

# THE FOUR LESSONS OF THE GREAT CHILA

AS TOLD TO, AND CHRONICLED BY, THE MANIPULATIVE SPECK

TORMENT  
TIDES OF NUMENERA

MUR LAFFERTY

# From the Depths: Silver

# TORMENT

TIDES OF NUMENERA™

## The Four Lessons of the Great Chila

by Mur Lafferty

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# Chapter 1

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## The First Lesson: The Meek Inherit Nothing

It was winter when Chila the Great freed those of us enslaved in the Bloom. We had toiled, been bought, sold, abused, even eaten. We feared our masters during the day and the appetite of the Bloom at night. There was no respite from the pain and horror and degradation we endured—not, that is, until Chila changed everything.

I am only a myopic girl—to me, the story began when Chila landed in chains next to me, burned, humbled, half blind, and afraid. But later, after the bloodshed, after we walked out of the Bloom and into the light, she assured me that much more had happened to her before we met, and that I was the one to tell the story.

I don't know why she chose me. I was terrified at the responsibility, and still am. Me, an insignificant speck, telling the story of the greatest legend of our age. I never deserved the honor. But Chila commanded, and I continue to obey. I've never failed her yet—and I never will.

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Chila's house was not the first to fall from the cliffs into Garravia Sound. Two others fell in the same week, so the three houses were lumped together in the minds of the people of Sagus Cliffs without distinction—sad stories of lost neighbors, but small and common and soon forgotten among so many others.

Chila's mother was one of those lost neighbors. A midwife to the poor, her fall into the sound left some of the neighborhood's women helpless and in distress, but they eventually found other midwives, or gave birth alone, or died, and were themselves forgotten. Soon, no one but her children remembered Chila's mother's name.

Chila's father, a fisherman, had disappeared the year before. He'd supplied fish for several of the Underbelly's fishmongers until the day—Chila's mother always told her this part with reverence—he'd caught a relic in his nets. Not just any numenera, though. This one was special.

After it had fought him, he claimed, like a sea monster, he had pulled it into his boat—a crystalline tube as long as he was tall, filled with what looked like clouds of silver smoke, and once he'd landed it, he had done what all good citizens were supposed to do—he'd taken it to the Protector.

The Protector was, as her soldiers were constantly telling the populace, the democratically elected leader of Sagus Cliffs, though when that election had happened, or who had voted, nobody in Cliffside seemed to know. It certainly hadn't been them. She lived at the very top of the cliffs, in a huge palace that looked out over the sound and was said to be utterly impenetrable, and she never, ever had any one-on-one contact with the unwashed public, unless...unless a member of that public happened to find particularly interesting or powerful numenera. For those lucky few, her door was always open, for she considered herself the greatest collector of numenera in the Protectorate, and she was always looking to acquire new pieces.

Neighborhood stories told of a fisherman who had kept a device he'd found instead of bringing it to the Protector's guards—a glove with five rings around its fingers, each set with a different gem. He'd activated the thumb ring and burst into a flame that didn't harm him, but it set his house aflame and killed his family. One would have thought that would have been enough punishment, but the Protector had found out and sent for him. He'd come back from the palace with the glove gone and a stump where his hand had been. The loss hadn't done much for his fishing career.

Knowing this, when Chila's father had shown the long silver tube to his wife, they'd agreed that such a thing was too powerful and mysterious for the likes of them, and he'd left for the long walk up through the city to the palace with it slung over his shoulder.

He never came home, and pretty soon only Chila and her brother Shade and their mother remembered him. And after the house fell and their mother died, only Chila and Shade remembered, and since they soon ran away from the ruins to live in the tunnels of the Underbelly, no one in Cliffside remembered him anymore, or—as I said before—his wife, or his children. The whole family was forgotten.

Is it any wonder that, born from this, Chila was determined that, when she grew up, she would be remembered—forever.

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The Underbelly was a maze of caves and tunnels that riddled the interior of the vast rock upon which the city of Sagus Cliffs was built. Some of the caves were carved by wind and weather, some by the secretive and unscrupulous, and all were occupied by those outside the law. Squatters claimed small alcoves and lairs while larger caves had been made into thieves' markets, illegal businesses, or the homes of cults or powerful gangs, while urchins such as Chila and Shade and a thousand others like them found whatever wretched nooks or crannies they could.

The siblings had a few holes they could usually count on to be empty, including one high up the wall of the main Underbelly market—easy to climb to, and, more importantly, easy to defend—and another behind a foul-smelling mortician's lab.

The twins were just turned fifteen, and as different as desert and sea. Shade was small, kept to himself, spoke to no one but Chila, and always wore black, gray, or white, depending on his surroundings, using the camouflage to sneak up on his unsuspecting marks, or to hide from the world when he wasn't working. Chila, on the other hand, was tall, talked to everyone, knew everyone, always wore bright clothing and garish hair accessories, and often sang and played musical instruments—stolen, of course—to entertain her friends and sweeten the underground merchants who saw them every day.

She did the same things, only in disguise, to distract stall owners, shopkeepers, and passersby when she and Shade would leave the Underbelly for the ripe hunting grounds of Circus Minor and the other overground markets. She would draw their attention, and Shade would rob them blind from the shadows.

It was a winning strategy as long as they didn't work one market for too long, but Chila hated it. Thieves had to be forgotten in order to survive, but Chila wanted nothing more than to be remembered. It killed her every time she disguised herself or hid her face. It went against her very nature.

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Today's mark was a tall, thin merchant, handsome and young. Chila watched him push his cart toward the marketplace, peddling to passersby, enchanting children with

his toys. A mechanical bird, its black metal feathers tipped in red as if it had skimmed a sea of paint, sat on his shoulder, eyes glowing, swiveling its head continuously.

The week before, Chila had seen the same man with a small bioengineered canine that looked as if it had been fashioned from balls of fluff and metal balloons. He always had some sort of animal gamboling at his heels or sitting on his shoulder, and she had wondered how he got them. Did he kill the wealthy and take their belongings, their pets and automatons, and sell them on the street? Shade had said that was rubbish, that the merchant was really an explorer from the north, which was known for its exotic fauna.

“Then we should go there,” Chila had said. “We could be animal sellers too.”

Shade had laughed. She hated it when her twin laughed at her. She hated it when he couldn't see beyond the Underbelly.

As Chila watched the merchant clatter by with his cart, she checked for Shade. He was in position, nearly invisible as he paced the man at the top of a shadowed wall, waiting for Chila to make her move.

“Sir?” Chila asked, walking up to the cart wearing a wealthy girl's clothes and pretty scarves, and what she hoped was a wealthy girl's confidence. Chila, though now far too long of leg, still had a childlike face, and if she dressed like a child and kept her shoulders slumped and her head down, she could still pass for one, barely.

The merchant looked her up and down, and she could see mental calculations going on behind his eyes. She hoped he was judging her nice shirt, her clean skin, her bright eyes, the lack of adults around her, and the way she clutched the silver piece in her hand, and deciding she was an easy mark.

She forced herself to relax and smile, and pointed to a small silver egg on a tripod stand. It seemed to be singing to itself, very low. “Could I get that for this coin?”

The merchant chuckled and shook his head. “Not for that coin and its ten brothers, girl.”

He started to turn away again just as, behind him, his cart trembled ever so slightly, and she hurriedly searched for more coins in her dress pocket. She had to keep him interested.

“What about this much?” she said, holding out a shin. She didn’t like risking the big money, but this was why she had it.

He turned back to her, brightening, and the cart stilled behind him. “That won’t cover the egg, but I’m sure we could find something here. How about a nice toy caffa?”

She nodded fervently and made her eyes grow bright with anticipation. “Can I see it?”

He searched a drawer for a moment and pulled out a mechanical insect about six inches long, a tenth the size of a real caffa, which were deadly alone and horrific in swarms. The merchant flipped a switch and the wings buzzed briefly before stilling. From what Chila knew of the market, the merchant intended to overcharge her outrageously for a broken toy she wouldn’t give to the Iron Wind.

That didn’t matter, though, because Shade was on the cart’s other side, working his magic on its locked drawers.

Chila tried to avoid chewing the inside of her cheek as she waited on the man to wrap the toy, and ignored an urge to feel for the knife in her pocket.

The bird on the merchant’s shoulder eyed her, then turned toward the shadows where Shade was. Now that she was closer, she could see the black feathers glistening with an iridescent sheen in the lamplight. Its eyes glittered green and it made a mewling sound as it shifted on the man’s shoulder.

“Your bird is very pretty,” she said, hoping to distract the man.

“It likes you,” the merchant said, finally placing the toy into a bag.

“It’s a toy, isn’t it?” Chila asked.

He grinned. “That don’t mean it can’t like you.”

She plastered on her best smile. “Did you make it?”

He held out the toy caffa. It buzzed again in the bag, sounding low and sad. It clearly wasn’t the quality that she had paid for, but that was fine. She reached out to take it, and the merchant’s hand shot out and grabbed her wrist.

“Your name wouldn’t happen to be Chila, would it?” He no longer looked so affable. Now he just looked hard-eyed and suspicious.

Before she could answer, Shade blew his cover with a loud yelp of pain. The cart had been rigged with some kind of trap, and he'd set it off by trying to pick the locks. He lay on the ground, struggling inside a gossamer net that was cutting into his skin and spotting its delicate white strands with his blood. And it only worsened as he thrashed harder.

“And there’s the other one,” said the merchant. “Perfect.”

His hand was still clamped on Chila’s arm, and her instinct was to pull away, but she had long ago learned to resist that urge. That was what adults who grabbed children expected. Instead, she propelled herself straight into him, ramming her forehead into his chest. He dropped her hand, flailing, as he slammed into the cart and it tipped on its side with a crash.

With a laugh, she snatched the wallet swinging from his belt, then vaulted over the cart and knelt by her brother. Whatever power had given the net its corrosive ability had stopped when the cart had fallen, and she helped Shade tear free of it.

“Get up. Come on!”

He struggled up and followed her, whimpering and trying to free his feet from the remains of the net. Blood had turned his black shirt into a sodden mess.

As they hurried for the nearest bolt-hole to the Underbelly, Chila felt something attach itself to her shoulder. She flinched and batted at it. It pecked at her hand, drawing blood, and she stumbled in surprise. The merchant’s mechanical bird had flown after her and dug its claws into her shirt.

“Dirty little spy!” she snarled, then threw one of her stolen scarves over it, whirled it around, and smacked it against a brick wall. It squawked and crunched and she shook it out, then stomped on it until it stopped twitching.

She was horrified when she saw that it bled.

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All the urchins had safe spots, hidden alleys and alcoves to go to in times of danger, and Chila and Shade settled into their favorite after some frantic dashing—the one behind a mortician’s lab. It never smelled very good there, but really, that was more a benefit than a curse.



Their bedrolls were still there, along with packs full of clothes, a canteen, and dried meat.

Chila lit a candle, shielding the flame with her body, and tried not to wince at her brother's appearance.

Lacerations crisscrossed his face, and his clothing hung off his torso in rags, but while the cuts looked numerous, they were not deep. He lay against the wall, panting, and she could tell he was trying not to cry. She blew out the candle.

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It was cold.

Chila's breath fogged in the air in front of her, which was odd, because there was no light, and yet she could still see the white clouds hanging there. The glow seemed to come from her body, but looking down revealed nothing.

Then lightning flashed, and in that blue-white instant she saw she stood on a hill above a dead plain. In the next flash she looked behind her and saw a great multitude of people in the lee of the hill below her, weapons raised, waiting for her command.

Chila raised her own weapon and the ground trembled beneath her as the people began to chant her name, their voices full of blood and reverence.

Ever since Chila recounted this dream to me, I have dreamed it myself, only, in my dream, I stood in front of her, her advisor and closest confidant, ready to kill for her.

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"Get up," said Shade. "We have to go."

Chila grunted and rolled over, but the nudge came again.

"Chila, I'm not playing around. There are men coming. After us. They're arguing with the mortician."

That woke her. Her eyes flew open and she sat up, looking around. "How did they find us? I murdered that spy bird."

"I don't know," said Shade as he grabbed their packs. "Maybe one of the other kids?"

“But we didn’t see anyone on the way back,” she said, then rubbed her hand. The wound where the bird had pecked her hand still hurt. In fact, it felt lumpy, like it was infected, or...No. There was something in the wound.

She squeezed the wound like she was squeezing a pimple and a little black bead popped out, as tiny as a gogglefruit seed.

“That little...” She held up the bead and showed it to Shade, who was strapping his bedroll to his pack. “It put a stink seed on us. Pecked it right into my hand. Those bastards out there followed the scent.”

Shade gave her a hard look. “Wish you’d figured that out before we came back here. Now get packing.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

She started throwing all her clothes together. She had way too many. “And we’re going to have to get out of here for good. They’ll know it now.”

“Where to, then?” he asked.

She frowned as she rolled up her bedroll, then she had it. “Home.”

He looked up at that. “You do realize our house isn’t there anymore, right? It fell into the sea? Mother died among the rocks, all of that?”

“The house fell, but the hole in the cliff is still there. No one’s built over it yet. They think it’s cursed,” Chila answered. “Now come on.”

They slipped out of the hole with their bags over their shoulders and under their arms, and crept into the mortician’s yard, which was filled with barrels of embalming fluid and other strange chemicals. The mortician was no friend of theirs. They snuck in and out when he wasn’t looking, and he didn’t know they were his guests. That’s what made him the perfect guard. He wasn’t defending them. He was defending his property, and he tended to shout to the tunnel tops when he did.

“I don’t care who yer looking for, or what they stole! This is my shop, and I don’t allow trespassing! Now go jump in the sound!”

Chila and Shade edged out through a hole in the mortician’s side fence and hurried off through back passages toward the surface, but after only a few turns, Chila stopped at a public bog.

“Just a minute,” she hissed.

Shade rolled his eyes. “Now? Really?”

“No,” she said. “Not that.”

She took the stink seed from a pocket. “I’m going to drop this down the skist chute and hope they follow it.”

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It was still dark when they reached the top of the makeshift ladder in the vent pipe and squeezed out onto the windy, winding streets of Cliffside, but the moon lit their way and they had no trouble finding their way to the ruins of their old house.

As they approached it, however, Shade slowed, and grew even more quiet than usual.

“Come on, Shade,” said Chila. “Where else could we go?”

“Anywhere,” he said.

Their home had originally been built back when Cliffside was a well-to-do neighborhood, and its foundations were carved out of the cliff itself, with the second stories and cooking porches cantilevered out over the edge to greet the sun and surf and air. Sadly, by the time their family had moved into it, a century later, the upper floors had gone unmaintained for decades, and a fisherman’s wages were not enough to make the necessary repairs. Like many others along the cliff, when the wood finally rotted, the house fell.

Now only the foundation remained, a rocky basement originally used for storage. Chila had moved her bedroom there when she and Shade had turned fourteen, and when the house had fallen, the only things that hadn’t gone into the sound were her bed, some boxes of blankets and clothes, and a locker of food. Shade and Chila had squatted there for months, until the night Shade saw their mother’s ghost.

Chila hadn’t been able to see her, but Shade had stared at a spot near the edge and sworn she was there. He had wept and trembled, and claimed the ghost was urging him to get Chila out of danger, and such was his insistence that Chila had finally agreed. They didn’t have much to stay for anyway. What they’d held onto was more the idea of home than anything actual, but it had still broken Chila’s heart to leave.

So had the fact that Shade could see their mother and she couldn't. Eventually, however, she'd convinced herself that it had nothing to do with her mother loving Shade more than her. It was more about Shade's connection to the darkness and the things that lurked there, the things that he wished one day to join.

When they finally reached the ruins, nothing now but a hole open to the sky and stars and the pounding sea, Chila stood outside it, suddenly unwilling to go in, though it had been her suggestion that had brought them there.

"Do you see her?" she asked.

Shade didn't say anything.

"Do you see her?" Chila asked again. She looked at him more closely, squinting in the light of the lantern, and saw that his eyes were full of tears.

He took a hesitant step forward and held his hand out to something invisible. An uncharitable thought crossed Chila's mind—he was faking in order to fool her—and she had a sudden urge to push him through the broken exterior wall to join their dead mother below. But no, this was her twin, her brother, the only person alive who shared the same memories, the only person alive who would always know who she really was. She bit her lip, and she watched.

Shade took another step. He raised his hands higher and caressed something in the air, as if touching the cheek of someone slightly shorter than himself, then he stumbled to his knees and buried his face in his hands.

Chila blew out an annoyed breath. She felt nothing different, saw nothing different. She strode forward and stepped in front of Shade to force him to acknowledge her, but as she did she stepped into a pocket of frigid air.

The hairs on her arms stood up and she gasped. Shade shoved at her.

"You're standing right in her! Get out!"

Anger conquered uncertainty. "No I'm not! There's nothing to stand in. You're seeing things! Nothing is here!" The cold pulled at her skin, insistent and angry, but she ignored it and held out her hand. "All you're seeing are memories. Now stand up. Stand up!"

He looked up at her, ignoring her hand. “It’s not a memory, Chila. It’s Mother. And she’s telling me what you’re going to become.”

Chila frowned, unnerved. “What I’m going to become?”

“She said you’re going to turn the world upside down and stand on top of it, and the lubrication for the gears of your machine will be blood and fear. She said the memory of you will be painted on the eyes of the world with...with my blood.”

Chila slapped him, hard, sobs closing her throat. “Stop lying! She didn’t say any of that! I would never hurt you! Never!”

## Chapter 2

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### The Second Lesson: Always Make Them Remember You

After we had been slaves for some time, and Chila was getting used to her new station in life and the loss of her left eye, she told me that to get what you want, sometimes you have to get others to think they had your idea all along.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

\*\*\*

Chila and Shade stayed in the ruins of their home that night, but while Shade slept, Chila stood at the broken outer wall, staring down unseeing at the water far below as her mind tried to digest the information their mother's ghost had given Shade—or what he'd said she'd given him. Was he lying? Was he crazy? And if he wasn't, what did it all mean? Was she really going to kill him? The idea appalled her. The two of them had certainly had their share of sibling spats, and sometimes they had turned ugly, but she would never spill a drop of Shade's blood. How could anyone think she would? Especially their own mother?

An infinitesimal sound made her turn, and she saw Shade standing behind her. She cursed herself for not noticing that he was awake.

“Are you going to push me?”

“Why would you think I'd want to?” he asked. His eyes reflected the starlight.

“Because you're afraid of me now?” she said. “Because of what Mother said? Or was this vision of yours just another one of your ‘lessons?’”

“Lessons?”

She faced him square on and folded her arms. “Do you remember the day you let that boy from school beat me up?”

“Sure,” he said. “I kept telling you not to underestimate anyone, that the smallest child could hold a dagger, but you didn't listen. You thought you were untouchable. I wanted to teach you not to be overconfident.”

“It wasn’t a small child with a dagger. It was a boy twice my size and twice my age. And I was confident because I thought you had my back.” She shook her head. “The only thing you taught me was that I couldn’t trust you. So I’m just wondering if this is another lesson like that.”

Shade met her gaze unblinking. “She was really there, Chila. I promise you. And she really said what I said she did.”

“And that doesn’t make you want to push me off the cliff?”

“You’re my sister. I’d never do anything like that.”

“No,” she said. “I guess not. Not unless it taught me something.”

She walked past him, hoping he couldn’t hear the pounding of her heart, then pulled her blanket tightly around her and lay down, her back to him.

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The next day, Chila sat on the ruined wall of her family’s basement, idly tossing pebbles down at the fishing boats and relic divers that plied the waters two hundred meters below, her mind once again turning over her brother’s premonition or whatever it was—all that nonsense about her being destined to change the world. It seemed a stupid thing to say after such an embarrassing setback of being caught thieving, traced to their hidey hole, chased out of the Underbelly, and now right back where they had been after the house had collapsed, and with nothing to show for it. They were just as poor, just as hopeless, just as stuck, just as fractious, just as unknown as before.

It was driving her mad. She couldn’t allow herself to end up like her parents, dead and forgotten in a rundown slum like Cliffside. The future her brother had predicted for her was the one she’d always wanted—only perhaps without so much blood—but how to get it? Obviously thieving wasn’t the right path. How could it be when, to survive, a thief had to be invisible, like Shade, when all she wanted to be was remembered? How was she going to make sure she would be remembered? How was she going to get there from here?

Shade once again appeared out of nowhere behind her, then sat down next to her and handed her a still-warm fish cake. A peace offering, perhaps. “Here. Hot off the cart.”

She smiled. “Hot in more ways than one, I’ll wager.”

“Aye.” He chuckled. “So hurry up and eat the evidence.”

It seemed the rift was mended, at least for now. They munched contentedly for a while, then Shade shook his head at the boats and the diving crews below. “Desecrating Mother’s grave.”

“Eh?” said Chila. “What do you mean?”

“What do the fish feed on down there? The bodies of the people who’ve fallen off the cliff. What do the relic divers find down there? Their possessions. It’s not right.”

Chila was about to chide him for being foolish. A house hadn’t fallen from the cliffs in three years at least, so all the skeletons down there had been picked clean long ago, and the relic divers wouldn’t want any possessions from those houses. They were after power cells and ancient weapons, not cheap dishes and frayed clothes. But then she stopped. For one thing, she didn’t want to have another argument. Second, no matter how foolish he was being, there was an emotional power to the sentiment Shade had expressed. ‘Desecrating our mother’s grave’ made the heart clench. It had a noble sound to it. An unassailable sound. A battle-cry sound.

Could she rally the people of Cliffside with that cry? Could she get them to chase the scavengers away? Could she be their hero?

Her momentary excitement dimmed as she thought about the realities of it. Most of the people who lived in Cliffside probably didn’t even remember the families that had fallen. They wouldn’t care. And the fishermen and divers had good reason to stay where they were.

A placid lagoon lay just north of the graveyard, filled with fish and submerged structures from other ages, prime fishing and scavenging waters—at least, it had been. But a few years ago a monster had moved into it and now used the water as its private larder, eating both the fish and the sailors it dragged from boats careless enough to pass within its reach. No one knew what the creature was. Some thought it was a



water-dwelling varakith, and others thought it was a kind of travonis ul. All they knew was that it had long, grasping tentacles and a huge mouth full of razor-sharp teeth.

All Chila knew about it—suddenly—was that she had to kill it.

“You’re right,” she said standing. “It’s not right. They shouldn’t be desecrating our mother’s grave. The trouble is, they don’t know she’s down there. They don’t even know she existed. Well, I’m going to tell them! And I’m going to make them leave our mother alone!”

Shade scowled at her and wiped some pastry crumbs from his lips. “Huh? Where did this come from? You don’t care about Mother.”

Chila put her hand to her breast. “What are you talking about? I loved Mother!”

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Chila spent the rest of the morning going through her pockets and searching the ruins of their house, looking for things she could use to make her mad plan a reality. It wasn’t a fruitful hunt. In the end she had only her trusty knife, an under-the-skin fighting implant she and Shade had swiped from a dead gang boy, but which they had been too afraid to try because they didn’t know what it did, and a vial of medicine left over from her mother’s days of helping women have babies, which, given at the right dosage—exactly the right dosage—would reduce pain and help the women relax, easing the birth. Too much, however, would shut down the body entirely. The normal dose for a woman was two drops of the tincture. Looking through the glass, Chila thought there might still be roughly a hundred times that left. She hoped it would be enough. She hoped she wasn’t being as crazy as she feared she was.

“Right,” she said at last. “We’re ready.”

“We are?” asked Shade. “What are we doing?”

“Well, I’ll tell you what you’re doing,” she said. “You’re going down to the wharf and telling those parasites who are scavenging our fallen houses that that’s our mother’s grave down there, and the grave of countless others. You’re going to tell them our mother’s flesh and secrets must stay under the waves. It’s her right. It’s the only right she has left, and they must stop fishing and treasure hunting there immediately.”

Shade laughed. “And what makes you think they’ll listen to me?”

“They won’t,” she said. “But then it’s my turn. Just tell them to watch the monster’s lagoon. Tell them I’m going to save them from the monster and give them somewhere to go.”

Then she shooed him out the door.

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As soon as Shade was gone, Chila upended all the bags she had brought from the hidey hole, dumping her rumpled collection of bright and bizarre clothes on the stone floor and sorting through them, heart thumping with excitement. Today was the day she stopped dressing like a child. Today she was going to be a hero, and that meant she had to dress like a hero. She needed to wear something people would notice, something they would remember, something they would cheer.

Finally she settled on a beautiful shift she had stolen from a street juggler in Circus Minor. It was white and sheer, with silver spangles at its collar, flared waist, and the ends of its sleeves. The juggler had worn it as a shirt, but it was just long enough on Chila to cover everything it needed to, so she took off everything else and wore it as a dress, then unbraided her childish pigtails and let her hair hang loose at her shoulders like grown women did.

She wished she had a mirror to see what she looked like, but even when her house had been whole her parents had been too poor to own one, so she just gathered up her knife and the subdermal implant, put the vial of poison around her neck on a cord, and climbed barefoot out of the ruined foundation to the street.

The reaction to her sudden appearance was immediate. People in the houses and shops on the safe side of the street stared at her, and she heard whispers of “ghost” and “spirit” as she walked toward the stairs that would eventually lead her down to the docks. Some people began to follow her.

On the spur of the moment she decided that she would do now what she had intended to do when she had got to the water, and, at the head of the stairs, she paused, raised her hands and her knife in the air, and slit open her palm.

There was a gasp from her audience as blood welled from the cut and ran down her arm, and then another as she smeared it down her face. Then she started down the stairs, and, more subtly, pressed the fighting implant into the cut. It knitted up

immediately, removing all trace of the wound except for a lump under the skin. She hoped no one had seen that part.

By the time she stepped onto the docks and saw Shade shouting at the fishermen and the diving crews out on the water, she had a block-long train of curious citizens following behind her.

“You are robbing my mother’s grave, you cowards!” Shade was crying. “And all because you’re too afraid to take back the lagoon from a fish!”

As soon as he saw her, though, he changed his tune, and started pointing at her. “Here, big men! Here’s the girl who’s going to save you from the monster you’re so scared of! Here’s the hero who’s going to give you the lagoon and give our mother back her peaceful grave!”

The men on the boats roared with laughter as they saw Chila stride down the quayside. She ignored them all and walked to the very last pier, the one that was no longer used, as it pointed north toward the beast’s feeding grounds. Her plan wasn’t fully formed, but one didn’t worry about the details after jumping off the ledge—or inserting the implant—and one certainly didn’t hesitate when one had an audience.

Chila marched to the end of the pier, put her knife in her teeth, and dove right into the water without breaking stride.

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Chila was not a born diver, nor a great swimmer, but she always told me that we do what we have to do, and we do it with what we have. And here she did just that. She swam slowly but steadily toward the center of the lagoon, then gashed the backs of her forearms with her knife, hoping the blood would alert the monster to her presence.

It worked. After less than a minute, something groaned deep beneath her, and as she ducked her head under the water to see what was happening, she saw a single massive tentacle querying up from the inky darkness below, sinuous as a snake. She let it come, and it probed her legs, back, shoulders, neck. It snaked around her arm, strong but not constricting, and finally found the implant in her hand. It nosed at it gently, and then more tentacles rose up to investigate.

Chila was beginning to think she was right, that it was some kind of water-dwelling *travonis ul*, then the first wire embedded itself into her bare foot. Five more sunk in, and she began seeing things through the pain.

The first thing she saw was herself, from below, through a murky, wavering point of view, treading water and struggling with more tentacles. Then she saw, or rather felt, an underwater cave, cozy and safe. Then she received what seemed to be an invitation.

Join me. You're different from the others. Stronger. I'm so alone.

She gulped a big breath as the tentacles pulled her under.

Chila knew her struggles were futile, but she couldn't help it, and she fought as more wires jabbed into her feet and the communication with the creature became clearer and clearer. It needed something to bond with. It had tried boats, fish, and other people, but none had seemed fitting. Chila, somehow, did.

I can't, I'll drown, she thought.

Why do you swim if you will drown? What are you doing here if you do not wish to come be with me? Become me?

More wires. Her lungs began to burn. She was getting a sense of the creature now, made of flesh and metal, one pseudopod in this world, the rest in others.

You are magnificent, why do you need a puny human to join with? she asked.

The reason came through, and it was complex and confusing. Chila shook her head in the water, trying to understand the societal hierarchy and where this creature came from and what it wanted.

If I join with you, will you leave this place?

We will leave this place as one.

But I don't want to leave. This is my home.

The anguish that bubbled up from the creature was nearly palpable, and Chila got a sense of how alone it was.

How long have you been here? she asked.

One day. One long day.

So time was different for the creature. Hmmm.

What if I come back in a few days?

The tentacles tightened. It pulled her further under.

Now. It must be now.

I can't.

You are not the one.

She felt the wires retract, and the connection with the creature faded - for all the ideas exchanged it had lasted less than a second - but the tentacles still pulled her down. The water grew darker around her but it was still light enough for her to see a huge gaping maw full of teeth opening below her. Then the tentacles pulled her straight into it, and darkness consumed her as the creature closed its jaws. Chila flailed around with her knife in utter panic, cutting its gums, tongue, and the roof of its mouth, but the beast didn't even seem to feel it. Desperate, she dropped the blade and, as its tongue contracted to push her down its throat, she activated the subdermal implant in her palm.

A sword of light erupted from her hand, nearly stabbing through her leg, and buried itself in the creature's tongue.

That got a reaction.

It roared, its mouth opening wide, then chomped it closed again. Only a desperate backward kick kept her from being bitten in two. Instead it only—only—gashed her face and left arm deeper than she had ever been cut before.

Then it swallowed.

The heavy tongue and the muscles of its throat combined to drag her backward into a space even more confined than its mouth. It was as if she were trapped in a flesh chimney. Then another swallow deposited her in a larger area. The stomach? All she knew was that red and black blooms were bursting across her vision, and her lungs were on fire. She had to get out—now!

With the sword of light she slashed at the pulsing walls of the space, while with her left hand she snatched the vial from her neck and thumbed it open. The flesh around her parted and bled as the vial emptied into the bilious water, and she felt herself

losing consciousness, but finally the blazing sword cut through to sea water and the difference in pressure forced her, wriggling, through the wound and out.

Praying that most of the poison had remained in the belly of the beast, she kicked weakly for the surface as her vision dimmed and her arms and legs numbed, but finally her head parted the waves, and she emerged gasping and retching into the glorious, salty air.

All around the edge of the lagoon the captains and crews of the fishing and scavenging boats stared at her with wide, frightened eyes as she swam slowly to the pier, while the crowds that had followed her watched in wonder from the shore. Under their scrutiny, Shade pulled her out of the water and for a while she just lay on the wood, staring up at the sky and breathing, but not for long. The show wasn't over. There were still a few lines left to say.

With an effort she stood and faced the captains, her white dress now clinging to her and crimson with the blood that ran from the wounds on her face and arms. She raised a red hand toward them and they recoiled from it.

"The creature is dead," she intoned. "You may now fish in the lagoon. But do not fish in this graveyard ever again. It is sacred, and I am its protector."

Chila managed to walk upright off the docks, chin up as she basked in the calls and questions from the crews, and the cheers of the crowd, but when she entered the shadows of the cliff tunnels, she slumped heavily against Shade.

He put his arm around her. "Well, you're known now. I hope you're satisfied."

Chila shook her head. "No," she said, her voice slurring as the poison that had swirled around her in the creature's stomach continued to seep into her wounds. "Even this they will...forget. Next we do something the whole...city will remember. We take back that...which the...the Protector stole from our father."

"But Chila," Shade groaned. "This stunt nearly killed you! What's the point? What's the point?"

She didn't answer. Instead she slipped from his arms and fell to the ground, succumbing at last.

She slept for fourteen days.

## Chapter 3

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### **The Third Lesson: If They Love You, They Will Do Anything for You**

Through her adventure with the leviathan, Chila learned intimidation, the art of teaching and guiding by fear and awe. The people who had witnessed it instinctively realized that if she was willing to go through drowning and getting cut to ribbons to stop the robbing of the graves of the forgotten, there was no telling what she would do to achieve larger goals. They understood that they could be either on her side or on the side that got hurt.

She always told me, “It’s never a threat. It’s a suggestion.”

She knew, however, that fear was not the only way to motivate people. Violence, or the threat of violence, was like a whip—you used it when you were forced to, but never when another tool would work better. You had to strike a delicate balance between intimidation and love.

I loved Chila since the first moment she landed beside me in the pocket of Bloom-flesh that was our dark slave home. The greatest moment of my life was the day she was chained next to me.

And yes, I have done anything and everything she has asked of me.

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When Chila woke again on the fifteenth day, her arm and foot were on fire and her face was swollen, and the first thing she saw through her crust-glued eyes was Shade, sitting on the far side of the shattered cellar, eating a piece of cake.

“Did it work?” she rasped.

Shade squeaked in surprise and nearly threw the cake through the hole in the wall, then had to juggle like a madman to keep from dropping it on the floor.

“You’re awake!” he said when he’d caught it at last.

“Yes,” she agreed. “Did it work?”

“Did what work?”

“Are the fishermen leaving our mother’s grave alone?”

Shade nodded. “They think they’ll face your wrath if they go back, and so far none of ‘em have dared. You scared them straight through. And that’s not all that happened.”

She squinted at him. “What else?”

“Your followers. The people who cheered you on the shore. They won’t stop coming around. They’ve been leaving food, sweets, little gifts. Big ones too. Look at what you’re lying in.”

Chila looked down at herself. Her bedroll had been replaced by a bed—small and old, but still, a real bed! And there were sheets on it, clean and fresh. She smoothed her hands across them.

“Not bad.”

“They want you to fix everything in Cliffside now,” said Shade. “Stop the swells who live above us from throwing their trash down on us, chase out the thieves and killers, rebuild the cliff houses.”

Chila chuckled, then gasped, startled at how much her battered body protested the simple motion. “I’m no city guard. I didn’t set out on this path to fix potholes and roust undesirables.”

“But you’re their hero. You could live on that. We already are!”

“I don’t want to be their hero, Shade. I want to be their god! This was just a step toward getting the world to see that we are not people to be forgotten, that there is no one who can look down on us. No one.” She smiled. “And next comes the Protector.”

“Oh, come on, Chila!” cried Shade. “You nearly got killed fighting that big fish! Going up against the Protector is going to be ten times as bad! You’re going to die before you even get within a block of her. She’s got an army! She’s got a whole city!”

Chila shrugged. “I’ll find a way.”

“You’ll find a way to get yourself killed.”

“If you don’t want to help, I’ll completely understand.”

Shade pouted. “I didn’t say I wouldn’t help. I just...I just don’t get it, I guess.”



“You will when you’re up there with me,” said Chila. “When we’re looking down at everybody else.”

He shook his head, then sat silent for a long time. Finally he sighed. “So when do we start this stupidity?”

She flexed her injured arm and poison-swollen hand. “It may take a few days for me to get back to fighting strength, but we’ll need to do some information gathering first anyway—find out what kind of things we’ve got to get around.”

He nodded. “I might know some people who could help with that. I’ll talk to them.”

Chila laughed. “You know people? You never talk to anybody.”

Shade stood. “You’ve been asleep, Chila. I had to do my own talking these past fourteen days. I had to keep you safe.”

Chila sat up, worried, then winced as her aching body screamed at her. “Who have you been talking to, Shade? What did you do to keep me safe?”

He scampered up the wall to the street level, then looked back. “Just rest, Chila. I’ll find you what you need to know.”

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Shade was gone for three full days. Chila took the time to wash, walk around the basement, and eat of the offerings the people from the neighborhood left her. When he returned, his hands were bloody, his face was pale, and he was wrapped in a dark, heavy cloak.

“What did you find out?” Chila asked. “Did you find a way to reach the Protector?”

Shade didn’t look at her. “Do you really want to do this, Chila?”

“I already told you I did,” she said. “Did you find a way?”

He still didn’t answer. “I mean, is it really worth the risk to get some stupid artifact we never actually owned anyway?”

“Of course we owned it,” said Chila. “Father pulled it from the sea. It was his.”

“But he gave it to the Protector as soon as he got it.”

“And what did she give him in return?” asked Chila, her voice rising.

Shade shrugged. “Nothing, I guess.”

“Worse than nothing! She killed him! She owes us, Shade! She owes us more than she can ever repay! The artifact is the least that I will take from her!”

He still couldn't raise his eyes to hers. “But...but what if we actually get it, and it hurts us? What if it changes us?”

Chila finally lost her temper.

“What if it does? What could be worse than this?” She held up her still-swollen arm and touched her puffy face. “We live in a hole, Shade. We steal to eat. If we are changed, did you ever think it might be for the better?”

“But we could die! We could be taken for slaves! You never consider the risks!”

“And you never consider the risks of doing nothing!” she retorted, then took a deep breath. “Now, once and for all, did you find a way?”

Shade nodded, still glum. “It'll take us to the outside of the cliffs, and you'll need some camouflage before we go, but I know where to get it.”

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Another merchant, another mark, but this one was no seller of toys like the one Chila and Shade had tried to rob a few weeks and an entirely different life ago. This one sold clothes, tools, and other specialties to the thieves and assassins of Sagus Cliffs, and was under their protection. To steal from him was to steal from the thieves' guild, and to steal from the thieves' guild was death. He had what Shade said she needed, however, and they didn't have the shins or the guild's permission to buy it openly, so they had little choice.

They started the job by clambering up a wall near the least reputable market in the Underbelly. Chila reluctantly wore one of Shade's dark cloaks around her broad shoulders and struggled to keep her grip with her swollen hand and find footholds with her booted foot, which still throbbed where the beast had inserted its wires. Finally, they reached a ledge and were able to look down on the merchant setting up his booth. They edged along until they were directly above him.

“Wait here and close your eyes,” said Shade.

“Why?” said Chila. “What are you going to do?”

“It'll make you dizzy,” he said. “You won't like it.”

“Fine,” she said, and squeezed her eyelids tight. “Now what—”

She heard Shade take a deep breath and push off the wall.

She gasped, expecting to hear a thump and an anguished cry, and opened her eyes. “Wait! We’re six meters up! You can’t—”

She heard nothing but a faint whoosh and looked around, but the angle of the rocky ledge meant she couldn’t see where Shade had gone without losing her balance. She bit her lip and pressed her forehead against the rock, fighting the sudden dizziness that hit her. After everything she’d accomplished, she couldn’t simply fall to her death, could she? That would be such an anticlimax.

The feeling passed, and Shade was above her again.

“I got it,” he said, opening a bulging satchel that hung from his shoulder. “Put this on.” He pulled out a large cloak. Even in the dim light Chila could tell it was fuligin, the chameleon cloth that the thieves’ guild kept a monopoly on.

“Wait,” she said as she took off her old cloak and wrapped herself in the new one. “What just happened? What did you do? How did you get back up there so fast?”

A murmur of consternation began to rise below them.

“Now is not a good time to discuss it,” he said, stuffing her old cloak in the satchel. “Follow me.”

He began climbing and she followed him all the way to the ceiling of the massive cavern where the torchlight didn’t reach. There, Shade crawled into a tight tunnel and beckoned for her to follow.

“What is this place?” she asked, squeezing into it. It was so tight the walls abraded her shoulders.

“A thief’s hole,” he said. “It weaves all around the cliffs. If they find out I’ve shown you this, they’ll kill us both.”

“Who? The thieves’ guild?” she asked. “Won’t they already want to kill us for stealing from them?”

“This is worse,” he said. “Only thieves are supposed to know about the tunnels, and telling outsiders is...bad.”

“Outsiders? Does...does that mean you’re in? What have you gotten yourself into?”

He pushed farther into the tunnel as if he hadn't heard the question, and she struggled to keep up. In less than a meter, she lost her sight completely and was forced to rely solely on the soft sound of her brother's hands and knees on the tunnel's hard floor. Her legs began to ache as she crawled, and she tried to focus on the end of their journey, where her father's treasure waited for them.

A few minutes later, the air pressure around them changed abruptly and Chila realized that they had entered a larger cave.

"Let's rest," Shade said. He rummaged around, then struck a match. He touched it to a torch that stuck out from the wall and Chila gasped as a rough-hewn room came into focus.

Jugs of water sat on a table alongside bread, cheese, and fruit. Basins filled with clean water sat by several tunnels branching out from the room, and there was even a small chamber pot set in a private alcove.

Shade poured some water from a jug into a stone mug and handed it to her, then tore her off a piece of bread from one of the loaves. "The thieves take care of their own. You never take more than you need, and you have to leave something in return."

"Have to? How will they know?"

"They'll know."

She took a bite of bread, then swallowed and said, "Well, debt to the thieves or no, taking these tunnels to the Protector's palace is definitely the way to go. I admit I wasn't looking forward to climbing up the outside of the cliffs."

"Sorry," said Shade, pointing down another tunnel, a little larger than the one they had exited. "We still have to. That's called the Suicide Tunnel. It ends at the cliff face. It's a good route for people who are being chased, or who are done with life, or for the crazy ones, the ones who want to face the impossible climb."

"Crazy. Right," Chila said. "That's us."

She stood uncertainly and splashed some of the water from a basin on her face. "What do we leave as an offering?"

"Your old cloak," he said, pulling it from his satchel and folding it.

It suddenly occurred to her that he had stolen a fuligin cloak only for her. He was still wearing his ratty old one.

“How come you didn’t get a new cloak for yourself just now?”

He looked away from her. “Uh, they only had one, and besides, I’m better at hiding than you, remember?”

She frowned. He was certainly hiding something from her, but now seemed like a silly time to have an argument about cloaks. “Fine.”

He put her cloak on the table next to the empty water jug and basket of bread. “Ready to go?”

She prodded her swollen hand, which was worse now, after all the climbing they’d just done, than it had been in days. “Not really, but I guess we can’t stay here, can we?”

“No,” he said. “Bad idea, like I said.” He turned and crawled into the Suicide Tunnel. Chila followed.

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I’ve been in the Suicide Tunnel. I wasn’t doing Chila’s business at the time—yes, I have done other things in my life, though none as notable—but I remembered Chila and Shade’s adventure as I headed into the tight tunnel and wondered how the mighty Chila had fit through it, as it felt as tight as a snake’s throat around my own insignificant mass. But then Chila did a lot of things people didn’t believe were possible.

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Chila found the Suicide Tunnel well named. It ended without door or gate, at a sheer section of the cliffs, with the rocks and the crashing waves far below. Chila was startled to see how high they had come—far higher than the cliff on which their parents’ house had sat, and that had been so high that she could hide an entire fishing boat behind her thumb if she held it at arm’s length.

On the walls of the tunnel all around the hole she could see hastily scrawled notes. Sometimes they were heart-rending one-word pronouncements—“Forever” and “Never” were popular. Sometimes they were pictures, drawings of figures lying in pools of blood, a figure on her knees, her face covered, weeping. One paragraph in

small print scrawled near the ceiling recounted a crime of such horror that Chila felt sick. She stopped reading at the point where the author had started practicing medical experiments on himself.

Then she looked over the edge and wondered about the bones of those who lay below—all the thieves who preferred death over whatever life had held for them—or perhaps simply no longer wanted to face themselves and what they had done.

She wondered what people would say about her if she stepped off the lip and into the air right now, flying straight down into oblivion. Would they remember her? Would they talk about her bravery? No. Killing the sea monster wasn't enough. Frightening the fishermen and the scavengers wasn't enough. No one would remember her if she vanished from the world—not yet.

Shade leaned out and squinted up into the light. “Look up there,” he said, pointing. “See those holes?”

Chila looked where he pointed and saw five shadows about a hundred meters above them. “You mean those overhangs? Are they protecting more suicide holes?”

“No, they let light into the Protector's garden. They are perfectly placed to give it sunlight no matter what the season. No one watches them, though. The Protector's guards figure no one is going to have the nerve to go in from this side.”

Chila frowned and looked around them. The cliff face was jagged and rough with plenty of places to wedge hands and feet as long as the winds didn't whip her off. “This is scary, yes, but the cliff looks easy enough to climb. Surely we aren't the first to try it.”

Her twin grimaced. “True. But there's supposed to be another security measure. Some sort of relic. Though no one I've talked to knows what it does.”

“So we don't know what's going to stop us, but you're sure there's something?”

He shrugged. “You wanted to go get our legacy.”

Climbing was slow for Chila, as her swollen left hand was really only good for steadying herself while her right arm searched for purchase and did most of the climbing work, and soon Shade was far ahead of her. She climbed with her face upturned, trying not to think about the drop below her and all the dead thieves she could so easily join. The wind danced around her, pulling at her, but she had followed

Shade's example and kept her cloak on with the hood up, which made her the same color as the cliff face.

Shade's cloak bulged out at the back, like he was wearing a pack under it, though she hadn't remembered seeing any straps across his front. What was he wearing under there?

She kept climbing, sweat beading on her face and her hand swelling so much it finally became little more than a thick fleshy stick she pressed into the cliff to keep her balance. She was just about to call out to Shade to say she couldn't make it when she realized they'd reached their destination.

Shade was squatting in the mouth of the first of five holes, a short tunnel large enough to walk into without ducking.

Chila looked around, frowning, as he pulled her up and in. "Why are there five tunnels if there are four seasons?"

Shade leaned out over the drop and looked at the other holes. "The middle one is the largest. Maybe it works all—"

A sudden wind through the tunnel lifted his cape and she finally saw underneath it. The shock made her legs buckle, and she clung to the wall, head spinning and guts churning. It wasn't a pack he was wearing. He wasn't wearing anything. What she had seen was part of him.

"S-S-Shade," she stuttered. "What have you done to yourself?"

He quickly pulled the cloak down again. "Nothing. Nothing."

"Shade, I saw it! You've got wings!"

She expected evasion or anger. Instead he just shrugged and smiled, his face looking suddenly worn, then turned away from her and pulled off his cloak. A pair of black wings unfolded from his shoulder blades. Like the beast from beneath the waves, they were a combination of wire, hinges, and joints fused with his own flesh and bone.

So that was how he had stolen the cloak from the merchant so efficiently.

"How...who...who gave these to you?"

Shade turned back to her and folded the wings. "Don't ask that, Chila. You don't want to know."

“Tell me, Shade! There’s no way you could afford a transformation like this! Who did this for you? What did you do for them?”

“I can’t tell you!”

He backed away from her, deeper into the tunnel, wrapping the wings around him and melting into the shadows until he seemed to vanish completely.

Chila was caught between anger at him and fascination at his new abilities. Fascination won. Her shoulders slumped. She shook her head. “How did you do that? Disappear right in front of me?”

“I’m just hiding like I always have,” he said, coming out from the wings again. “Only now I’m better at it.”

She stared, amazed. “You got exactly what you always wanted. When will I get that?”

He reached out to her, his smile strained. “When you get Father’s legacy back?”

She took his hand and they walked to the other end of the tunnel and looked out over the magnificent garden courtyard that sloped away from them beneath it.

Shade pointed down the hill to the far side, which was the wall of a massive house. At the base of the wall sat a rectangular device about the size of a coffin into which five long tubes were set, though there seemed to be slots for seven. Each tube was a different shade of silver. The leftmost one was nearly transparent, like a soap bubble, while the rightmost was completely opaque, like liquid metal. The three in the middle were gradations between those two extremes.

“Our birthright,” Shade whispered. “Come on.”

He hopped down to the lawn, then turned and reached up to her.

Chila jumped down on her own, frowning. “What are they doing just sitting out in the garden?”

Shade led her down the hill toward the house. “Remember the security measures I told you about? I think this is it. It’s some kind of thief stopper.”

Chila slowed. “How does it stop thieves? Does it fry them? Turn them into bees? And why didn’t you tell me before that the artifact was Father’s legacy?”

He gave her a sickly grin. “I wanted to surprise you?”



She turned on him, suddenly full of suspicions. “Shade, you’re not making sense. How do you know all this, anyway?”

He backed away from her. “I told you. I asked around.”

“Asked who? The thieves? Is that who gave you your—”

The grass under her feet suddenly turned slick, as if it had been coated in butter. Shade flared his wings and flapped aloft as it happened, but Chila slipped and fell, then rolled down the hill and slammed into the side of the coffin-sized device, knocking the wind from her lungs. As she tried to get up, a net of rainbow light drifted down on top of her, pinning her to the ground in a way she couldn’t understand.

Shade landed beside the net and looked down at her. He was crying.

“Don’t just stand there, Shade!” Chila cried. “Get me out of this!”

“You asked me before how I got my wings. What I did to get them.” He shivered. “I...I had to give something up.”

“What?” Chila croaked.

He hung his head. “My sister.”

He turned and opened his wings again like he was going to fly away. Chila howled with rage and fought against the net of light, trying to rise and stop him.

She made it to her knees before the net tripped her, and she fell hard against the device. One of her hands flopped into it and cracked the middle tube, a light silver device with purple undertones that thrummed with power. It flashed bright and loud, and something flared white-hot behind her left eye.

Then there was nothing.



Something was wrong.

Chila lay on a soft bed. Shade wasn't in the room, but someone was, rummaging through a cupboard. A woman. She was smiling. Chila frowned, then opened her eyes.

The world seemed oddly flat.

"Ah, you're awake, good," the woman said, stepping over to Chila. She was older, with small lines at her eyes and mouth, and her brown hair was laced with gray. She held a blue clay bowl filled with a greenish-gray paste that she stirred with a knife.

"Lie back." She pulled the knife from the bowl and smeared the paste on Chila's forehead. Chila winced as the flat of the blade touched her, but the paste was cool and soothing, and after the initial shock, she relaxed.

"Where am I?" she asked.

"You're in my house. You broke in about an hour ago and were trapped in my flutterby net." Chila couldn't see the woman, but she sensed her presence. "It seems to have swollen your eyes shut, among other things. Fortunately, I am an amateur apothecary, and know what to do to reduce the swelling. Lucky you!"

Chila didn't feel lucky. Something was very wrong. One moment she could see the woman, the next she couldn't, the next she could see as if she had one eye closed, and now the woman had told her that both her eyes were swollen shut. It had to be one of those things, not all, didn't it? Was she still asleep? Was this some kind of nightmare?

The woman finished spreading paste on Chila's face and moved on to her forearms and hands, which were also swollen, worse than after she had fought the creature in the lagoon. The cool paste was a blessing.

"Who are you?" Chila asked.

"I am the current democratically elected leader of the cliffs, my dear. I'm Chila."

"No, I'm Chila." Her brain was fuzzy, but at least she knew this.

The Protector laughed. "Funny how we have that in common. But I am Chila the Protector. What are you called? Chila the thief? Chila the untrustworthy? Chila the sneaky?"

"Nothing. They call me nothing," Chila said. "Not yet."

“Not yet?” said the Protector. “You see a future for yourself after robbing the most powerful woman in Sagus Cliffs? Your eyes must be better than they appear.”

Chila remained silent as the paste soothed her into a dreamy, pain-free state.

“Did you know your parents named you after me?” asked the Protector. “They hoped you’d become a great leader.”

“You knew my parents? You knew my father?” Chila asked. “What...what happened to him?”

The woman dabbed another dollop of paste on Chila’s hand. “I always regretted that. Sadly, he saw the whole of the tube device. My fault, not his. But I couldn’t let him go back home with that knowledge, could I?”

Chila’s eye flew open. “So he’s dead?”

The Protector shrugged and began wrapping a bandage around Chila’s hand. “I sent him to the Bloom as a slave. I’m afraid he didn’t last long.”

Chila was silent.

The Protector smiled. “Do you hate me now? Do you want to kill me for what I did?”

Chila refused to respond to the bait. “Why are you helping me? I tried to steal from you.”

The Protector laughed. “Oh, you succeeded! The middle tube is gone. You shattered it, which is highly annoying. As to why I’m helping you, I wanted to see if the contents of the tube had given you any interesting abilities—anything I could make use of. Sadly, it seems it’s just turned you into a swollen little sausage, so I’m afraid you’ll be sharing your father’s fate.”

Chila felt her stomach grow cold. “And...and Shade?”

“He works for me now. I thought he told you.”

“He said...He said I was the price of his wings.”

“That is true. My men caught him snooping, trying to learn about my security arrangements. They were going to throw him over the garden wall, but when I found out he was your brother, I made him an offer.”

Chila closed her eye. It didn't make a difference. She could still see. "But why? Why did you want me? Why was I worth the trade?"

The Protector's smile faded and she turned away. "Simple. The city was talking about the wrong Chila."

The paste's soporific effect overwhelmed Chila then. Her vision blurred, eyes open or eyes closed, and she was dragged down into the depths of unnatural sleep, her last thoughts of Shade, and their mother's ghost's prophecy that Chila's fame would be painted on the world with her brother's blood.

It seemed much more probable now.

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I'm excited to write this part down. This was where I come into the story. Chila doesn't remember this part, but I can still see it with absolute clarity.

She didn't know yet that she'd lost an eye—that when she'd broken the crystal tube her father had discovered, what had escaped it had burned her left eye away. She only knew that her vision had changed, and she was not yet fully aware of those changes.

But first, my inconsequential story. I was a thief. They caught me. I was sent to the Bloom, purchased by a slave broker, manacled, and thrown in with his other girls. Nothing out of the ordinary for a girl of my birth.

For weeks we huddled together in that room, those girls and I, deep within the Bloom, with its wet walls and its darkness deeper than night, weeping and awaiting our fates, and praying that the Bloom would not eat us. Well, I didn't pray, because I didn't believe the Bloom ate people, even though some of the girls said they could hear it whisper to them at night, even though some of the girls disappeared in the night, even though one morning I woke up missing my left forearm, though I had not felt it taken from me. I still refused to believe. I didn't dare. How would I have slept again if I had? Instead I just told myself that sometimes people came in to steal themselves a slave—or a body part—when we were asleep.

Anyway, back to Chila.

It was the time of day the slavers called night when the cell door opened and the guards brought in a tall girl and dumped her on the floor beside me. They clapped a

manacle around her ankle and attached it to the giant chain we were all tethered to, then left without a word.

Chila was still covered in the sticky paste the Protector had smeared her with, and still groggy from its effects, and her bandages obscured one eye and half her face, so she didn't make an astounding first impression. All she did was moan and shiver and try to stand. My friends and I did what we could to calm her and make her comfortable, and finally she slept, and we did too.

We woke again a while later when she started screaming.

The drugged paste had worn off, and Chila had finally discovered her eye was missing. And worse, it was still dark, and she was completely disoriented, because she could still see.

"You can see?" I asked her. "In here?"

"Yes," she said. "Everything. Even with my eyes closed. You are still there. Still staring at me."

"You're like a cave bat," I said. "Amazing."

She groaned. "How will I ever get to sleep when I can see no matter what I do?"

"How will we ever get to sleep if you don't shut up?" said one of the girls down the chain.

"I saw who said that," said Chila.

In the silence that followed, I touched her arm.

"I'm Speck," I said. "Welcome to the Bloom. You're in Overseer Xage's slave pens."

"Slave pens," said Chila. "So she did it. Of course she did."

I didn't know what that meant, so I continued. "You're going to be rented out as day labor until somebody buys you, or until somebody steals you from the cell."

"Steals me?"

I leaned into her and lowered my voice. "The other girls will tell you the Bloom takes us away, that it took my arm. But I don't believe them. I think it's brigands who don't want to pay for slaves—or meat."

"You think brigands took your arm?"

“Yeah, those bastards.”

“No,” she said after a second. “The Bloom took it. It needed something from you.”

“What do you know about it?” I asked her. “You just got here.”

“I just...know,” she said. “Now be quiet a minute.”

How did she know? Looking back I have my theories. Maybe the contact with the leviathan had opened her mind to contact with monstrous beasts. Maybe the broken tube had given her more than just the ability to see in the dark, or maybe it was some inborn ability. Whatever it was, something about her made me believe her, so I was quiet, and I waited while she looked around.

“Right,” she said at last.

“What?” I asked softly. “What did you see?”

“In the back corner. A... mouth, a throat, a maw. We’re very close to it. You’d think, if it took something from you, it would give you something back. That would be fair, wouldn’t it? To make a trade? Like maybe we could have some lights in here? That’s worth an arm, right?”

“Who are you talking—”

I stopped when I realized I could see Chila, lightly stroking the rough wall of our cell with one bandaged hand. Luminescent veins had blossomed in the ceiling, first just a couple, and then more as she murmured under her breath.

It was from that moment that we began to worship her.

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Even among all her miracles and mysteries, one of the most remarkable things about Chila was her patience. She had lost an eye, been betrayed by her brother, burned, broken, and enslaved, but she wasn’t desperate to escape. Instead, for weeks she paid close attention to the routines of our situation, what the guards did and when, what the slaves did and what they dreamed, and, most importantly, what the Bloom did in relation to those other things.

Until someone purchased us, we slaves were rented to various Bloom merchants for manual labor—and sometimes deeper cruelties. I did my best to line up beside Chila when the masters came and so we were often paired. We were both crippled, so

we got the crappy jobs from merchants looking to save a shin. Still, we made a good team, I the clever little one, she the big strong one, and without saying that we enjoyed our time as slaves in the Bloom, I will say that her presence made my time there far more bearable, and I believe the experience was also essential to turning Chila into the woman she became.

Then, that time came to an end.

It was the second month of Chila's captivity. We woke to find that we had lost another girl to the Bloom, and we'd all had nightmares that night of yawning, gaping holes dragging us into oblivion. Well, almost all of us. Chila said she'd dreamed of freedom. Then, immediately upon discovering that the girl had been taken, she'd gone to her customary spot on the wall and placed her hand on it.

We all watched warily as she frowned and talked to the Bloom very intensely. Finally, she touched her forehead to the wall, and I distinctly heard the words, "You owe us."

Both my eyes were blacked and puffy due to a merchant who the day before had considered my scrubbing of his cart offensive for some reason, so I couldn't see very clearly, but the other girls suddenly cried out in wonder.

"A door!" one gasped. "She made a door appear.

"No," said Chila, looking around at us. "I did nothing but ask for recompense."

She patted the door and murmured a quiet thank you, then hauled it open. There was a small room behind it, full of weapons all piled on the floor, and a keyring lying right on the threshold. Chila picked it up, unlocked her own manacle, then tossed the keys to me. I fumbled them, still agog at the miracle in front of us.

"Unlock yourself, Speck," Chila said. "And all the rest. Then all of you come take a weapon. We're getting out of here."

I did as she ordered, and one after the other the girls stepped to the door and Chila handed them a sword or a dagger or a spear or an axe. When it was my turn, she handed me a bag of bladed throwing disks—sisks, we called them. I had never used them before, but they felt right in my hand.



Finally, Chila chose for herself a giant glowing hammer that sparked and crackled with terrifying energy, then closed the door and watched until it was absorbed into the cell's wet pink walls once again and vanished entirely.

“Now,” she said, turning to us. “Stand here at the back wall where the light will fall on you when they open the cell, and keep silent. I will stay beside the door and surprise them once they are surprised by you.”

As we followed her orders she nodded up at the ceiling and the luminescence from the veins there began to fade. When it was fully dark, Chila stepped to the cell door, then swung her hammer and struck it a great clanging blow.

Shouts echoed from the passage outside and I gripped my sisks tighter.

“Get ready,” said Chila, stepping into the shadows and looking at us all. “Your time has come.”

## Chapter 4

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### The Fourth Lesson: If They Can't Love You, Make Them Fear You

When Chila's father had walked into the Protector's palace and never walked out again, Chila began to understand the advantages of notoriety. If her father had been someone respected or feared in Sagus Cliffs, someone whose disappearance would have brought consequence, then he might have returned from the palace. If he had been more than a fisher, someone would have asked why he hadn't.

From then on, Chila was determined that she would be known enough—feared enough—that she would always be able to walk back out of any place she walked into.

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As the ringing of Chila's hammer on the door faded and the sounds of the approaching guards grew, I could feel the Bloom tighten around us in anticipation. A guard wrenched the door open and stormed into the room, demanding to know what was going on. He had just enough time to step toward us, his fist raised, before Chila jumped from the shadows and slammed her hammer into the side of his head. He went down as five others poured in behind him. Chila backed up, drawing them farther into the cell, and the rest of us dashed around them into the hall, then turned and blocked their exit, watching to make sure Chila was safe.

We needn't have been worried. With a few swings of her lightning hammer, she bashed through them all and ran to join us, then slammed the door on them.

"And here is the first payment!" she cried, looking up at the ceiling. "The first of many!"

We didn't know what she meant until the cell door closed up like a throat and the cell inside vanished from our sight. The Bloom had received its offering. They were nearly musical, the guards' muffled screams.

Two other guards came, drawn by the noise, and that's when I killed for the first time.

She was a tall woman with dark eyes and brown skin. I threw a sisk, and as it left my hand the spring released and steel blades sprouted from the rim. It sliced open her neck, spraying her companion, a monstrous guard we called “Hound,” and she died with a startled expression on her face. I was thrilled. My life had been minuscule until that moment, but now I was a killer. I had a victim, the beginnings of a legend. I felt a scrap of what drove Chila.

The other girls leapt on Hound and beat him with weapons and bare fists—payback for all he had done to them during their imprisonment, then he was dead and it was over. The other girls rose from the slaughter, their dirty rags and emaciated frames caked in blood, and Chila hugged them, then stooped and started searching the dead.

“We need money for food,” she said. “Honest merchants get shins. Those who use slaves get blades.”

Food. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d had real food. I stepped forward before any of the other girls recovered enough to speak. “We will follow you anywhere, Chila.”

She put a hand on my shoulder and smiled. “And I will take you everywhere, Speck. That is my promise.”

I could not have loved her more than I did then.

She led me out of the guard’s hallway and the other girls followed. I turned and motioned for them to keep up.

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Our procession through the markets of the Bloom was one they still talk about today. At first the merchants and hawkers simply stared at us in silence, startled to see a group of girls, clearly slaves, armed, bloody, walking unchained and unafraid. They stared too at the force of nature that was Chila, fearsome with her scars, her one eye, and her glowing hammer resting easy on one broad shoulder.

What happened next started a chain reaction.

Chila had nothing else on her mind but her freedom and ours. She wasn’t there to free any other slaves, though many looked up as we passed them, hope blossoming in

their eyes. Her only aim was to lead us out of our own particular hell—until, that is, she heard the whispers of a pair of earthware merchants who were watching us pass while their slaves used long iron tongs to load clay bowls into blazing kilns behind them.

“That’s not a slave revolt,” said the first man. “That’s just a cell’s worth of girls who got lucky. The overseers will squash ‘em like bugs before they reach the courtyard.”

“Aye,” said the second. “Gavrus the Scalped opened every single pit in the slave market and the overseers still spanked his bottom for him.”

Chila stopped abruptly, her head swiveling slowly to focus on the two men.

“Where is this slave market?” she asked.

The men cowered back, their sneering condescension evaporating in the heat of Chila’s gaze, and seemed too frightened to speak. I knew the answer, however. I had been held in that market before being sold to Overseer Xage.

“I can take you there, Chila,” I said. “I know the way.”

“Thank you, Speck,” said Chila. “But first, these gentlemen seem to think we are not a big enough force to take on the overseers, and I believe they are right. We must recruit more.”

And with that she stepped to the center of the market and raised her glowing hammer over her head like a beacon.

“Slaves!” she cried, and her voice boomed louder than any human should have been able to speak. “I am Chila the Chainbreaker! Chila the Cagesmasher! Chila the Great! All who know me know that what I promise, I deliver. And today I promise you glory! I promise you victory! I promise you freedom!”

She turned back to the stall of the earthware sellers and brought her hammer down on their table, smashing the bowls and pitchers and mugs displayed there, sending them flying.

“Walk with me, slaves!” she called. “And be slaves no more!”

“Yes!” I cried. “Crack your masters’ skulls and walk with Chila the Great!”

The slaves at the earthware kilns were the first to answer the call, beating their masters to the ground with their iron tongs, then falling in line behind Chila, but all

over the marketplace, the spark Chila had kindled burst forth in flames, and men, women, and children, all branded with the marks of their various masters, strode from the stalls and workshops, and joined our ranks.

From there we grew into an army, larger with each market and manufactory and great house we passed, and it was not long before our army was tested, before we heard the shouts of the Bloom's guards coming from the connecting tunnels, before the overseers tried to end us before we'd begun.

It was terrible. They were veterans. We were neophytes. They were strong. We were starved. They were armed to the teeth. We had what we could find. Yet somehow, though they killed us by the score, with Chila leading us, smashing their captains and their constructs with her hammer, calling to the Bloom to swallow whole squads of them, we persevered, making them pay for every death, overwhelming them as more and more slaves rallied to her hammer.

Some say the Bloom truly woke that day, with all the blood that Chila fed it. But I think it was Chila speaking to it that fully woke it. Then she fed it.

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When it was over, when we had fallen upon the slave market and opened all the pits, when we had killed all the overseers and broken open their coffers of shins, when we had sated our starving bellies on the food in their larders, when we had raised toasts to Chila with the wine in their cellars, she stepped up onto the base of a shattered statue and stood before us.

“Well done, friends. We have killed the overseers, and it was a great victory, but our war is only half done. Those who employed the overseers, the true masters, live in Sagus Cliffs, and they will not suffer our freedom in silence. They will come for us, and we will have to fight again, ten times as hard as we fought today, if we hope to beat them.”

There were murmurings at that, for our losses had been many, and our wounded were legion.

Chila held up her hands, nodding. “I know. And I don't blame you for your fear. Nor will I order you to stay. I am not your master. You have no masters anymore! You are free. You may leave, do what you will. I will not stop you. But know that if you go

out on your own, you may be caught again, while, if you follow me, you will be safer, and eat better, and be stronger, than you would on your own. I promise you that.”

Not a single man, woman, or child turned from her then. We were all of us ready to die for her.

Later, many of us did.

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The next morning word came to us that, just as Chila had predicted, the Protector had learned of our great triumph and was assembling the soldiers of Sagus Cliffs to meet us.

I hurriedly sought out Chila to tell her the news, and finally found her sleeping in the house of Overseer Xage, our old master, curled up in his luxurious bed with her hammer beside her on a pillow, and his corpse hanging from one of the bedposts.

I approached her on tiptoe and reached out to give her a gentle shake.

Without opening her eyes, she smiled. “My manipulative Speck. What can I do for you?”

I shouldn’t have been startled when she recognized me for what I was, but I was anyway.

“Manipulative?” I blurted.

“Of course. Such a tiny, shy, humble girl, and yet you’re always the one to bring me news. Always the one who brings the others my orders. Soon you’ll be leading my army.”

I shook my head and glanced around, glad we were alone. “Me? You’re our leader. We were all doomed to slavery before you came! I haven’t done anything!”

She smiled and opened her one eye. “Indeed. Well, I’ll keep your secret, and you keep humble. People respond to that. Now, what can I do for you?”

“Soldiers will be coming for us soon, with the Protector leading them. What should we do?”

“What do you think we should do?” she asked.

I bit my lip. “I...I wouldn’t presume.”

“Of course you wouldn’t. Not you.” She smiled. “Well, we will need to meet them head on with our strongest fighters, but also our biggest personalities, who might be able to goad them into a disadvantageous position. My father always said half of battle was intimidation.”

“I thought he was a fisher?”

“He turned to fishing after he lost his taste for war,” she said. “He didn’t like to talk about it, but he taught me some tactics. We’ll also need some stealthy fighters to get around them and attack them from the rear while the brave ones hold their attention.”

Then she looked me right in the eye. “The most important thing is that we must all be united in this. Can you ensure this?”

“Of course,” I said. “You saw them after your speech last night. They would follow you anywhere. They are ready to die for you!”

“That was last night,” said Chila. “You will find that a night of nightmares and a morning of hangovers will have given many of them second thoughts. Go talk to them. Find the hesitant and either stir them to bravery or get them working outside the action—tending the wounded, watching the children, arming the warriors. Those who will fight, find out their strengths. Find out what they excel at, then return to me and we’ll see what to do next.”

Talk to people. That I could do. I’d been talking to people my whole life, convincing them that I wasn’t one to watch, that I wasn’t a threat. I could convince them of other things too, probably, if I tried, and for Chila I would try anything.

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In the end we decided that the slave market was where we would wait for the Protector and her army. For one, we were already there, but it had strategic advantages as well. It was a huge arena-shaped space, dark, gloomy, and cavernous, situated deep within the Bloom, which meant that the Protector would have a long march through hostile territory to reach us, and a long uncertain retreat when she tried to get out again. It was also surrounded by a perimeter of broad platforms—the stages from which the auctioneers sold their slaves—and around them, rings of rising tiers where vendors of other wares usually set up shop, which made anyone who held

the center vulnerable to long-range attacks, a perfect place to destroy her troops if we could force them to enter it—and Chila had some ideas about that.

Having chosen our ground, she positioned our troops. Our front line was mostly adults, men and women with soldiering in their past, and the bigger, louder, and crazier the better. They ranked up in the public square outside the slave market, ready to turn tail and draw the Protector's troops into our trap as soon as they showed their faces.

Another group, mostly girls from our prison, took positions in hidden tunnels along the Protector's line of march, ready to fall on her army from the rear. They would play the role that Chila's brother Shade so often had, that of the assassin.

Of the hundreds of people I talked to at Chila's behest, only twelve refused to fight, either from fear or worry about the children among us. Ironically, most of the children begged for a weapon in order to hurt the people who had hurt them. We gave them rocks and sling shots, or bows and beam weapons for the older ones, and put them on the tiers above the arena floor along with groups of more experienced artillerymen.

Finally it was time. Our outliers had come running back to the market to tell us that the Protector had entered the Bloom, and I ran to tell Chila the news.

"Thank you, Speck," she said, looking at herself in the mirror of Overseer Xage's bedroom. "The Bloom already told me."

She was wearing a bright silver vest over a red linen shirt and pants, and looked magnificent, but underdressed for battle.

"Don't you want to wear the armor we found for you?" I asked her.

She snorted. "That ugly mess? No thank you."

"Aren't you afraid of getting hit?"

She shook her head, then turned and looked at herself over her shoulder. "I fought a sea monster. I lost an eye. I was sold into slavery. Apparently I'm carrying my father's artifact inside of me. There's not a lot left to fear."

"But you could die!"

She shrugged. "It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter if we win or lose. It doesn't matter if I live or die. What matters is that they'll tell stories about us for centuries to



come. How we cleaned out the slave pits. How we defied the guards. How we fought and earned our freedom. That is winning. That is living.” She turned and smiled at me, then started to take the knives I had tucked into my belt and the bag of sisks I wore slung over one shoulder. “In fact, Speck, the only person who absolutely must survive this battle, and therefore must not fight, is...you.”

I stared at her, gaping. “M-m-me? Why?”

She kissed me on top of my head. “Because you will tell that story.”

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They say that the Protector entered the Bloom with a thousand soldiers, more than three times the number of slaves Chila had gathered, and far more professional than the guards of the overseers who we had fought before. They say that the soldiers were armed with the finest weapons the armories of Sagus Cliffs could provide. They say that what followed was a massacre, and it was, but we were not the ones who were slaughtered.

The Protector and her army marched through the Bloom’s red, pulsing corridors expecting to fight slaves and renegades. Instead they fought the Bloom itself. Passages would constrict, crushing soldiers to death. Others became pitch-black mazes, where men would march into bottomless pits or find themselves trapped and set upon by silent savage slave girls who could see where they could not. Some of the men went mad, screaming that the Bloom was talking to them, telling them to do horrible things to their comrades. Some of the men listened.

As the army finally neared the slave market, now less than three hundred strong, they tried to surround it and trap us, but soldiers who were sent into side corridors were never seen again, and paths that seemed to lead in the right directions circled back and funneled the survivors to the main entrance, where our biggest, boldest, and best were waiting for them.

Still, we were no match for them. The soldiers’ beamers and heat sticks and lightning lenses cut down entire ranks of our sword- and spear-armed fighters, filling the chamber with the smell of burning meat, but when our troops turned and fled into the arena, though the Protector knew it was a trap, she soon found that its door was the only way open to her. All other paths had been sealed behind her. There was no

way back, no way around, only forward, through an opening that looked like a toothless mouth.

To her credit, the Protector led the way, marching right into the center of the arena with her soldiers surrounding her, while above them on every side our shooters and lobbers and archers aimed down at them, and our fighters took cover behind the auction platforms and waited.

That's when I, standing next to Chila on the first tier, saw Chila's enemy for the first time, and also the hunching shadow that stood almost invisible beside her, wrapped in wings of black and with a sword like a slice of moonlight in one hand—Chila's brother, Shade. I'm not ashamed to say he terrified me.

The Protector stepped forward and looked up at Chila. "Is this what you want? Certain death in this horrible place?"

Chila laughed. "Are you asking me, or yourself?"

"You could surrender," said the Protector. "You could return to being a slave and no one else would need to die."

Chila's followers laughed at that one, long and loud.

"If you were concerned with avoiding deaths," said Chila, "you could have left my father to his family after he brought you the artifact. But you didn't. You caused this, not me."

I have since learned the laws of war, and what happened next was against all agreed-upon formalities of battle. An arrow was loosed. It flew through the air and sank into Chila's shoulder. She grunted in pain and stumbled backward into my arms as our forces erupted into outraged battle cries and fired down on the Protector and her soldiers with everything they had.

"Forget it," said Chila, her voice calm, and batted away my fluttering, panicked hands, then got shakily to her feet. Her body tensed and rippled, as if I saw her through hazy heat, and the arrow fell away like something within her had cut it in two. She pulled her vest and shirt aside to examine the wound, but there was no wound. Instead, her skin had grown silver scales where the arrow had punctured her, overlapping, spreading.

“What did you do?” I asked her, wonder in my voice.

“The impossible, it seems,” she replied, then hefted her hammer. It crackled and the air around us felt suddenly sharp and clean. She grinned at me then and I could see that the dark tint of her skin had taken on a silvery sheen. Then she was off, leaping down from the tier and shouting to her hidden troops.

“To me, my children! To me! Strike them while they cower from our fire!”

Our fighting troops roared out from behind the auction platforms to swarm the Protector’s army, slamming into them from all sides.

Only Chila’s admonition that I should live to tell the tale kept me from charging in after her, so I stayed, crouched and anxious, peering over the lip of the tier, as the battle crashed and careened below me.

At first it seemed as if the fight was going toward the Protector’s soldiers. They were stronger and had better armor, but when the younger girls from the tunnels ran in after our front line, cutting windpipes and stabbing backs and stealing weapons, they began to falter, and when Chila reached the center of the arena floor and began to let loose with her hammer, the tide turned irrevocably.

She was a red and silver typhoon, swirling and blurring in the midst of the Protector’s army, untouchable and unstoppable, lashing out with her glowing hammer to smash men back by the handful, and send golden lightning crackling through dozens more to drop them to their knees.

And as the soldiers turned their beamers and blasters on her, trying to cut her down from afar, the rest of Chila’s army attacked them from behind, cutting hamstrings, piercing kidneys, climbing on shoulders and stabbing out eyes.

Then Chila spied a swooping figure above her and pointed her hammer at it.

“Come on, Shade!” she called. “Finish what you started!”

Her voice rang through the giant chamber like a trumpet call, and I could feel the Bloom constrict a bit, giving Shade less space to circle. “She gave you your wings for betraying me! What has she promised you for killing me?”

She had stopped her frantic whirling to taunt him, and I gasped in horror to see the state of her. She had not been as untouchable as I had thought. Her clothes were

shredded and torn, and every visible inch of her body was cut and bruised and burnt. Worse, her other eye was gone, replaced by an oozing gash that cut across her face from brow to chin. But as I watched—as the whole arena watched—everywhere she had been hurt, by blade or slug or fire, everywhere she was bruised or bled or burnt, began scaling over just as her arrow wound had, filling in to give her a shining silver skin, even over her eye sockets, though it was clear she could still see, and even better than before. Chila was thriving on battle. It was transforming her.

Only one person was not stopped in their tracks at her metamorphosis. Only one person did not look upon her in awe. He dropped out of the shadows at the top of the chamber like a shard of falling obsidian and slammed her to the ground, then swooped up and around again for another attack.

All fighting stopped then. Even the Protector, surrounded by her elites where we had driven them, on the highest tier overlooking the pit, stopped screaming encouragements to her men and looked to the floor below to see the siblings battle.

They fought like the moon and the clouds, the earth and the sky, he darting in to attack, obscuring her with his wings, then retreating into the air, blood trailing from his sword. She standing strong, legs wide, swiping crackling lines of lightning around her with her hammer and sending him arcing off at wild angles as he twisted to avoid it.

Then at last he cut deep across her back, splitting her linen shirt and silver vest, and sending her spinning to the ground, blood soaking her, and her hammer flying from her grasp.

With a cry of triumph, he landed and raised his sword over her, aiming to sever her head as she pushed to her knees and looked up at him. He hesitated then, for despite the blood and pain, she was smiling, the silver scales already closing over the terrible wound.

Then she tipped her head and bared her neck to him, inviting him to attack. The insult was too much, and he slashed down at her, howling with rage. The sword bounced off her scales and he fell back, staring in horror, then turned and tried to fly away.

She grabbed his foot, lightning fast, and yanked him from the air as if he was as light as a feather. He hit the ground hard. Even from my safe vantage point, I could hear his arm bones snap.

With her twin struggling to rise, Chila turned him over and knelt on his chest, then smiled at him with her strange silver lips.

“Go on,” he said, snarling up at her. “Finish it! Do as Mother said you would! Win your legacy with my blood!”

She stroked his face. “Do you think I’d let the words of a ghost decide my fate? Nobody shapes my destiny but me.”

And with that she helped him up and put him on his feet, then turned to face the Protector, still standing among her remaining men on the highest tier.

“Your champion is defeated,” she said, then reached up with her silver hands and seized the tattered remains of her fine clothes and tore them off with as little effort as a child pulling the wings off a fly. Underneath, her body was hard, perfect, and metallic, silver scales covering every inch of her. She bore no wounds, no marks, no bruises, no sign she had fought at all. “If you don’t want the city talking about the ‘wrong Chila’ tomorrow, you’ll have to fight me yourself.”

The Protector shook her head. “I will retreat. I do not wish to die.”

“Don’t you?” asked Chila, walking forward with the sound of her bare soles hitting the stony flesh of the Bloom echoing through the chamber. “And yet you had no compunction against leading a thousand men to their deaths for that very reason. You had no compunction against killing every slave in the Bloom for that reason.”

She shook her head. “No. Your men may leave. They did not come of their own accord, but you will die here. I will give you neither your life nor your name. From here on there will be only one Chila—Chila the Chainbreaker, Chila the Cagesmasher, Chila the Great. That there ever was another by that name who led the city will forever be forgotten. I will be, am, and was always, the only Chila.”

And with that she leapt to the Protector’s perch in three swift bounds, picked her up over her head, and threw her down to her followers in the pit.

“Here is your tormenter, my children!” she called. “Give her every punishment that was ever given you!”

As the former slaves tore the forgotten woman apart, as Shade stared at the grisly spectacle in mute shock, Chila turned to the soldiers of Sagus Cliffs and swept a hand toward the exit of the arena.

“Leave now,” she said. “If anyone asks you, tell them Chila the Great has closed the slave pits. If anyone wants to open them again, tell them they will have to battle me themselves for the right.”

They bowed before her, then left without a word.

It was over. Chila’s followers were holding up the head and bloody limbs of the forgotten woman and cheering Chila from the arena floor. She stepped to the edge of the tier and spread her arms for silence. They stared up at her adoringly, as did I.

“You are the rulers of the Bloom now, my children, if that is what you want. Choose a leader from among yourselves, and send them to me in the city. This is the beginning of a new relationship between the Bloom and Sagus Cliffs, a time when everyone will be free, and no one will be forgotten.”

As the cheers of her children erupted afresh, I pushed through the crowd and up the tiers, and found myself walking shoulder to shoulder with Shade.

“Shade, Speck,” she said, beckoning us close. “I’m so happy to see you survived.”

“Are you?” asked Shade.

“I was so afraid,” I said. “The battle was so close. I thought we were all going to die.”

Chila chuckled. “There was never any danger of that.”

“Oh, but there was!” I said. “Even with so many of the Protector’s troops getting lost in the Bloom, we barely won. So many dead, but we persevered. It was incredible—an impossible victory.”

Chila laughed and ruffled my hair with her silver fingers. “Speck, I’m disappointed in you.”

“Disappointed?” I asked, frightened. “Why?”

“Because you haven’t understood that the battle was only as impossible as I wanted it to be. I could have asked the Bloom to swallow the Protector’s army entire and it would gladly have accepted the offering, but where would the glory have been in that? What kind of story would it have been if it didn’t end in a desperate battle and a hairsbreadth victory?”

I stared at her in wonder. So did her brother.

We had so much to learn.

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Everyone we passed as we walked out of the Bloom, then up through the vertical slums of Sagus Cliffs to the Protector’s palace, cast sidelong looks at us—at Chila’s naked form and silver scales, at her smiling, eyeless face. They whispered behind their hands. I heard it again and again, “Chila the Blind. Chila the Silver. Chila the Great. She freed the slaves and killed the overseers. She defeated the Protector. She told the Bloom what to do.”

I don’t know how word had spread so quickly, as the battle was so fresh that Shade’s wounds still wept, but somehow they knew her. Some might have feared her, some might have hated her, but all of them, every single one, knew her—and her name.

The guards and servants at the palace had also apparently heard of their mistress’s fate, but instead of attempting to avenge her, as I’d feared they would, they welcomed us and stood aside as Chila led Shade and I through its vaulted corridors to its walled garden.

The palace was unlike any place I’d ever seen—an endless, open maze of airy rooms with low, brightly upholstered furniture and walls covered in soft fabric, dyed pleasant colors. Nothing of the city could be seen or heard or smelled here. All was sunlight and breeze and the soft buzz of insects beyond the latticed windows.

Finally we found the garden, and Chila brought us to the coffin-shaped device with its remaining four tubes. She stood for a long time looking down at it, contemplating the first tube on the left while I waited patiently and Shade shivered to one side, trying to cradle his broken arms in his broken arms.

Finally she put her hand on Shade's shoulder and pointed to that first tube. "Break it, Shade. That's the one she let you touch that gave you your wings, but the transformation wasn't complete. Break it and you will be what you've always dreamed of being."

Shade stepped forward, reaching out a twisted arm, then hesitated and looked back at her.

"D-do you trust me?"

She smiled. "Do you trust me? Or do you think I still need to be shown I'm not invulnerable?"

He shook his head. "I trust you. I know now that you'll always do what you say you're going to do, no matter what it is. You need no more lessons. You never did."

"Good," said Chila. "Then I trust you. Break the tube."

With two broken arms he couldn't pick up the tube, so instead he raised a foot and stamped down on it, shattering it. Dark silver fumes bloomed up from it and washed over him, enveloping him. He inhaled them deeply, then started to cough and convulse, bending double and hugging his stomach.

I stepped back, terrified and afraid that I had just witnessed Chila murder her brother for what he had done, after gaining his trust only seconds before. But then, as the dark swirls cleared, Shade stood straight again, wiping his mouth, and I saw that he had changed.

His skin was darker than before, and his limbs even longer and thinner—but now unbroken—while his face had grown more lean and skull-like. But the greatest change was his wings, which before had been unlovely things of wire and bone and flesh that had looked makeshift and pieced together. Now they were his wings, a completely natural part of him, with strong bones and thick membranes, and a far wider span than before.

He spread them as we watched, then raised his arms and whooped. "Now!" he cried. "Now I am me! Now I am complete!"

And with that, he hugged Chila, then sprung up into the air, beat his wings, and flew up over our heads.



Chila laughed with delight as she watched him swoop and circle above us, then turned her eyeless face to me.

“Now, Speck,” she said, pointing to the tube with the densest silver in it. “It’s your turn. Break the one on the right.”

I stared at her, astonished.

“I-I don’t understand. Why me? I’m nothing. I mean, I want nothing more than to be by your side forever, but I don’t know why you would want me.”

“You lie,” she said softly. “You’ve been telling lies about yourself your whole life, though perhaps even you have fallen for them. What name were you born with?”

I stepped back. “What?”

“Your parents didn’t name you Speck. You chose that name as a way to lie even more about your abilities. What was your name?”

I looked down. “Rockwall,” I whispered.

She nodded. “Fitting. I like it. But we’ll keep it between us. Your strength, Rockwall, is in making people underestimate you, making people ignore you. That is power in its own right, and why I want you with me. I want this world to know my name, I want to stand on top of it and have everyone look up to me, but as confident as I am, I know I will not be able to do it alone. I will need Shade to do the things that I cannot be known to have done, and I will need you to tell my story, and keep telling it long after I have gone.”

“A-after?”

“Unlike Shade, I don’t believe in ghosts, or any heaven or hell. The only immortality I believe in is the memory of others. As long as I am remembered, I still live, and so you will keep Chila the Great in the thoughts of the people for as long as you live.”

“And how long will that be, Chila?” I asked.

She smiled. “Break the tube and see.”

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After that, Chila ruled Sagus Cliffs for many years, with Shade and me as her constant companions and advisers, and many of her fellow former slaves working as the new administrators of the city. Then, one day—a day like any other—I woke up and found them both gone, vanished without a trace.

The city mourned. I just wished Chila had taken me with her, but I knew why she didn't. I still had a job to do. The job I'm still doing, all these years later, thanks to the silver fumes in that broken tube.

Some people say I must be my own great-granddaughter, not myself, since I shouldn't still be here telling stories after more than a century. I let them think that. It doesn't matter what anybody thinks about me. It only matters what they think of Chila. It only matters that they still talk about her. It only matters that they remember her.

Chila.

Chila the Chainbreaker.

Chila the Cagesmasher.

Chila the Silver.

Chila the Great.

## About the Author

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