

# **Greenwood**

## **Dark Remorse**

By Jonathan Vega-Argueta

# Chapter One

“All of you are here because of the special gift you were born with,” announced the tall woman behind the podium. “You were born with an ability some can only wish to hold. You were born to be different from the rest of us. You were born to mark your place in this world. All of you are nothing short of miracles that science still begs to understand after decades.”

Henry hadn’t been to many orientations, but he was sure this was one of the worst. Strangers surrounded him, and the chairs, which were as comfortable as they were spacious, ensured that elbows were touching. The stage holding the podium where the woman was speaking was taller than it needed to be, which Henry could only assume was to force down their throats the power that they wielded over them.

“Some of you were born with the ability to bend fire to your will. Some of you were born with the ability to bring winter on a hot summer day. Some of you were born with the ability to leap higher than skyscrapers. While all your Gifts are different, I’m sure you were given them for a special reason. We here at Greenwood University believe that all of you can become even greater than the Gifts you were born with.”

Henry stared at the woman to see if she had any quiver in her voice, but he could tell that she wasn’t lying. However, when he looked around the auditorium, it was far from a welcoming introduction to college life. Harvard was well beyond his reach, but he knew well that their orientations did not have men in full gear of protection marching around with weapons of war strapped tightly to their sides. Henry knew that if he even moved a muscle when not instructed to, they would be quick to strike him down with no hesitation.

“I sincerely believe that Greenwood University is the place where you can find solace and comfort. Many of you will be living far from home, experiencing life on your own for the

first time. I was there once upon a time, but just as I was given a place to call home, I will make sure that Greenwood University becomes that home away from home. People will always be willing to lend a helping hand, ensuring you don't trip up. Here at Greenwood, we see you for what you are: young adults in need of direction but full of promise."

That wasn't true; Henry knew exactly how they were viewed. Their abilities were called Gifts; the woman even called it a blessing, but he knew what they were. He had seen what they were since he was young, the fear in everyone else's eyes when they saw him. Henry had known since the age of four that what he had was never once considered a Gift. To the woman giving the speech, to the guards ready to kill at a moment's notice, and to every person on this planet born without a Gift, what Henry held in common with everyone else in that same auditorium was only one thing-

"A disease," Henry heard a guard whisper to his mate.

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It had been a month since. Henry had to admit that Greenwood University was a nice place, but one could not ignore the feeling of being criminals of a crime that they could not control.

The morning sunlight roared and announced the new day. Whenever the alarm failed to go off, the sun would always be there to ensure that he didn't even sleep a wink more. Curtains were not an option, as the reception desk worker stated they posed a security threat. Whether that threat was to Henry or those outside the university's walls was something the worker did not mention.

Henry sprang out of bed and prepared to go on his morning run when Adam, his long-time friend and roommate, groaned like a hibernating bear.

"Are we having nice dreams over there?"

Adam rose from his bed as if he were Dracula. Henry couldn't help but notice that his messy blonde hair took the shape of freshly microwaved noodles.

"Well, if you consider having dinner with the middle school principal as a nice dream," Adam muttered under his breath, to which Henry could only respond with a look of confusion. "The answer to that is yes." Adam finished, flashing his bright smile.

Henry finished tying his shoes and went on his way, leaving Adam to presumably fall back to sleep for another hour at minimum. Though it had marked a month here at Greenwood, it had almost felt like nothing had changed from when they left home. They lived in the same house for years and even grew to sometimes call the other brother, but that was only when things got serious, which with Adam is rarer than finding a diamond. Henry could not have imagined the family he had when he was adopted after his Uncle's death; they welcomed him with open arms and made sure that he felt loved. Henry cracked a little smile at the memory of it all, but it quickly faded as he ran into her.

"Hey! Isn't it quite early, Henry?" the cheery blonde-haired girl asked.

*Vicky*. She was the resident advisor on this floor and the first to introduce herself openly to him. Many were reluctant, considering his past, but she seemingly was more than willing to shake his hand on move-in day. While the warm greeting was appreciated, the honeymoon period was cut quite short once she had begun to become an annoying and almost nosy neighbor.

"Yes, it is, but you know, early to bed and early to rise makes a person healthy, wealthy, and wise. I believe that it was Benjamin Franklin who said that." Henry muttered, following the steps of Adam's father whenever someone had asked that question. Even flashing the same fake smile he would.

“I suppose that is true; I mean, I am much the same. Though you won’t find me heading to bed anytime soon when exam season comes up!” Vicky chuckled, which Henry could only awkwardly reciprocate.

“Well, if you don’t mind, I am going to go for my morning run. I want to get the blood flowing before another busy day. I am sure that you know that very well.” Henry told her, and even though he had declared his intention to leave, she remained in the same spot in the middle of the long hallway.

“Oh, okay. Well, I am glad I was able to catch you. It seems sometimes that you just never want to come out of your room. Every time I come, Adam is always there to answer. You know, one would not be shy to think that you were avoiding me. You aren’t right?” Vicky asked, her eyes resembling those of an injured puppy.

Henry knew he was, but he also knew that telling someone would only hurt them. Plus, she was the only stranger who greeted him with a smile. She was annoying, but he found it a bit endearing.

“Of course not! You have been nothing but kind to me. Why in the world would I ever want to escape from you? I have to get going, but I will make sure to say hello when I can!”

Henry told her, slipping past her on his way to the elevator. She responded with a wave and a bright smile that Henry was sure could power anything. As soon as he turned around, he wiped the smile off his face and patiently waited for the elevator to ding on his floor, which, after a while, it did.

As the numbers slowly dropped to one, he mentally prepared himself for each stop that the elevator made. Whenever the doors slid open, and the person waiting for the elevator saw that it was him inside, they were always quick to pass it up. They all looked at him with terror,

worrying that somehow sharing a tiny space with him would lead them to their inevitable demise. Henry could even recall the one time that a person on crutches attempted to use the stairs rather than share a ride for a mere number of seconds with him.

As he hit the ground floor and walked out the doors, the guards quickly stood at attention, each placing a finger on the trigger.

“Don’t worry, I am just going for my morning run, not planning on killing anyone or causing a whole reign of terror.” Henry sarcastically stated as he walked out the front gates of Dancer Hall. The sun was still beating down on him as it was in his room.

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Morning runs had always been a way for Henry to find time to think. The fresh air and feeling of adrenaline allowed him to be distracted from the harsh reality that was the real world. Though even when he tries to escape, there is still an element of a dead pixel to the false screen.

Across the campus, at least two guards were stationed at almost every few yards, ready to defend the university. As he chased the sun through campus, he quickly found that the further he ran from his room, the fewer guards he would find. He even found a little tree atop a distant hill where there was not a single guard within a three-mile radius. The view was always something out of a film, with the beautiful combination of greenery meshing with the tall skyscrapers of Greenwood. As Henry drew closer to the top of the hill, he saw that someone else had gotten there before him.

“Oh, hey. This is one hell of a view, huh?”

It was Ethan, another long-time friend, whom he had also come to see as a brother. He was weirdly calm, and even though he had been the first to speak, it felt as if he had quickly faded Henry out of the setting. Though something else drew Henry’s interest.

“Yeah, my favorite spot. It allows you to escape from the world of troops and Gifts. Here you can just enjoy the brightness of the sun and the feel of the grass under your hands. I can keep rambling on, but first, what’s with the fresh wrap of bandage on your wrist?”

Ethan looked at his wrist, then at Henry, and then returned his gaze to the mirage. Henry couldn’t help but notice the dead gaze that was present not only in his eyes but in his entire presence.

“Take your best shot; I promise you already know the answer.” Ethan told him, with his voice not even breaking.

Henry knew exactly what he was talking about: his father and sister, who was left alone to his whims ever since Ethan was forced to live with the rest of them. Thankfully, they still allow for free travel, meaning that when he needed to, he could protect his sister, though he would almost always be too late to stop anything. Henry had met his father a few times when he was younger, but after his mother’s death, he became a different person. He could recall a time when he even asked Adam’s Mom about the whole situation, and all she could do was stare at him with so much sadness in her eyes.

“Death changes people, Henry. Mr. Harson allowed the darkness from inside to come out, and he is no longer the same person he was before. From here on out, we are just not going to visit, okay? I promise that Ethan can still come over to hang out.” she said with a smile that did little to hide the fear she had about him.

Ethan, for five years, was left with the burden of the drunken man filled with rage.

“He called her a disease. He grabbed her from her bed and just spat in her face.”

Henry felt his heart stop and blood begin to rush, with his fingers slowly curling into a fist, attempting to hold back any anger that had not already seeped out.

“What?”

“He called her sick. He told her that she was just going to be like me, a disease that only brought pain to the house. She started to cry, and all he could think to do at the time was slap her across the face, along with leaving his mark. She immediately called me and asked me to save her.” Ethan explained, staring at his hands as if they were covered with any traces of blood.

Henry felt his chest tighten; he knew exactly what had gone through Ethan’s mind when she said that. Ethan was born with a Gift far more dangerous than any person should hold, most especially someone just entering college: radiation manipulation. He was born to parents who couldn’t teach him to properly use his ability, just as Adam, but he still knew one trick very well. One touch, and he could kill anyone he wished.

“You didn’t, right?”

“No, but I would be lying to you if I said I wasn’t tempted to. I rushed in and punched him. No radiation, but there was plenty of blood. That drunk piece of shit couldn’t do anything but throw a glass beer bottle at me. I will admit that it did some damage.” Ethan said, pointing to his new bandage. “He couldn’t get off the ground; he looked so weak. I wanted to kill him right there, but I knew I shouldn’t. I just warned him that if I ever got a call like that again, I would promise not to think twice. He told me that if I ever came back, he wouldn’t hesitate to kill me.”

Silence hung in the air for a couple of minutes; Henry not bringing himself to break it. It was the same story every time; no matter if it was at lunch in high school or under this tree. The first day Ethan came to school with bruise marks was the day Henry learned very quickly why Adam’s mom wanted to create distance, and that even without Gifts, humanity was unbelievably ugly.



“Are you going to be okay? I know that I can’t do much, but I want you to know that Adam and I will help in any way that we can.” Henry assured him, hoping that it would be the best way to break the layer of silence that had built up.

“Yeah, I’ll be okay. It’s my sister I’m worried about. I hope that my threat meant something and that he won’t even think of ever touching her again.”

Henry nodded his head in agreement and joined him in staring out at the peaceful sky. After a while, Henry looked at his watch and noticed that it would soon be time for him to return to Dancer Hall and prepare for class. He looked back at Ethan to see if his expression had changed, but his composure was much the same.

“I have to get going back, but text me if you need anything. Also, make sure to hide that new bandage from Adam; we don’t need him getting riled up and threatening to throw golden baseballs at your father again. I’m sorry about your sister, and I promise you that if anything happens again, I will be among the first to help you deal with him.”

As Henry began his descent down the hill and back to the heavily guarded fortress that was Greenwood University, he felt the buzz of his phone. He swiftly grabbed his phone to check if Ethan had sent him anything he didn’t want to say aloud.

*Hey! It’s me, Vicky! I asked Adam for your number, as I thought it wouldn’t hurt to have a way to communicate in case one of us missed our classes. Plus, we can plan fun events and maybe even a study group. Text me when you’ve read this!*

Henry let out a loud, exhausted sigh and weakly put his phone back into his pocket.

## Chapter Two

Henry always thought that college was the place where people could explore their interests more, but for diseases like him, one is given a schedule and has to live by it. Greenwood University was just an extension of high school, though this time, they could legally kill any of the students. Those who taught classes were props put in by the so-called Gifted Protection Agency, or the State, as they have come to be affectionately called. The professors viewed them with such heavy disgust, as science experiments just waiting to be torn into.

Gifteds and Society 101 was always a fun class, where the professor would yell at the students, calling them traitors to God. Henry had the class today, sharing it with Vicky, who was the only student seemingly brave enough to sit next to him. Even the professor refrained from giving Henry any remarks because his pure desire for life mattered more than his doctrine that everyone with a Gift is a monster deserving of being berated.

Henry sat in his normal spot at the back of the room, feeling the gaze of everyone on him. There were always people staring, from when he was young and riding his bike to when he walked down the halls for lunch in high school. They always looked at him as if he were some bomb, where one push of a button would set him off on a path of destruction. It had become something of a normal affair, though it always hurt him to see how it affected those around him. Adam's parents were always stared at, being treated as devil worshipers, along with Adam and Ethan, who were treated as outcasts because they maintained any association with him.

"Hey! I wasn't sure if you got my text, but I didn't want to overstep your boundaries by sending a whole flood of them asking if you did. Did you get my text?" Vicky asked him as she placed her stuff next to him on an elongated table used as an excuse for a desk.

“Yeah, I did. I wasn’t able to get back to you because I was busy talking to a friend, and I also wasn’t exactly sure as to how to respond.”

“Hey, don’t sweat about it. I sometimes don’t know what to tell people either. However, I found that with practice, you get better at it. Did you do the reading for this week? I found it to be one-sided, but I guess what else is new here at Greenwood?” Vicky asked, letting out a slight chuckle, but Henry could tell she hated the whole gimmick of State agents cosplaying as professors.

Before he could respond, the professor aggressively pulled the door open, and the hush marking the beginning of class had fallen over. He marched over and turned on the projector. With that, Henry found himself paying very little attention to the lecture. He grabbed his phone and tried to distract himself from the class, but he felt himself drawn to the message that Vicky had sent. Henry thought that she was playing around with him, acting as a savior to those who deemed him in need of control. That this was all some act, that all those smiles she gave him, every wave, every hello, was some sort of role that she painted on every time she saw him. Though with the morning text, it seemed that this was not the case and that maybe something bigger was at play. The more Henry tried to piece together what exactly drew this bright bubble of pure sunshine to someone who was seen as the end of days, he felt his mind leave the classroom and become engulfed in the confusion.

“Why?” Henry accidentally whispered aloud, which he quickly cursed, hoping that she had not heard.

“Why, what?” she asked, dashing his hopes very quickly.

Henry maintained eye contact with her and debated what the right course of action was. Could he just simply ask her why she was entertaining him? Should he just play it off as

confusion? She flashed him a smile, as she seemingly always did, and he conceded that maybe the truth is sometimes better fished to the surface than hoping that it would willingly come up for air.

“Why do you treat me so nicely? I mean, everyone either turns their heads, refuses to make any contact, or even share the tiniest of spaces with me. You are the only person here that I was not already friends with who is willing to even shake my hand. You are adored by all, and I am viewed as a terror with the sins of my mother strapped on my back. I am just so confused, and honestly, no matter how I try to put the pieces together, I keep thinking that this is some sort of fun act for you. If so-”

“Are you asking me why I want to be friends with you? I did not realize that it required an explanation. Maybe I thought you would be an interesting person to get to know, and so far, I have not been proven wrong. As for your past, trust me, I am very well informed of everything surrounding you, but that was your mother, not you. You are here, so clearly they deemed you civil enough to sit with the rest of us; otherwise, they would have had you in some sort of cage like a wild animal.”

Henry tried to look for shifting eyes or awkward hand movements, even maybe the slightest hint of discomfort, but he couldn't find any evidence of falsehood. He couldn't believe that someone viewed him positively, as someone who was not a devil born of sin. He was so alone, with only Adam and Ethan to provide him company, but some part of him was elated to find out that maybe Vicky could be a possible addition to the ensemble. Henry wanted to ask more questions about how she viewed him, but Vicky prompted him with a question of her own.

“Was it awkward the first time we met? I mean, considering our past, I was expecting things to go down a whole lot worse than they did.”

“Awkward? Our past?” Henry asked in return.

Vicky continued staring at him, hoping that an answer would come to his mind, but all she got in return was a look of complete blankness in his eyes. Her bright smile had suddenly shaped into a more muted expression.

“Do you not know what I am talking about?”

“Uh, no? I'm sure we met for the first time on a moving day. I am not exactly sure of what past you are talking about,” Henry responded, unknowingly adding more tension to the situation.

“The last name Bowers ring a bell? A person with the light manipulation Gift, same as me? Any connections at all in that head of yours?” Vicky asked, this time with a bit of nervousness and urgency in her voice.

“Bowers? Light manipulation? As far as I am concerned, you are the only person that I know who fits that description, so if you are referring to someone else, I am completely dumbfounded here.”

Vicky kept her eye contact with Henry, but her eyes had slowly dimmed to an almost deadpan stare with no sign of life. It was as if Henry had just told her that her dog had been freed from its leash and ran into the street. She searched for words, her lips trembling each time she attempted to let them escape her mouth. Her hands were shaking, and her legs were moving in motion as if she were attempting a marathon in her chair.

“Molly Bowers. She was my mother. I lost her very young. I only ever got to know her through pictures and the stories that my Dad would tell me. It was from her that I learned to be kind to all and always extend forgiveness, no matter the past they harbor. I have always upheld that standard, even when it came to you.” Vicky said as she shifted into a strict stance.

“Well, I’m very sorry to hear about your mother. If it makes you feel any better, even though she was not the best person, I lost my mother young, too. I even lost my Uncle a few years later, leaving me with nothing. So I understand what you are going through, and I am so glad that she taught you to look beyond someone’s past or worst moments.” Henry told her, placing his right hand on her shoulder. Vicky aggressively gripped his wrist and began to slowly twist his skin. “Henry, you can’t relate at all.”

Henry looked at her with a mixture of confusion and pain, as her face kept a cold expression.

“What do you mean I can’t relate at all? She was a bad person, but I still lost her at a young age, like you did.” As these words left Henry’s mouth, he felt Vicky tighten her grip on his wrist, testing the limits.

“You can’t relate because your mother killed mine.”

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A few hours had passed since that interaction. After spilling her information to Henry, she quickly turned to face the class and refused to answer any remaining questions he held. As soon as class had finished, she was quick to gather her supplies and leap for the exit. Henry had sent her multiple texts in some desperate hope that maybe she would answer, though it seemed that nothing was working. All Henry could do for the rest of the morning was replay her twisting his wrist and saying, *Your mother killed mine*.

As he walked towards the dining center, lifting his head to brave the heat, he saw her not too far ahead. He wanted to shout her name in hopes of grabbing her attention, but he knew better than to draw the attention of a crowd. That didn’t stop him from trying to go and confront

her, but as he began to push through the crowd of students, he was greeted with a slap to the back of his head.

“Are you in a hurry, too? I also need to make sure that those delicious, heavenly, perfectly sliced pieces of breakfast pizza find a home in my stomach,” proclaimed Adam, rubbing his stomach as if he had already laid his hands on his prize.

“No, sorry, it was something else.”

“What? Was it about Ethan? I was with him in class this morning, and I could tell something was off. I mean, he was wearing a long-sleeved sweater in September! He might as well book himself a treatment down at the sauna, though I might have to join him to score a little.” Adam jokingly stated, jabbing Henry in the side, accidentally hitting his weakened wrist, which he reflexively flinched.

“You too? Is this a secret prank you and Ethan are trying to do? If it is, don’t tell me; I would much rather be surprised.”

Henry couldn’t help but laugh at the sheer ridiculousness that was Adam, who never failed to bring a smile to his face when he most needed it.

“No, it’s not. You don’t need to worry about keeping your guard up or anything. Let’s go get you some breakfast pizza and hopefully run into Ethan along the way. The lines are only going to get longer, you know.”

The gears inside Adam’s head clicked, reading an emergency signal. He blasted off into a full sprint towards the dining center, leaving Henry well in tow. As he began to gain ground on him, he saw a fleeting moment of Vicky’s face, which was nothing but distraught.

*Your mother killed mine.*

Henry had the moment once again flash across his mind, but he just shook it out, hoping that maybe with time and some food, it would be nothing but another addition to his poor excuse for human interaction.

Adam was first to the entrance, tapping his toes as he stood there waiting for him. Henry hated how everyone seemingly steered clear of him, though Adam always made sure to use it to his advantage. Wherever he went, there was rarely a line, and wherever he sat, there would almost always be an assured guarantee that there would be plenty of table room and seats. No matter the situation, Adam seemingly always found a way to turn a negative into a positive. This was one that Henry quickly found to be useful at amusement parks and malls.

Once they had grabbed their dishes of choice, Adam a stack of breakfast pizza and Henry a simple cheeseburger with fries, they ventured to a space to sit in the crowded center. After a while of searching, they found Ethan already sitting on his own, with no one sitting next to him as expected.

“I hope those seats are not taken, because I am about to leave my butt print all over them.” Adam proclaimed, seeing Ethan give out a little smirk, which he interpreted as a victory.

“Hey guys. I see Adam decided to go with the signature lunch dish. I must wonder what goes through your Mom’s mind when you tell her what you eat.”

“That’s the trick, you see; you simply just don’t tell her.” Adam winked and finger gunned as if he were a businessman closing down a deal. The group laughed, allowing Henry to forget everything that had happened that morning.

As the sound of the cafeteria crowd died down, Adam looked at Henry with a puzzling look, prompting him to quickly wipe his face, thinking that maybe some leftover ketchup had left its mark on his cheek.



“It’s nothing on your face; I was just thinking back to this morning. My wonderful dream date with Ms. Gazli was interrupted by another blonde beauty, but she wasn’t there for me. It seems our RA needed your number quite early in the morning, so I, of course, kindly obliged.” Adam smiled, his teeth perfectly stained by the pizza cheese. “Though, if you don’t mind me asking, why exactly do you think she asked me for your number? I mean, it’s not like you are the most open-armed person. I swear a fire hydrant has more charisma.”

Henry frowned at the comparison, but he could say nothing in opposition because he knew the value of the statement was far from false. “She was hoping to become friends with me. I asked her about it during our history class, and that was the response that she gave me.”

Adam's ears perked up as if he had heard the ding of the pizza oven, staring at Henry with the buggiest eyes and widest grin. “Well, she should have said so earlier! She is more than welcome to sit with us, especially in the seat next to mine. So what smooth response did you give her after she told you that? Was it like, Vicky, we are now bound by friendship, and I swear to always protect you?”

“The conversation ended up with her telling me that my Mom killed her Mom,” Henry stated, with the harsh feeling from that moment igniting inside him again.

“Damn. I knew you were bad at talking with the ladies, but that is a new low. Though with you, there is always a new low being set.” Adam jokingly said, launching his arm in the air for a high five from Ethan, which he answered. Adam’s eyes were suddenly drawn to the slipping sleeve of Ethan’s sweater, catching sight of the bloodied bandage wrapped around his wrist. “What is that?”

Ethan quickly grabbed his sleeve and attempted to rehide the wound, but Adam was faster, keeping his arm frozen in the air. He studied it and, most notably, paid attention to the

freshly dried blood reaching the surface. His demeanor took a serious turn as he continued to investigate the wound.

“When did you get this? Who did this to you?”

Ethan looked at Henry in the hopes that he would somehow help in the situation, but all he could do was return the same concerned face from when he first learned about it.

“I went back home to protect my sister. This is just some shards of broken glass from his beers, nothing too crazy to worry about.” Ethan declared defiantly, knowing there was no escaping the truth.

Adam’s breath grew heavy, and it was clear that to him, it was something to worry about. He was the one who was always quick to protect Ethan since they were kids. Henry tried to show restraint whenever possible, but for Adam, all that mattered was the littlest bit of contact, and he was ready to jump into action.

“We have to go now! I am going to show that piece of shit what happens when he doesn’t learn to keep his hands to himself. I am sure he won’t mind the taste of gold in his mouth.”

Adam angrily jeered as he erupted from his chair. Ethan quickly reacted by pushing him back.

“No, there is no need. I already warned him that if he were to try anything again, there would not be any second chances. I am sure this time that she will be okay.”

Adam was not satisfied with the answer and once again erupted from his chair, this time with a bit more determination. Henry could tell that there was a fire inside him, but he feared it would be directed in the wrong fashion.

“You have given a whole boatload of second chances, and he never learns. I know that we legally can’t kill him, but I don’t see the harm in beating him till he can’t walk. I say we show him how weak he made you feel.”

Ethan sighed and just went back to his sandwich, giving up on cooling down the spirited Adam, which Henry took as his turn in the arena.

“You aren’t going to do anything of the sort. What exactly are you going to do? You are built like a man who would blow when a heavy gust runs through the city. All you can do is make baseball-sized golden balls. You would be knocked to the ground before you knew it. I suggest that you sit back down before you go and do something stupid.”

The fire in Adam’s eyes died, replaced with a wounded expression. Henry knew that what he said had gotten to him, but it was also the only way to kill his spirit. Being born to Giftless parents made it almost impossible for Adam to use his Gift of Gold manipulation to its full potential. He somehow learned one day to form golden balls based on the only sport that he was half decent at. They had become his trademark, but compared to those around him, he grew insecure about his ability.

“You know I can do some damage with my Gift. It may not be as deadly as Ethan’s or as dangerous as yours, but at least I use it and don’t hide it away because I am ashamed of it.” Adam mumbled, stabbing into the remaining slice on his plate.

“You know exactly why I keep my Gift under wraps—because of exactly how dangerous it is. You don’t get to tell me what I shouldn’t be ashamed of, especially when you have no grasp of what it’s like to walk around with such a disease. You were lucky to be born with the ability to make riches with your hands. You don’t know half the pain people like Ethan and I had to deal with our whole lives.” Henry venomously retorted.

Adam looked significantly more hurt by that remark than anything that Henry had said before. He furiously shoved Henry away and began to march towards the exit. All the while,

Ethan kept staring at his plate, refusing to lift his head. Henry got up and followed Adam, hoping he had not just ruined another relationship.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean that. You know how I get when you talk about my Gift. It’s not exactly something that I’m glad to be born with.”

Adam turned back to face Henry, with a look on his face that was filled with clear determination.

“I know you guys can’t do anything because of your Gifts, but that doesn’t mean I can’t. I am going to prove to you that my Gift can make a difference. That first difference is going to be Ethan’s father.” Adam stated as he marched back towards the exit. Henry stretched out and grabbed his arm, stopping Adam right in his tracks.

“Let me go. I am not going to ask a second time,” he muttered under his breath.

“I’m not going to do that. I can’t let you go out there and hurt yourself. I am not going to let you stain your image because you wanted to prove a point. Please don’t do anything stupid.” Henry desperately pleaded.

Adam suddenly whipped around, formed a golden ball in his hand, and with perfect pitcher accuracy, he threw the ball right at Henry’s head, which he swiftly dodged. Though as the intended target moved, it naturally found itself a new one. The ball made full-force contact with the back of a man’s head, who had been enjoying his plate of mashed potatoes. Adam and Henry quickly felt their blood run cold, staring at each other in search of an idea of what to do next.

“Who threw this?!” yelled out the newly wounded man. He was dressed from head to toe in biker gear, with a poorly groomed mullet sitting atop his head and scars scattered all along any visible bit of skin. While it would be wrong to jump to conclusions, it was not exactly a wild

claim to fear that this man was someone that Henry and, most assuredly, Adam didn't want to get involved with.

"Someone answer, or I am going to make sure that none of you leave here!" the man openly threatened the crowd, which summoned a silent whisper over the cafeteria.

Adam and Henry traded glances and then rushed to get to the nearest exit. They knew this was the best time to escape. As they slowly crept to the exit, the door and its handle began to freeze. Ice crept out of the cracks of the wooden door and sealed it shut, ensuring there was no escape for the two. Adam still attempted the handle and even rushed to use another golden ball to break the hard ice.

"So it was you."

Henry felt a freezing burn, and when he looked behind him to spot the origin, there stood the man. Up close, the scars seemingly drew more personality than before, and his expression was as cold as his Gift. Adam shattered the ice and immediately went for the handle. As he tried to grab hold, the ice reformed, freezing his hand to the handle. Adam attempted to free himself again, but it was to no avail. Each crack was repaired and patched with a flood of ice. Henry attempted to walk over to Adam, but he felt the man's arm fling him to the ground as he breezed by him towards Adam.

"You are not going to get out that easily. That hit hurt like hell, though I must admit you've got some hell of an arm," the man sinisterly complimented. "Last time I checked, though, my head isn't a goddamn pitcher's glove! How are you going to make it up to me, huh?"

Adam wasn't moving; he refused to blink or look away. The man continued to stare him down, refusing to provide him any space to breathe, or at least think of what the next move should be.

The man pinched his ears and allowed his breath to cover the outer case of it. “Answer me! How are you going to make it up to me?” the man screamed as he turned to face Adam, painting his left cheek with spit. Adam’s eyes quickly darted for assistance, eventually landing on Henry. His eyes were pleading for some action, for someone to help him, for anybody to do anything. Henry started crawling behind the man, but it seemed he was already a step ahead of him.

“Don’t move any closer. Take one more step, and I swear I will ram an icicle right through the back of his head.”

Henry froze as if time itself had come to a sudden stop. The man grabbed Adam’s cheeks and stretched them like a beloved family member. He summoned an icicle and placed it on the sides of Adam’s mouth, filling it with dripping water. The man suddenly crushed it between his hands, allowing the ice to run down Adam’s throat. He met Henry’s eyes with his, along with his sinister white smile, his teeth as white as the glaciers in the Arctic.

“I know exactly who you are, Henry. I know exactly who your mother is. I also don’t give a shit about that. I am not scared of you one bit. You are nothing like her, and even if she were still around, I promise you that I would have killed your mother in an instant. Your mother was nothing but a disgusting, vile disease that plagued this Earth. She was lucky people like me weren’t around to clip her wings!”

Henry felt his hands naturally curl into fists, and his feet moved in step towards the man. But the moment he took one step, the man reacted in equal fashion. He turned one of his fingers into a sharp icicle, and within the blink of an eye, he turned around and scratched right at Adam’s cheek. A deep gash was left in its wake, with blood dripping onto the ground. Henry felt his

body numb, unable to process what had happened. He looked back at the man and was greeted with the horrific image of him licking the blood, staining his white teeth.

Adam let out a yelp, collapsing to the floor, using his only free hand to hopelessly close the wound. The man drilled his boot into his stomach, causing him to let out a whimper of air and more blood onto the already stained floor. Henry launched at him, but the man was fast to the action. He formed a sword and pointed it right at Henry's throat. He slowly twisted it into his skin and pressed it closer to puncture. Before the bubble could burst, Vicky appeared behind the man.

"Alright, that's enough, John. You are coming with me."

The permanently plastered sinister smile faded. The sword and ice covering the exits had vanished, leaving no trace that they were ever present. Henry quickly rushed to Adam, trying to provide any comfort he could, seeing his clothes stained by his blood. John couldn't help but let out another harsh chuckle.

"You don't know when things go too far, do you?" Vicky bitterly asked.

"You don't know how to have fun. We were just having a little bit of fun. Couldn't you tell?"

"You call that fun?" Vicky asked, pointing to the pool of blood that remained on the tile flooring. "That's an assault on an unsuspecting victim."

"Well, maybe if he didn't throw a goddamn golden ball at the back of my head, we wouldn't have had to go down this route, now would we?" John asked in a weak attempt to paint himself as a victim.

Vicky let out a long, heavy sigh of apology. When she opened her eyes, she made eye contact with Henry for the slightest of moments, still a little bit hurt from earlier. Henry opened

his mouth to say something to her, even if it was just a thank you for stopping John, but she spoke first, ending any opportunity for him.

“Take Adam to the nurse's office. I am going to deal with John and make sure that he doesn't hurt you guys again. As for the rest of you, go back to your lunch and your days; anything that happened today does and should not concern you.” Vicky commanded, slowly dragging John away from the scene. With help from Henry, Adam got up from the ground, still massaging his gash. Ethan came rushing over, putting Adam's remaining weight on his body.

“So, do you think I am going to get a cool-looking scar from this?” Adam jokingly asked, trying to shed light on the situation.

“I am going to be honest with you. Hell yeah.” Ethan responded, bringing a smile to Adam's face. They all let out a little whimpered group laugh, showing at least some sort of life present at the moment. Henry tried to show a strong face as they carried Adam's body to the health ward, but he had an eerie feeling that it would not be the last time they would face John.



## Chapter Three

Henry kept massaging his throat, the exact spot where the sword had begun to dig. He watched Adam and Ethan during their shared math class, and they seemed perfectly calm, almost as if the cafeteria event had never happened. Adam even admitted to Henry that he was getting a lot more attention thanks to it, saying that everyone had been so kind to him, even extending a promise of protection if he was ever attacked again. Henry couldn't help but smile at that thought, but he knew those promises were worth as much as a rusted car. He saw how everyone looked at John; it was different from how any of them looked at him. He struggled to put a name to the look, but he had a strange feeling that what they felt was more real. It was a level beyond the average fear of something like a spider, but a special type of fear. The fear John had was deserved.

Henry attempted to break it down further in his mind, but he was interrupted by the lights turning on, motioning for the class to leave. He looked over to see if Adam needed help getting up, but it seemed that the health ward must have worked their magic because he was seemingly walking perfectly. His gash had even almost vanished.

"Well, it seems we were wrong; the scar was not cool at all. There is not even one to begin with! I wanted to be able to act all mysterious and walk up to a group of chicks and be like, do you want to know how I got this scar? It was a hell of a fight."

"Fight? You got your hand stuck to the door handle and pretty much stabbed; you didn't exactly put up a fight." Henry absent-mindedly stated. As soon as he realized what he had said, he was quick to ask for forgiveness, but Adam, who was left hurt by the comment, stopped him before he could even begin.

"Yeah, no need to remind me. I was talking a whole big game about making a difference and proving myself, and not even a couple of minutes later, I had my hand frozen to a door

handle. Mark my words, though; give me a second chance, and I promise you that I will not go easy on him.” Adam declared as the group left the STEM building, heading back to the dorms in hopes of catching some sort of rest from the tiring day.

Before they made any serious ground, Henry caught the slight sound of something coming towards them. Instinctively, with no reason that he could concretely point to, he pulled Adam right towards him. Adam opened his mouth to protest, but where he stood mere seconds ago came the remains of an ice dagger.

“You didn’t think we were done, did you?”

The group turned and looked at John, who was sitting quite comfortably on the roof of the building. He snapped his fingers and crafted a stairway out of ice, slowly marching down, not breaking eye contact with any of them. He let out that same sinister smile. Almost as if he had timed it to the second, he let out another dagger aimed right at Adam. Right as it was set to make contact, Henry caught it in mid-air, causing his blood to spill over the dagger before it faded back into thin air.

“I did some thinking in my downtime, and I realized that Vicky was right. I was unfair; I didn’t even give you the chance to respond with attacks of your own. So, I’ll challenge you to another fight. How about it, Adam?” John slithered, extending his arm out as if he were the Devil, hoping to reap his soul.

“Don’t do this; it’s a dumb idea.” Ethan pointed out, hoping to reach Adam’s senses, but by the mixed look of determination and anger on his face, it seemed that he was having limited success.

“You don’t say anything.” John sneered, throwing another dagger in his direction, which Henry reflexively stopped again, with the same injured hand, letting out a small whimper of pain.

“This is Adam’s battle and his alone. If you get involved in any way, then I promise you that I will take Adam out of the battle and make it ours.” John stated, winking at Henry. Henry looked over to Adam to plead with him to think twice before engaging in conflict with John, but he could tell that no matter what he said, it would not change his mind.

“Don’t worry, guys, I know what I’m doing. I told you that if there was a next time, I was going to take advantage of the situation and make sure to beat him. I promise you that I am going to kick his butt.” Adam proclaimed, giving them both a double thumbs-up. Henry sighed, knowing that there was nothing he could do but hope.

“You got yourself a duel!” Adam yelled at the top of his lungs, which somehow made John’s smile wider than it already was.

Henry and Ethan walked over to a nearby tree, left only to watch the scene that was about to unfold. Ethan, who luckily had extra bandages in his bag, wrapped up Henry’s wound.

“What do you think he meant by saying he would take Adam out of the fight if we joined? Is that not what we would want?” Ethan asked Henry as he finished tightening the bandage around the wound.

“I am not exactly sure what he meant, but I have a bad feeling he is not exactly being generous to Adam in that statement. I say, for now, we hold some faith in Adam.”

“Are you sure? All he can do is make singular golden balls with his hands. I am not exactly sure what good that would do in this fight. Or any fight, really.”

Henry looked over at Adam, who was jumping and stretching as if he were about to run a marathon. Adam looked back at him and gave him another wink and thumbs-up, flashing the same bright smile from this morning.

“I think he is going to be okay.”

John stuck his hand out, directly aimed at Adam, ready to fire. “You threw quite the strike at my head, so I am going to do the same.” he smirked as a sharp and long crystal made of ice shot out from his palm, right at Adam’s face.

“I got a lot more strikes like that in my arsenal.” Adam retorted, pitching a golden ball directly at the crystal. Henry didn’t know how, but Adam somehow got the ball to hit the crystal right in its tip, causing it to shatter mid-air, letting the ice shrapnel melt into the ground.

“Your pitcher’s arm is still good, I see, but let’s see how you scale when we pump up the number of targets.” John snapped his fingers, and right above his head, a dozen of those same crystals appeared. Henry felt his heart drop to his stomach, but as he looked at Adam to gauge his reaction, he seemed undisturbed.

“Fire.” Adam taunted.

John gleefully responded with a point of the hand, serving as the crystal’s conductor. As soon as they began sailing towards him, Adam crafted another single golden ball, but this time, as he threw the ball, he snapped his fingers in perfect mimicry of John, causing another eleven to form out of thin air. Just as the last strike had ended, the crystals shattered as soon as the connection was made. Adam bowed, flashed a wide grin, and pointed a finger gun at John.

Henry looked back at Ethan and saw his eyes widen. “Did you know that he could do that? I thought he could only make one at a time. Where did he learn to do that?”

Henry didn’t know, but he had a feeling this was his side project. He must have taken the time out of his day to practice using his ability. Henry let out a little chuckle, surprised that Adam could put the commitment into something, which luckily was the very thing that was keeping him alive.

“I may have been a little unfair to you, but a few dozen is easy to match. How about I test where your limit is?” John snickered, snapping his finger just as before. This time, though there were not a dozen or a couple dozen crystals, before anyone could dare attempt to count them, John declared the answer with pride. “One hundred! Try stopping all of that!”

Henry felt his heart drop further inside, but just as before, Adam seemed calm, almost equal to the occasion.

“Give it your best aim!” Adam shouted, which was again met with a point of John’s finger, launching the largest cavalry of ice crystals that Henry had ever seen. The sound of the crystal thundering towards Adam in the air sounded as if Greenwood was being run through by the Viking settlers.

Adam formed another golden ball and aimed it right at the center of the cloud of crystals. Adam gingerly clapped his hands, and the singular golden ball multiplied 100 times over, equaling that of John’s move. Just as it had the two other times before, the balls made a connection with the crystals, letting a rain of ice fall onto the hot summer grass. Adam faced the crystals, letting them rain down his face, letting out a cheery laugh.

Henry and Ethan let out a sigh of relief, but it only lasted a few minutes as they felt a shift in the air. The bright sun vanished underneath the grey clouds that had formed in the sky. The hot summer air had turned into a harsh breeze, with the cold biting at any exposed flesh not covered by clothing. Henry let out a breath, seeing it take shape before his eyes. As if the temperature change had somehow not served as evidence enough, snow began to fall on the ground. Henry looked over to John and saw that his dark hair had turned a pale white, and his eyes became a piercing blue.

“I will admit, you have been an impressive toy to play with. Too bad I wasn’t trying. I can do what I just did multiple times without breaking a sweat. How about we test your true ability?” John sneered.

Just as before, John snapped his fingers, but this time, there were no large crystals in the sky. While difficult to spot at first, once Henry caught sight of what it was, he felt that his heart had finished its descent and left his body. They were much smaller than crystals, smaller than even Adam’s golden ball; they were as large as the tip of a pinky, though it seemed that the sharpness was unwavering. There were not only a dozen, not even hundreds; there were well over a thousand of them.

“Ice bullets! A nice little party trick that I learned not too long ago. Very sharp and too small to stop, meaning your stupid golden balls, no matter how much you make, can’t stop them all!” John maniacally cackled.

Henry looked over at Adam and saw that his smile had been washed off his face, just like the summer heat. There was no reassuring wink or thumbs-up; there was pure terror. His eyes were fixated on the cloud of bullets, gripping the golden ball already in his hands, hoping it could take charge of the situation. Ethan jumped up and started walking towards him, but Henry held him back.

“We can’t just go marching in there.”

“Are you kidding me? If we don’t get involved, Adam is going to die! We have to do something!” Ethan yelled, spraying frost all over Henry’s face. He could tell that Ethan was hurting inside and was desperately wanting to jump into action. Henry quickly scanned the area and saw that a couple of troops were marching along the path.

“I know that, but he said that if we got involved, things would get worse than they already are. However, if we get someone outside involved, just like Vicky from earlier, we might just be able to stop him. I am going to go get those troops to stop this whole thing. Just stand here and don’t do anything stupid.”

Ethan nodded his head in understanding, allowing Henry to go forward with his plan. He quickly sprinted towards the troops, screaming out for them to help him. Once he got within a few feet of them, they were quick to draw their weapons on him.

“Stay back!” one of them shouted.

“I need your help! Our friend is going to get hurt if we don’t do anything. Please just follow me and settle that John guy down.” Henry pleaded, with their facial expression remaining unchanged.

Henry began to get closer to them, but with every step he took, the troops tightened their grip on their weapons, ready to shoot him down as if he were some rabid animal.

“Did you not hear me? Do you not feel that cold air? Do you not see the snow on the ground? In the middle of September? I am here asking you for help, and you’re pointing the gun at me?” Henry angrily asked, which did little to help his current situation with the men who had a bullet tracking to his head.

One of the troops drew closer and placed the muzzle right at the center point of Henry’s chest, ensuring that all it would take was one bullet to kill him. He wanted to reflect his anger at that moment and rip the gun out of his hand, but he knew that it wouldn’t do him any good. He knew the truth, yet he still came for help. They don’t care if a Gifted person dies; they are only here to protect their own. Henry opened his mouth to give some wisecrack to the man, but before any sound could come out of his mouth, he heard the snap of fingers first.

He quickly turned and rushed to get to Adam, but he knew that his clock had run out. With every step, his legs became heavier, unable to do anything but watch everything in slow motion. Adam didn't do anything; he was standing there with no choice but to stare. Henry slipped on a patch of ice, scraping his knee. He attempted to get right back up but slipped again, with snow now serving as his wig. He punched away at the ground, hoping it would open up and swallow him whole. Henry, with tears flooding down his eyes, looked to Adam, but this time he was instead greeted with a sudden and harsh flash of light and heat. As the world became a bright beam, he heard the bullets of the guards fire in the background, without purpose or aim.

Henry blinked away any shock remaining in his eyes as the world filled back with color. When we looked around, the scenery had completely changed. The snow on the ground was nothing but puddles of water, and Henry found himself trudging in mud. The clouds of winter had seemingly vanished, and the sun was harshly striking down onto the scene. Even the trees had not been spared, with some looking severely burnt. Henry ignored the sudden change of environment and ran over to see what had happened to Adam, only to find him shaking, eyes wide open, behind Ethan, who was drenched in sweat, with his face pale from exhaustion, and his arms wide open, not a bloody bandage in sight.

“Ethan! What happened?” Henry screamed.

Ethan looked at Henry, flashing a weak smile. “Well, I decided that I wasn't going to let Adam die. So I decided that I might as well try out a little theory I had in the back of my head. If I can control the radioactivity in my hands, maybe I could use that to let out heat from my hands. I emitted the lowest radioactivity level I could, hoping not to kill us all in the process. It seemed like my theory had proven successful.”



Henry was left with his mouth hanging open. There was a little worry in the back of his mind that he might have somehow contracted radiation, but he was more concerned with the present moment. Their moment of celebration did not last long, though, as they heard a harsh laugh coming from John, who seemingly did not go away with the snow.

“That’s a hell of a Gift! Though I did warn you what would happen if you decided to get involved. I’m going to have to remove Adam from our little fight.” John stated, shoving his pointer finger into the air.

Before anything happened, Henry tackled Adam to the ground, before a spear of ice had erupted right where they had stood. Adam let the remainder of his air out of his lungs to let his scream shatter the air.

“You accepted the rules, which means you also can’t interfere, Devil’s boy.” John mocked with a disgusted face of disapproval.

Henry quickly grabbed Adam and shoved him to the side of the tree, just before the spears had once again appeared from the spot where they were lying. He could tell that Adam was well beyond his element, terrified beyond his wits.

“Your fight with him is over; you are now fighting me!” Ethan shouted, hoping to draw the attention away from the scene.

“Last I checked, you weren’t the one who chucked a ball at my head. You also were not the one who agreed to this fight, so I have nothing to do with you. I am going to warn you now, though: do not get involved.”

Ethan decided to ignore his warning, slowly approaching him, without hesitation in his step. John’s face scrunched up with a scowl replacing his juvenile smile. “I told you not to get involved.” He stated once more, right as he fired another ice crystal at his face, the same ones

from earlier that Adam had so easily deflected. Ethan did not respond with a weapon. He just stuck his hand out right as the crystal was about to hit, seeing it melt into a pool at the bottom of his feet.

“And I told you that your fight is with me.”

John scowled and snapped his finger, which seemed to have no immediate effect. Ethan stopped in his stride, expecting an attack to appear, but it seemed to be a false flag. Then suddenly, the ground began to shake, and John found himself surrounded by walls of ice, leaving him in the shell of his creation.

“Don’t come any closer; if you do, I promise that you will regret it. I don’t have a problem with you yet, so cut your losses short.”

Ethan, unaffected by the eruption of ice walls, kept marching forward towards the fortress. He picked up one of the remaining golden balls from the ground and threw it right at the wall. While a dent was made, it was not going to be enough to break into his shelter.

“I told you that you are not fighting Adam anymore, so either get out of here and fight me or surrender. I will go charging in there myself if I have to.” Ethan threatened, slowly marching closer.

No response was heard, which only served to anger Ethan more, who was beginning to march faster, with his fists ready for any immediate action that John would take.

“Make him regret messing with us!” Adam shouted, leaning on the tree for support.

Henry wanted to interject with his own opinion on the matter, but it seemed those two had already made up their minds. They were determined to take an eye for an eye, seeing fit that since John wanted to hurt Adam, they should match that action. Henry knew that was not the

best way to look at the situation, but the steely determination in Ethan's eyes showed no hesitation in the idea. He couldn't kill his father, but John would serve as a perfect substitute.

"John, you tried to hurt Adam, so I only think it's fair that I return the favor," Ethan yelled at the silent walls as he crept closer.

A rain of crystals erupted from the walls of ice, but just as he had done before, he melted them before they even reached within a foot of him. As the pool of water grew beneath Ethan's feet, an eerily dead silence filled the air, with not a whimper from the melting wall or an attempt to deter Ethan. Henry couldn't place his finger on what was happening, but he had a feeling that things would not end well.

Adam began to walk towards the wall as well, but Henry was quick to hold him back from continuing further.

"What are you doing? The moment you are in range, John will take a shot right at you." Henry scolded, but Adam ignored him and shrugged him off.

"It's okay, Ethan has it all covered. Anything that comes my way, he will just use his hands to guard me. Plus, I want to maybe get a kick in or two." Adam cheerfully stated. Henry looked over to Ethan and saw that he had reached the wall and was still not met with anything, not even a slick pathway to cause him to slip.

"Don't forget I warned you." Ethan stated again as he placed his palm on the wall, which predictably began to melt. Adam ran down to join him in charging the palace.

Ethan placed one leg inside the shelter and quickly went stiff. Adam stumbled to a stop and fell directly to the ground, with mud painting his jeans. Henry watched with his eyes wide open and mouth agape.

Ethan looked at the puddle below him. It was a mix of water and blood. He felt his shirt draw more damp, and his world slowly grow darker. He let out one final glance at John, who had returned his trademark sinister smile, and then let out a little chuckle.

“Don’t forget, *I warned you.*” John stated as he pulled his ice sword from Ethan’s stomach.