica said, shrugging. “Something to do with summer or harvests or something. I heard they’ve been doing it for a while in Half-Moon Landing, but this year father invited them to our city. The best part is all the merchants who come to sell the gadgets and gizmos they bring to Talmoria from across the sea.” Veronica jumped back and waved her arms high in the air. “Secret artifacts with magical powers that can make a fat man skinny, a short girl tall, or even turn a woman into a man! Some of this lost junk is thousands of years old.”

Manie smiled, trying to imagine what that would look like. “You’re making things up.”

Veronica leaned down and put her face close to Manie’s, hissing, “*Strange and horrible creatures* that could give even the bravest man nightmares.” She put her hands against her cheeks and wiggled her fingers. “*Blargh!*”

Manie burst out laughing and pushed her sister away. “You sound like jester Frog Feet.”

“I still have all my teeth, thank you very much. Well, except the one old man Rango knocked out with his cane when he caught me stealing from his shop...”

Manie slapped a hand against her forehead, making her sister laugh.

“*What?*” Veronica said with a shrug. “He had some very nice daggers. I’ve still got it.”

The white cobblestone road twisted like a snake slithering down between the tall towers. The alleys were tight, submerged in shadows so dense that the city turned as dark as night where the light couldn’t reach, but in the streets, beams of light as bright as molten gold pierced down into the shade, coming from beyond the tips of towers that cut the clouds like swords, urging vines to grow where the green moss and flowers couldn’t reach.

“Over here,” Veronica said, hopping a little canal at the edge of the road that splashed and gurgled, its brown water rushing down into the drains. “Let’s go this way.” She stopped in front of a steep staircase that went far down into a part of the city that had always been described as dangerous by their father.

“But that leads through...” Manie stopped at the edge of the canal before she finished.

“*Copper Lanes*? What’s the matter, Manie, are you afraid you might bump elbows with one of the peasants you said you wanted to help?” Veronica asked. “Should we go home and tell dad you’d rather go back to reading books and eating ham with the gentry?”

Manie felt her cheeks get hot. “It has nothing to do with any of that, Veronica. I’m just not an idiot. I’m a *princess*. People hurt princesses”

“I’m a princess too, *remember*?” Veronica reminded her, sounding like she’d been kicked in the tongue. “But if you’re such a scaredy cat then I guess I’ll take you home and we can go see the Torch-Wings some other time.”

“I’m *not* afraid,” Manie said, straightening her back for the jump. “But we should be careful.”

“Good, we will,” Veronica said, clapping her hands. “Now follow me.”

Manie bit her lip and groaned as she jumped over the canal. Veronica caught her arm to keep her from falling back.

“Good job, sis. Now this way.” Veronica took a step down the stairs and Manie reluctantly followed. Veronica moved ahead and danced down the slope, frequently turning back. “We’ll be fine,” she promised as Manie followed.

Manie looked around at the white stone walls rising on both sides, growing darker and dirtier the deeper they went. At each lower level of the city, where the stairs made way for another layer of towers and maze of alleys, Manie saw piles of garbage and discarded food grow larger and more putrid on both sides. The air was thick with buzzing flies and the stench of fermenting juices. In the corner was an iron bin full of dirty clothes that had recently been set aflame. “This doesn’t look good.”

“I promise we’ll survive,” Veronica said, taking Manie’s hand. “I go this way all the time. It’s a shortcut.”

Manie screamed as a garbage bin tipped over and shattered a few glass bottles and jars of rotten fish. A cat yowled as it climbed a fence and scrambled out of sight. “It’s just that... Alaya told me they found someone’s dead body around these stairs just a few days ago. *And they weren’t alive*.”

“Yeah, being not alive is usually a requirement to become a dead body.” Veronica said. “I guess that explains why it’s so...umm...*empty* around here. Usually it’s packed.”

“It could still be dangerous,” Manie pointed out.

“You told Markus you trust me to keep you safe,” Veronica reminded Manie as she crouched in front of her. “I didn’t forget how to use my Crystal. And besides, you’re pretty tough yourself, *Little Lightning Bolt*. I saw you set those scarecrows on fire in the training room. I don’t miss everything that happens in the mansion.”

“Yeah but I’m not good at it. I don’t even like to use my powers. Alaya thinks the Crystals are evil.”

“Well I think they’re good,” Veronica replied. “They can stop bad guys from hurting people. And you should know how to defend yourself, especially after what mom did.”

“I lost my Purple Crystal, though. I’m not as strong as when I had it.”

“Lost it?” Veronica asked as she turned her eyes from Manie. “That’s not good...”

“Yeah, I know,” Manie said as she grabbed her arm. “Father got mad when he found out. He said my life could be in danger if someone bad knew where it was.”

Veronica whipped back to Manie, looking upset. “He blamed *you*? What a...complete horse patty,” Veronica blurted out, shaking her head. “For something so important he should have shown you a better place to hide it.”

“Maybe,” Manie replied. “He told me keeping the Crystals safe is part of the responsibility that comes with our powers. I should have been smarter.”

Veronica rolled her eyes. “*Ughh*... Just forget what Father says, okay? He doesn’t know any more about the Crystals than the rest of us. You’ll find your Crystal. It’s probably just lost behind a shelf somewhere or something...”

“I hope so,” Manie said as she tried to remember the last time she’d seen it, all over again.

“Didn’t I tell you not to make a habit of using the same route?” A woman’s voice intruded from the shadows. “Makes you an easy target.” Her voice was thin and smoky, like burnt wood.

Veronica’s brow tightened. She turned to the alleyway where the voice came from. “Oh, it’s just you... Don’t you have anything better to do than stick your nose up my butt Tonila? I’m trying to enjoy my day off.”

“Tailing rats like you is *exactly* what Darko pays me for—so no, I don’t have anything better to do,” Tonila emerged from the shadows and into the sunlight bending between the buildings.

Manie gasped when she saw the scar on the woman’s cheek. It looked deep and painful.

“I was going to see Darko *tonight*,” Veronica said. “So you’re just wasting your time by being here.”

“*Tonight?*” Tonila asked with a small smile. “We expected you a *week* ago.”

Manie heard a slap of wood on stone. She turned and saw another two men coming out of the opposite alleyway, one of them wielding a club. She felt her arms shake when she saw them. “*Vee!*” Manie squealed, pointing. She wanted to run back to the mansion and find a guard, but Veronica held her to keep her in place.

“*It’ll be okay,*” Vee whispered. “Tark, Gob.” Veronica acknowledged each of them with a tilt of her neck. “I knew I smelled horse dung. Guess we’re really having a party now.”

“Where have you been, Veronica?” Tonila asked with a sharp tongue. “Darko trusted you to get that job done. Is this how you repay his trust? By taking what’s his?”

Veronica turned to Tonila, her eyes sharp as a Renjin’s. “Darko claiming that key as his own is a stretch of the definition by any understanding.”

“He paid you to bring that key to him. That makes it his.”

“He paid me to break into Ivan’s shop. I did that. But there was no key.”

Tonila shook her head and curled her lip. “I know you’re lying to me. Ivan’s been asking around, trying to find who ordered the snatch. Says he’s missing something very valuable.”

Tark clapped his club against the stone’s, making an echo bounce down into the lower city. “Just give us the key, Veronica. You’re lucky Darko didn’t order us to bring him your *head* now that you’ve stabbed him in the back. Guess he’s still got a soft spot for a rat like you.”

“I told you I don’t have it,” Veronica said. “I lost it.”

“*Bullshit,*” Tonila barked back, slamming her fist into a box of glass bottles.

“It’s not bullshit,” Veronica spit.

“So we have to shake it out of you,” Tonila said, her voice inflating with frustration. “I’ll make sure this isn’t fun.”

Manie looked at Veronica, the panic building in her chest like a breath of razor wind. “*Vee!*”

“We can work this out,” Veronica said. “That’s why I wanted to talk to Darko.”

“She wants a cut of the gold,” Tonila said, baring her teeth and eyes like white fangs.

“*What?*” Veronica asked, her eyes retreating into confusion. “No, I don’t. I just want to come to an agreement about something.”

Tark looked at Gob and laughed. “*Agreement?* What’s there to agree about? You want to barter over which one of your fingers I’m going to break first? Because that’s what’s going to happen when Darko hears your *agreement.*”

Manie gasped and bit her lip, hiding behind Veronica's arm as Tark came close. He grabbed Veronica's wrist and pulled her towards him, putting distance between her and Manie.

"You're not going anywhere until we get that key," Tark growled in Veronica's face.

Veronica's lip raised at the corner of her mouth, showing teeth. "Let go of me..."

"Don't let her out of your grip—we're going back to The Forge." Tonila approached Manie. "Looks like we'll have a little bonus, too. It's her sister."

Manie backed away from the woman until her shoulders found a wall. She gasped and looked for an escape, but they were cornered. Tonila reached down and snapped her fingers around Manie's wrist, squeezing hard enough to burn. "Let go of me!" Manie screamed.

"Stay still!" Tonila hissed, yanking Manie away from the wall.

"Get away from her!" Vee screamed. She shoved Tark and made him stumble back.

Tark grimaced and said, "You'll regret that." He raised his club to hit her, and Veronica shot the weapon out of his hands with a burst of wind from her fingers. The club twirled back through the air and knocked into Gob's mouth, throwing him off his feet with a burst of spit. Gob spilled the bin of burning clothes as he fell, creating a wave of sparks that rolled and crackled across the stones, catching everything wooden in its path aflame.

Tark cursed and shouted as he shuffled sideways to avoid the tide of fire, dragging Veronica with him. He stopped with his back facing Tonila and Manie, then dragged Veronica to his chest by her wrist. "Don't try that again," he shouted down at her. "Or I'll snap those wrists like dry kindling!"

Veronica showed her teeth and put her hands up into Tark's throat. "You mean this?" She exploded a burst of wind up into his jaw and the force of the eruption flung him through the air like a sack of dirt. He did a backflip, screaming the whole way, then slammed into Tonila's chest ass-first as he came down. Tark and Tonila rolled into a wall of garbage that broke when they hit and were buried under a mound of rotten fruit and dirty clothes.

"Don't touch my sister!" Veronica shouted as she stumbled and caught herself on a broken door frame, looking dizzied from using her powers. She regained balance and jumped over the bed of spilled coals and rushed to Manie, scanning her sister from head to toe. "Manie...are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Manie said, rubbing the finger marks on her wrist.

Veronica nodded. "Good. We need to get out of here, now!" She grabbed Manie and led her to the stairs that went down deeper into the city, but stopped as soon as her foot touched the first step. More of Darko's goons were coming up the stairs from below. They shouted her name and whistled when they saw Veronica's face.

"Wait, stop! They are really pissed off at me. Go back, go back!" Veronica turned to the dark alley beyond the burning mounds of discarded furniture and trash. "Go that way! Run!" She pushed Manie to give her a boost.

"More of them?" Manie ran as fast as her legs could go, jumping over flames and burning wood, feeling heat tickle her legs. She landed in a bed of orange sparks and tore off into the shadows where the gleaming white stones dimmed into darkness. She stopped and turned, calling Veronica with her hands cupped around her mouth.

Tonila dug her way out of the garbage mound, shaking a black banana peel off her forehead. "Get that little shit!"

Gob used a wall to help himself back to his feet. When he turned to face Veronica, Manie saw a stream of blood trickle out of his mouth. "*Stop!*" he shouted. Gob pushed off the wall and immediately toppled over, knocking himself unconscious on a piece of wood sticking out of the garbage pile.

"Idiot!" Tonila shouted.

Veronica jumped over Gob and the flames and grabbed Manie by the elbow, pushing her into motion. "Don't look, just run!"

Manie ignored the urge to see if they were being followed and looked ahead. The alley bent down between stone houses surrounded by garbage where some doors sat open. Beams of light shone down from the roofs like golden swords, above a woman coming out of her house with a basket of apples, but she ducked back inside when she saw Manie and Veronica sprinting towards her. A pack of cats fighting over a dead bird scrambled, hissing and yowling as they dispersed.

"Get out of the way!" Veronica screamed.

Manie looked back and saw Tonila and Tark come over the top of the alley and into the light. When Tonila reached the woman at her doorway she shoved her and made the woman drop her basket of apples, spilling them across the dirty stones. "They're behind us!" Manie shouted.

"*Shit!*" Veronica ran only as fast as Manie could. They rounded a corner and a garden opened up that was thick with apple trees. "This way!" Veronica vaulted over a short, wooden fence, then picked Manie up and lifted her over from the other side. They ran, ripping through vegetables and low branches as they came to the mouth of another alley where the patch of nature stopped. They went into the shadowy arch and out the other side, but when they came around the next corner, they were met with a dead end,

where the higher level of the city towered over them beyond a wall of shining, white stone too tall to climb.

“I thought you said it was safe, Vee,” Manie said as she fought back the tears in her eyes. “Now what’s going to happen? Where are they going to take us?”

“We’re going to be fine... We just have to find a way out of here.” Veronica searched the alley until she found a door at the base of the tallest tower. “Here, this way!” She pushed into it, but the door wouldn’t budge. “I think it’s locked.” Veronica tried kicking it, then when that failed, she threw out her arm and blasted the door with a gust of wind. A huge cloud of dust exploded off the stone wall and blew through her and Manie’s hair, but the door remained closed. Veronica’s eyes rolled back into her head and she tipped over sideways and barely caught herself with her hands on the ground before her head smashed into the stones. “*Fuck...*”

“Are you okay?” Manie asked as she grabbed Veronica’s arm.

“I’m fine...” Vee said back, sounding exhausted. “I’m using my powers too much.”

Manie could see the panic in Veronica’s eyes like she was looking through cracked windows. Manie tried to find a way for them to escape. Her eyes glided up the building beside them until she saw a bucket of bricks hanging from a pulley system high over their heads, where construction was being done on the building. “Veronica look! If we cut that rope, the bricks might swing down into the door and smash it open.”

The group of thugs came sliding around the corner with Tonila at their heels. “There she is!”

“Yeah, I guess that might work.” Veronica climbed back to her feet and unsheathed a black dagger from her hip, then handed it to Manie. “Take it and climb. I’ll hold them off.”

“All the way up there?!” Manie asked, feeling her heart rise to her throat.

“You can do this, it’s not even a quarter as high as your tower. Just don’t look down.”

Manie focused on the knife in her hands, her fingers shaking like she’d been blasted by icy wind. An hour ago she’d been trying on dresses for a banquet, now she was facing a group of armed men and a daunting climb. Manie closed her eyes and took a breath. “*Okay, I can do this.*” She tightened her fingers around the knife and bit her lower lip, looking up the outside of the building. There were bricks sticking out of the wall she could climb. She grabbed the first one and pulled herself up, leaning close against the stones so she wouldn’t fall.

“Go, Manie,” Veronica shouted, her voice thin with hope.

“We can ransom the young one to the king,” Tark growled in Tonila’s ear. “Send him a few fingers in a box and this could be a much juicier payday than even what that key can give us.”

Veronica turned and ran back down the alley to face Tonila and Tark and the rest of Darko’s thugs. She slid to a stop just ahead of them, making everyone pause. “If you come one step closer you’re going to find out what I’ll do to protect my sister from monsters like you...”

Manie smiled when she heard the terrifying sound coming from her sister’s throat.

Tonila looked at Tark, then back to Veronica. “If you want to protect your sister, then give us the key you stole. Otherwise I can’t guarantee she won’t face the consequences of *your actions*.”

“There’s no gold in the temple,” Veronica shouted. “Ivan lied to all of us. The key won’t make you rich.”

“If that’s true, then hand it over and everyone can go home,” Tonila said.

“I can’t. It’s the key to something far more valuable than gold...”

“What’s more valuable than gold?” Tark growled.

“The future,” Veronica replied in a soft voice. “A future only people like me can see.”

“*The future?*” Tark asked back. “What is that even supposed to mean? I’m going to slap those riddles out of your mouth when I get a hold of you.”

Manie looked up, from the shadows of the tall towers, and saw ropes and ladders running up the side of a building on the next level of the city, illuminated in gold by the beams of sunlight. The stonework on the corner was being repaired, and the giant bucket of white bricks was hanging from ropes and swinging in the wind. “I’m almost there.”

Manie climbed a small ladder that had fallen and was jammed between the walls to get a better view of the bucket. As she pulled herself up its side, the ladder twisted and she nearly plummeted all the way to the stones below. “*Oh no*,” Manie screamed as she regripped the wood rungs and pulled herself on top, balancing on two steps, her legs and arms now shaking from the near fall. The ground was far below, enough to make her stomach turn when she gazed at the drop. She looked over her shoulder towards the bucket but the ropes were still out of reach. Manie walked up the ladder to the wall and leaned against it, shimmying along the rim of the building towards the ropes.

One of the thugs lunged out to grab Veronica’s arm but missed, so she raised her hands and shot a blast of air into the man’s face, making him fall back and slide across the alley on his ass. Veronica fished out a chunk of stone from under the garbage and debris and shot it from her hand with a blast of wind, making it whip through the crowd

of attackers like a ballista bolt. Tark and Tonila ducked as the rest of their group dove and twisted to reach safety.

“Turn around and leave now!” Veronica screamed, trying not to let her eyes close from the exhaustion whipping through her. Sweat built on her forehead like she’d turned to melting ice.

As Manie reached the end of the ledge she was standing on, she looked up to the ropes and saw that they were still out of reach. Her legs nearly buckled as she realized what she had to do. “Don’t look down!” She pushed off the ledge and dove through the air. Her arms wrapped around the wooden beam the ropes were hanging from and her legs swung forwards, causing the hand she was clutching Veronica’s dagger with to slide off the boards. Manie screamed as her legs dropped and the knife slipped from her fingers, twirling and tumbling towards the ground below. “*No!*”

The thug beside Tark dove into Veronica’s legs and knocked her to the ground. She coughed as stones in the alley bit into her back. She pounded her fists against the thugs neck and head but it seemed to affect him as much as a pecking bird. “*Get off me!*”

He flipped Veronica onto her stomach and planted his boot between her shoulders. “Stay still!” The man turned back to Tark and waved him over. “I got her!”

Veronica watched her black dagger smack into the ground beside her and bounce within reach like it was a wish being granted. She slid out her arm and grabbed the weapon, then swiftly swung it around and plunged the tip into the ankle of the thug who was restraining her, making blood spray across the stones. He grabbed his ankle, screaming as he lost balance and fell, his boot coming off Veronica’s back. Veronica jumped to her feet as soon as his weight left her bones and she twisted around to face the group of attackers before they got any closer, holding out her bloody blade. “Who else wants a taste?”

Manie grabbed the wooden beam and pulled herself up with her elbows. She could easily see the bucket from here. The ropes were just ahead, but now she had no way to cut them. “I have to try something...” She remembered her training in the mansion. Manie threw out her arm and shot a burst of lightning from her palm with a grunt of effort, and the electricity struck and burned through the rope like it was a white-hot blade carving through butter, then the lightning ripped into the wood behind the bucket and exploded into a ball of flames and sparks and black smoke. Fire erupted towards Manie like the breath of a Renjin, and she nearly fell trying to avoid being burned. The bucket plummeted down between the tall towers then snapped forward and swung when it reached the end of the rope’s slack. The bucket charged across the alley and slammed into the locked door like a hammer strike from a giant. The entire door frame broke into the tower and erupted a breath of smoke as bricks shattered and spilled into the open room.

Manie climbed up the beam until she was balancing on her stomach, then she shot her fist into the air. “Yes!” But her celebration was cut short as a loud crunch and crack shivered through the wooden beam she was clinging to. “Uh oh...” The wood abruptly snapped down the middle, bringing the entire pulley system with it. Manie dropped and screamed as she plummeted through the air towards the stones. But she landed softly in a pile of torn bags of flour at the bottom, disappearing into a cloud of dust that burst up around her. The debris from the pulley system swung down on its ropes and crumbled over the group of thugs cornering Veronica and Manie, burying everyone except Tonila in a cloud of wooden wreckage.

“Mikhail’s toes that was close!” Veronica shouted. She ran to Manie and pulled her out of the flower bags by one arm. White powder rained off her clothes in long streams. Manie squealed like a mouse as Veronica set her onto the ground. “You okay?”

Manie patted flour off her clothes and looked at her arms. “I’m okay. I survived.” She coughed a white breath.

“You’re dead in this city after this!” Tonila shouted as she lifted boards off Tark. “When Darko finds out you’re keeping that key from him he’ll have Brenna and me break your legs! King’s daughter or not!”

“You’ll have to catch me first!” Veronica grabbed Manie, pushing her into a run. “Go go go!”

Veronica and Manie ran for the broken doorway at the end of the alley, both of them laughing like bandits as they disappeared into the room. The door was completely broken off its hinges, leaned against a tall shelf holding stacks of filled and torn flower bags on the far end of the room. White flour had spilled everywhere and powdered the air in a cloud from the impact, and the bucket of bricks had carved a deep slash in the wood floor where it toppled over.

The blades of the flour mill spun and whined overhead, letting beams of white light filter in and swirl across the room. Manie could hear footsteps closing in from the alley. Veronica seemed to hear the footsteps too. There was a stack of flour bags near the door almost as high as the roof. “Help me with this!” Vee and Manie grabbed the edge of the shelf and pushed until it tumbled over and collapsed into a mound of bags that blocked the entrance.

“Will that stop them?” Manie asked, frantic to receive an answer.

Tonila came to the doorway and shoved an arm through where the sacks hadn’t piled high enough to cover, her carved face shifting into view. “Don’t move!” She shouted.

“Nope!” Veronica replied. “Come on!” She grabbed Manie’s arm and turned to the stairs at the back corner, circling up the middle of the tower. When they got to the top,

Veronica slammed into an old wooden door, blasting through and out onto a rooftop high above the city. Denengear stretched away before them like a jungle of stone towers and rivers of cobblestone streets that went on and on for miles, all dressed in gold and glass windows, reaching high above a sea of wooden hovels and clay structures centered around the outskirts of the city. Giant kites from the festival were everywhere, like wooden whales swimming through a sea of clouds.

Footsteps pounded up from below. Veronica grabbed the door and slammed it shut behind her.

Manie put her hands over her ears. “We’re trapped!”

“No we’re not.” Veronica turned from corner to corner but the roof of the mill ended in a deadly drop in all directions. No other towers were near enough to make the leap. “Oh shit...”

“What do we do now?” Manie shouted, panic in her voice like she was about to drown.

Veronica searched again for some kind of escape, but there was nothing to see: no ladders, no doors, no stairs to descend. Manie saw it more clearly than her sister did. They were stuck. Veronica went to the farthest edge of the building and looked down. Manie wrapped her arms around Vee’s waist just as a flock of birds erupted from the rain troughs below and scared them both back.

The door burst open behind and Veronica and Manie twisted back to see Tark and Tonila standing in the entrance. “Nowhere left to run,” Tonila said with a toothy smile, “and you can’t beg your way out this time. Darko’s a long way from this side of the city.”

“You know, someone could really get hurt up here,” Veronica said. “Why don’t you just give this whole thing up? The only thing Ivan’s key can give you is some junk from a thousand years ago that belongs in a *museum*. This is pointless.”

Tonila snickered. “Whatever it is, you already told us it’s more valuable than gold. I’m not stupid.”

“I think I might have some arguments against that last point,” Veronica replied.

“Give up the key, *Veronica*. Do you really want your sister to get hurt because of your mistake?”

“She’s not the one who’s going to get hurt,” Veronica replied, eyes gaining an edge.

Tonila shook her head. “That’s not how this works, and you know that. I’ll give you one last chance, then I’m going to take a few fingers—from both of you.” Tonila held out her knife and squinted like a snake about to strike. “You know I don’t want to.”

Manie gasped and squeezed Veronica’s waist, taking inventory of the ten fingers she still possessed. She tried to find a way to escape like when she’d seen the bucket, but

there was nothing to do. She could hardly breathe, she was so afraid. “Vuh’-Vee...do something...!”

Veronica’s mouth came open and her eyes started to rise. Manie tracked where her sister was looking and saw, through the turning blades of the flour mill, one of the giant kites sailing right towards them from out of the Sky District. The kite’s rope was dangling below, low enough to reach. Manie’s mouth came open as she realized what her sister was going to do. “Oh no...”

The kite drifted over the roof, rope slapping the buildings as it came in. Tark turned around just in time for the knot at the end of the rope to smack him in the mouth. “*What the fu-?*”

“I’ve got a better idea,” Veronica shouted. “Hold on, Manie, we’re going for a ride!” Veronica pulled Manie’s arms around her waist and snapped her fingers together like chains.

“*Veronica!*” Manie screamed as she hung on with all her strength.

“*GRAB HER!!!*” Tonila shouted at the top of her lungs.

The rope dragged past them and fell over the rim of the mill’s roof.

Veronica dove off the mill with Manie hanging to her waist and grabbed the rope with both hands. “*SHIIIIIT!!*”

Manie screamed at the top of her lungs as the giant kite nosed down from the weight and fell. Her stomach shot to her throat as she saw the ground come up to meet them, but the kite caught the wind at the last second and whipped back up, sailing off into the city between the canyon of tall towers like a soaring eagle as the frame shook and vibrated in the wind.

“*Yes!*” Veronica shouted. “Please don’t stop!”

“We’ll find you, Veronica!” Tonila yelled from the rooftop behind them. “And when we do, *you’re dead!* You can’t hide from us forever. This was your last chance!”

“Yeah, like I’ve never heard *that* one before!” Veronica screamed back, laughing as her voice echoed between the towers. “Bye bye, Tee! See you back at The Forge!”

Tark kicked a bag of flower off the roof. “Damn! There goes our bonus!”