

# Secret Keepers

And the Killer of Kohar

Book 1

by

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Secret Keepers: Book 1  
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This day I vow,  
    To dedicate my life to God,  
    By service to my fellow Humans,  
    Through the Order of the Secret Keepers;

To go,  
    Without question,  
    Wherever I am most needed;

To form no attachments,  
    Of family, friendship, profession, or politics,  
    Which might prevent or hinder this vow;

To live simply,  
    Owning nothing,  
    Which might prevent or hinder this vow;

To reject all  
    Prejudice,  
    Oppression,  
    Injustice,  
    And Evil,  
    In whatever forms they may present themselves;

To let no wrong pass unchallenged;

To keep secret  
    That which is confessed to me in secret;

And to speak for those who have no voice.

~The Oath of the Secret Keepers

# CHAPTER 1

---

## MANOR VAULKERY

CHARLES MORRY COUNTED EACH STEP OUT OF old habit. Twenty-three, by the time he reached his destination. Twenty-three concrete steps between the third floor of the Manor-house and the first room in the tower. They had been wooden once, in his childhood, dented by the passing feet of a dozen generations of Vaulkeries. When had the concrete come? And why? Someone had covered the wooden floor of the first tower room, too, stone tile, pristine, as if no one had set foot there before him.

Otherwise, the room was the same as it had always been. Towers of spare chairs, with the chipped bust of some Vaulkery ancestor proudly stacked on one of them, gathered dust in the corners. Two battered tables stood end to end across the center of the room. There were two windows, one taking up the entire front wall, the other taking up most of the back wall. Both came to high, pointed

arches, looking down in grandeur on the village below. One old heater, under the front window, worked valiantly, but in vain, to warm this lofty space.

Charles paused in the doorway. Behind him, the spiral staircase continued its climb up into the sky, but the stone and plaster walls hid its ascent from view. There was another room, Charles knew, thirty or so steps up, at the very top of that very tall tower. But for all the hours he had spent here as a child, Charles had gone higher than the first room on only eight separate occasions. Twice he had been chasing a cat. Once he was playing hide-and-seek. The other times he did not remember. The second room was always locked, anyway.

In the first tower room, where he had spent a significant part of his now-past childhood, Charles glanced to his right. There, a battlement hung outside the arched, four-pane window. Its crenelated balcony jutted out over the village like the toothed jaw of some guardian monster. It was an echo, the reminder of a bygone age when the towers and the battlements and the castles beneath them were the only things standing between their villages and annihilation. To the survivors of a galactic cataclysm, six hundred years earlier, the battlement stood as their only hope against chaos. To Charles and the man who owned this house, it was a childhood plaything.

But it was difficult to remember those days now, when Charles and the owner of this house had called each other friends.

Across the room, a young woman stood at the front window, watching people below as they moved about their business on the village's two broadest streets. She wore a white sweater, open in front, over a dark blue dress, clean clothes, but old, with visible patches in several places. She must have heard Charles enter, but did not turn, even when he went to stand beside her at the window.

"I'm glad you came," he said after a moment.

"They didn't want to let me in the door," she said. "I thought about waiting for you. But, I have to admit, being able to force my way into a High-blood Manor-house felt pretty good."

"You're a Secret Keeper on Secret Keeper business. You have every right to be here. And I say that as a High-blood."

A smile tugged at the corner of her mouth. "A very unusual

High-blood.”

“How have you been, Megan?” he asked.

She sighed. “Mostly the same. My brother’s having a baby—did they tell you?”

“No.” Charles looked at her. “Cory? When?”

Megan shrugged. “Next January, I think. They just found out. Anyway, who else’s coming to this?”

“Wash and Seeks for sure,” he said. “And Bowler, of course. And I’m sure we couldn’t keep Morca away.”

They were silent again, watching the village, normal life carrying on despite all the reasons people had to hide at home and ignore life right then.

“I’m glad to hear about Cory,” Charles said after a beat. “It’s nice to have some good news, for a change.”

“Should we be glad though?” Megan ran a hand through her hair, taking a deep breath. “I don’t want to teach my nephew how to dive for cover and load a gun, not three days after he’s born, anyway.”

“If every person in this country put their lives on hold because of the war, we’d have no good news at all.”

“I suppose. But that hardly changes the facts.”

They heard feet on the stairs then. Daniel Seeks and Ced Washington arrived together, followed minutes later by Daniel’s sister, Morca. The men, like Charles and Megan, dressed in simple clothing—jeans and long sleeve shirts and dark jackets, though only Megan’s clothes were patched. Morca had on a dress, still simple, but elegant. From the knees up, she could have been headed to a party. The heavy combat boots, however, muddled the look from knees down. Charles stifled a laugh when he saw them.

“Where’s Vaultery?” Morca Seeks asked the moment her head came through the tower door.

“What? You didn’t expect him to be on time, did you, Orky?” Daniel said. “That would mean he respected us.”

“Don’t call me that!” Morca said. “I already hate you for making me wear these things!” She jabbed the floor with the rubber toe of one boot.

“I knew it,” Charles said.

“You are going to destroy your feet in those torture devices



you insist on wearing!" Daniel said.

"You try being five-foot-one!" Morca glared at him, crossed her arms, then uncrossed them to heave herself up onto one of the wooden tables to sit crossed-legged, further contradicting her elegant dress.

*She's so young*, Charles thought. Twenty-four. Barely an adult. That fact usually slipped his mind, but every once-in-a-while, she would do something, or say something, and it would hit him again. She was far too young for the responsibility forced on her. But then, they all were, he would remember a second later. He and Megan and Daniel – only a few years ago they had all been in school together, worrying about tests and papers.

Three men and a woman arrived over the next ten minutes. They were all older than Charles and the others, with faces hardened by the years that passed in violence and confusion. They said their polite "Hellos," and little else. One old man produced a briefcase and began in silence to sort out papers on the table next to Morca.

"Orky, get down from there," Daniel said.

"Would you stop calling me that!" Morca slid to the floor and into a pace, one end of the room to the other, and back, unable to hold still.

A minute later, they heard footsteps again, coming up the stairs. The old man straightened up from his papers and glanced around at his comrades. "We're all here," he said. It was a warning. The time had come.

Lord Brian Vaulkery arrived in style, a guard in front and a tail of clerks behind. A few years ago, he had been another classmate, also given more responsibility than someone trying to pass Advanced Calculus should have been able to handle. But in the dark times, the young took power, and an overwhelming vote put a twenty-seven-year-old recent graduate in charge of the Senate and the army.

At the sight of him, Charles stood up straighter, and Morca stopped pacing, wedged between her brother and Megan.

"Dr. Bowler," Lord Vaulkery said, looking at the old man and the seven neatly stacked piles of paper. "Oh, and Charles," his eyes flicked toward the younger man. "Of course you would be in on this. And you brought your little Low-blood playmate, too,

how cute. Hello, Giltmen.”

“Lord Vaultkery,” Megan said.

“Could we have a civil conversation, Brian, maybe just this once, do you think?” Charles asked.

“Enough,” Bowler said. He bent his white head toward the papers, then looked up again, and cleared his throat. “Thank you, Lord Vaultkery, for seeing us in your home.”

Vaultkery eyed the papers with a cautious expression. “If I had a choice, I would not be here.”

Bowler ignored the other man’s pointed lack of respect. “And please, accept my congratulations. We’ve all heard by now, your wife is...”

“Pregnant, yes, I’m going to have a child,” Lord Vaultkery said with neither pride nor interest. “Truly glorious news, we’re all thrilled. Dr. Bowler, you have come a long way to waste my time. What do you want?”

The clerks, trained to be invisible, fidgeted behind him.

“Brian, I said this to you many times at school. I take no pleasure in repeating it now. Respect is a tool that you would benefit from learning to use,” Bowler said.

“I owe you no respect at this moment,” Vaultkery said. “The common people may worship you, but your little church group is not above the law, and it’s about time you remember that.”

“You’re not the law!” Morca said. Her brother elbowed her in the shoulder, but not before Vaultkery’s glare landed on her.

“The Secret Keepers are one of this country’s oldest institutions,” Charles said. Bowler held up a hand, but he ignored it. “We do deserve your respect...”

Dr. Bowler put his hand on one stack of paper, causing a louder than expected thud that reverberated in their stone surroundings. “I am sorry. This conversation is a trap, and I should not have started it.” He tapped the stack of papers again, two fingers pressing down into the white surface. “This is a petition, signed by twenty thousand names.” He slid the stack of papers down the table to Vaultkery. “Read it.”

The nearest clerk took the papers to Vaultkery, but he waved them away. “This is a government matter. Respect or no respect, that is a line you Secret Keepers are not allowed to cross.”

“No, it’s not,” Bowler said. “You control the government, and

we speak for the people. If we bring a petition, you have to read it.”

“I believe that law applies to petitions brought before the Senate.”

“The Senate won’t convene until summer,” Charles said. “We are operating one hundred percent within the law, and you know it, Brian, so please just shut...”

Bowler held a finger up to silence him, but Charles had already stopped himself. Childhood friendships aside, telling the Minister of Affairs to *shut up* during an official meeting was in no one’s best interest.

“Fine.” Lord Vaultery snatched the papers from his clerk, glanced at the title, then lowered the pages. “But I don’t have to read it, of course. I know you want me to withdraw troops from the Manor-villages and put them in the cities. I have ten military generals who say that would be a mistake.”

“High-blood generals!” Morca said.

“Trying to protect their own homes,” her brother said.

“The Braud live in the cities, not in the villages,” Megan said. “They don’t murder High-bloods, because you all have your castles to hide in. The Manor-villages do not need those troops!”

“My advisers say differently,” Vaultery said.

It was his calmness, the complete lack of any emotional connection, that made Charles want to slap him. Brian Vaultery had always been like that, ever since they were children, cold, calculating, and calm about it all. People were numbers to him. That had always been true, but grew more and more upsetting as the war dragged on.

Charles took a breath to compose himself, and said, “Brian, this is not an attack, and it doesn’t have to be a fight. We’re just looking at the facts. Hundreds of Low-bloods get pulled out of rivers and cracks in walls every day. We know because we’re the ones who find the bodies! The Secret Keepers have been on the front lines of this war since day one, but we’re not supposed to be an army, and we can’t do what the army does.”

“We’re at war,” Vaultery said. “During war, the most sensible position is to protect your most valuable assets...”

Bowler put his hand on Charles’ shoulder before he could say something they would all regret. “You are obligated to read the

petition," he said.

Vaulkery locked eyes with him for several seconds. Then he huffed and lifted the papers.

"Your claims are unsubstantiated," Vaulkery said after a long pause for the turning and examining of pages.

"The evidence is here," Bowler said, motioning to the six stacks remaining on the table.

Vaulkery flipped pages, eyes scanning. "Most of these names are from Kohar."

"Kohar's our largest city," Charles said. "Of course most of the names are from Kohar."

"I mean, that probably makes most of them irrelevant at this point," Vaulkery said. He looked up, over the pages, at the nine people across from him and their suddenly blank expressions. "You don't know? Oh, of course not. You were up here waiting for me... The Braud began a full-out attack on Kohar half an hour ago."

The nine across from him stood dumbstruck, not moving, not breathing.

"I dispatched troops, of course," Vaulkery said, tossing the petition at a clerk. "But by the time they get there, I'm pretty sure it's going to be over."

Charles's expression had become fixed, glaring at his once-friend's skull. "What will be over?"

"The Braud took the city center," Vaulkery said. "They spread from there. By now, we've lost the city."

"The Braud don't *take over* cities. They're terrorists!" Charles said. "They don't have the numbers to do something like this."

Vaulkery shrugged. "And yet, it has happened. Even you must understand, we cannot allow this. Our largest city in the enemy's hands, all of its resources, all of its factories..." He shook his head. "I've ordered a counterstrike."

"He's going to blitz the city," Morca said. Her eyes were unfocused, staring straight through Lord Vaulkery's chest. "Not a surgical strike, a blitz. Air-to-ground missiles. The city and all in it erased."

"You can't do that!" her brother said.

Vaulkery looked at them in silence, like a teacher, deciding how to best communicate some mathematical equation to his students.

"We have an opportunity here. You're right. The Braud don't have anywhere near the numbers we do. To pull something like this off, most, if not all of them, must be in Kohar at this moment. Striking the city now will end this war. By the end of the day, the Braud will no longer be an issue."

"You're not that naïve," Charles said.

Finally, a hint of emotion, a flash of annoyance across Vaulkery's face, upset, perhaps even regret. "We've already lost Kohar. I didn't start this, but I will end it." He turned to Megan, and said, "Now, Giltmen, if I remember correctly, don't you have family in Kohar?"

Megan stepped right up to Vaulkery, then past him, through the cloud of clerks and down the concrete stairs.

"Megan, wait!" Charles said, turning to Bowler. "Authorize me to dispatch the Secret Keepers to Kohar."

"Yes, of course, go," Bowler said before Charles had finished speaking.

"There's nothing you can do, Charles," Vaulkery called after him as he charged down the stairs after Megan.

---

Two hours later, with a motorcade of Secret Keepers, armed to fight or to heal, Charles Morry arrived on the outskirts of Kohar. It was not a city as cities had been in Earth's past. The wars, centuries ago, had leveled all of those. Buildings were rarely taller than five stories now, and the roads were small, almost impassable by car. But in the cramped places, thousands of people lived and worked, and rarely slept.

Even from a distance, Charles knew that it had all ended long ago. The thousands of lights that should have twinkled across the night skyline were gone, replaced by a tangible darkness. As they jumped from their vehicles at the edge of the city, something else met them: a Human cry, sounding through the dark as if worked into the very air, inseparable from it. They had no choice but to breathe it in, to take it into their bodies and accept it along with the oxygen they needed to live. It had become a fact of existence.

The floodlights and headlamps turned on the city revealed a

carnage of concrete and metal. The streets, always cramped, had become fields of debris, stretching on for miles, interrupted every so often by the skeletons of factories and homes. Familiar landmarks in the skyline were gone, replaced by smoke and ashes. The floodlights also showed dark bodies crawling toward them, dragging the dead and the dying. They held back long enough to be sure the lights belonged to Secret Keepers, then flooded forward.

No matter how many were with them, each person came alone, desperate, seeking those still lost in the rubble. "My child..." "My husband..." "My wife..." "My parents..."

Again and again, the same petition, for help that was probably impossible, broke against the compassion of the men and women who had come as perceived saviors into the land of death.

Their car stopped. Megan's feet hit the ground, and then she was running. Charles ran after her, thinking he could do just as much good behind her as anywhere else. They clawed their way through once familiar streets, digging out anyone they found with a pulse. They pulled a seven-year-old boy, dead, from beneath a fallen wall, and Megan threw the most massive rock she could lift, screaming at the top of her lungs. Then she rushed on. At least nine people must have owed their lives to her that night, but she hardly noticed any of them.

Before long, Charles found himself lost in this once familiar place. The night had reached its darkest point, and soot blocked out even the starlight that should have lit their way. There was nothing recognizable left, not that he could see, anyway.

"Charles!" Megan's voice ground in the air, hoarse from hours of breathing through ash. "Charles, help me, now! Please!"

He was already running to her, straining to see through the dust. First, there was a streak of hair, poking out between the rocks, and then Megan's hands just above it, torn and bloody from the work they had already done that night. She clawed at the stones, pale fingers, like the talons of some suffocating bird, scratching its way back to the air.

"This is it," she said. Charles feared she would make the entire pile cave in and grabbed her arms to slow her down. "I recognize it now. The drugstore was there. And the factory there. See? One wall's standing. I grew up here. They're here! They have to be here!"

But all they found were bodies. Piles of bodies, wedged under and between stones, just like every other collapsed housing complex they had seen. Families inside collapsed rooms. Three floors and twelve apartments compressed into the ground. Charles recognized some of the people. He suspected that Megan knew them all.

And then, there was a man on his stomach, lying on something, with brown curls beneath him.

"Cory? Cory! No, no, no!" Megan backed away, a hand over her mouth and tears suddenly, from nowhere, streaming down her face, as if she had been crying for all these hours already. Charles let her be and dragged the body away from the red hair. It was almost impossible to do because this was Cory, the boy he had lived with for seven years at school, whom he had teased about having freckles, his best friend's little brother.

But another classmate was below him, her curls shining like a beacon even in the darkness.

"Georgiana!" he coughed out her name, throat burning from the dust, and pressed his fingers into her neck. Somehow, by some miracle, there was a pulse. "Georgie... Megan, she's alive!" He checked quickly, looking for reasons not to move her. "Megan!"

Megan stood several feet away, sobbing. He wanted nothing more than to let her cry, let her mourn, but they had no time.

"You said she was pregnant," he called to her. "You said Cory was going to have a baby. Georgiana's here, and she's alive, so there might be a chance. Megan, help me!"

It worked. Megan's eyes came back from delirium. She looked first at Charles, then at her sister-in-law, then scrambled over the debris, running, he knew, for help.

Charles stayed. He got up three times, dug for bodies, came back, three times, to the only one with a pulse. Three tries were enough. After the third, he stayed cemented beside Georgiana, clutching her hand, with two fingers pressed into the veins on her wrist. "Georgie, please," he said. "It's me, I'm here, it's Charles. Please. God please. Please."

The Secret Keepers had already set up triage facilities in the city, and it took Megan less than ten minutes to return with help from the nearest one. With Georgiana in their hands, she set off again, tearing through the rubble with the determination of stifled



grief. Charles followed her, working beside her until dawn, then well after.

Meanwhile, Georgiana Giltmen was transferred with a thousand others to the nearest hospital. Every doctor and nurse was called, then doctors and nurses from other cities, then medical students from the nearby schools. The sheer volume of patients made triage nearly impossible.

Less critical patients lined the halls, holding broken limbs, or bandages to bleeding wounds. Nurses ran ragged just from the effort of distributing painkillers and sedatives. Phones rang non-stop, and family members converged on the hospital from all over the country, seeking loved ones. Secret Keepers and soldiers kept these family members outside, but by midday, Megan was cutting through the crowded halls to her sister-in-law's room. Charles followed a step behind her. They needed to intercept the doctor on his way out. It was the only way to get information.

They almost missed him, but managed to grab his arm as he came from a two-bed room holding ten people, filling out paperwork on his way.

"And you are?" he asked wearily, barely looking at Megan.

"She's my brother's wife," Megan said. "He's dead. They just found out she was pregnant. Please, just tell me how she is!"

"You're talking to a Secret Keeper, by the way," Charles said. "Two of them, actually."

The doctor looked from Charles to Megan, sighed, turned a page on his clipboard, then filled out more papers while saying, "She's stable."

"But?" Megan asked.

"But she's in a coma, and her chances of coming out are not good."

Color bled from Megan's face as he spoke.

"However," the doctor turned the page again, taking a longer look. "You're right. She is pregnant."

"Still?" Megan asked.

"Still," the doctor said. "And from what we can tell, the babies are fine."

"Babies?" Megan said.

The doctor raised one eyebrow and rechecked the chart. "There were two heartbeats."



“What...” Megan backed into Charles.

“Look,” the doctor said. “Even if she doesn’t come out of the coma, we can probably keep her alive until she comes to term, but it would require some pretty expensive medical intervention, and for a Low-blood...”

Megan had stopped listening, turned around so that her face pressed into Charles’ shoulder, so deep he didn’t know how she could breathe. She stood stiff as a board against him, unresponsive.

“Do it,” Charles said. “Whatever you need to keep all three alive.”

“And you are...?” the doctor asked.

“The High-blood who’s going to pay all the medical expenses! Now do it!” Charles said.

The doctor eyed him, eyed Megan, decided he wasn’t paid enough to bother with this bizarre situation, and nodded. He took Charles’s name, made a note in the woman’s file, and marched off down the hall.

# CHAPTER 2

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## THE HEIR

A LITTLE MORE THAN THIRTEEN YEARS HAD passed since Brian Valkery ordered a strategic attack on the city Kohar. The city was abandoned, the war ended, and life went on.

In the first tower room of the Valkery Manor-house, almost nothing had changed. Stacks of chairs still crowded the walls. An ancient bust still sat atop them. Two battered tables still ran across the center of the room. In fact, had the red-faced housekeeper been there thirteen years earlier, she would have noticed only one difference—a chair had been taken from its stack and used to prop open the window leading out onto the battlement.

The housekeeper let out a squeak when she saw that window propped open, gathered up her skirt, and scuttled over as quickly as she could.

“Um, Mr. Valkery?” she said, sticking her head out the

window. The shoe that came flying at her face was not exactly unexpected.

“Go away, Hilda!” came the voice from the roof. There, perched on the crenellations, his feet dangling over the edge, back to the window, sat a thirteen-year-old boy, blond-haired, short, and skinny. He spoke as one speaks to a fly that has not yet become a nuisance, but soon will.

“Mr. Vaultkery!” The housekeeper attempted to haul herself out onto the battlement. The bottom of the window was a good three feet off the ground. No obstacle at all for the boy. The middle-aged housekeeper, however, hardly did any physical work anymore, had on a long, heavy skirt, and was a bit overweight. Three feet proved insurmountable. She could get no grip on the stone wall, either inside or out. Her feet went up over the windowsill, hands clutching desperately for something to hold before she crashed down onto her back on the floor.

“Mr. Vaultkery!” she said, breathless, hauling herself to her feet. “Are you trying to fall to your death?”

“Maybe I should,” The boy turned so quickly on the crenellation that the housekeeper shrieked in fright, and toppled backward again, one leg caught over the windowsill.

“Maybe then people will leave me alone!” the boy said to her heels.

“Mr. Vaultkery, it is your birthday!” The housekeeper gave up on getting out and instead leaned as far as she could through the window, her face beet red.

Directly beyond the crenelated balcony rose the chimney and slate-covered roof of the staff-building. There the servants had their rooms, apart from the Manor-house. Beyond that lay a truly magnificent scene. Over the quaint roofs of the village houses, one could see green gardens and half-cultivated woods, stretching across a quarter mile to the banks of an enormous lake. The boy spent hours each day soaking in this view. The housekeeper saw none of it.

“Your guests are arriving,” she said.

“I don’t want guests,” the boy said. “And I don’t want a party, and I don’t want presents. I want to be left alone!” He yanked at his other shoe.

“Your father wants you in his study!” the housekeeper said,

seeing the shoe come off.

“Good for him!” the boy said.

“He will come and get you himself!”

The boy froze, perched on his bare toes on the ledge with his left hand drawn back to throw. For a long moment, he and the housekeeper engaged in a silent duel. By invoking his father, she had already won, but he made her wait as long as possible.

“Fine,” the boy said at last. He shoved his foot back into his shoe, grabbed the other one from where it lay below the window, then pulled himself inside over the windowsill with an agility that made the old woman dizzy.

“Good then...” The housekeeper said, the flush fading from her face. “Good. So, I’ll just take you...”

“I know the way,” the boy said.

---

In his dark study on the second floor of the Manor-house, Lord Brian Vaultery waited at his desk, under the glare of a single reading lamp, tapping his fingers. He kept the room dark, to prevent distractions, heavy curtains over the windows, door closed, and just that one lamp.

On the opposite wall, next to the door, hung a full-length mirror in a gilded frame, almost invisible in the darkness, reflecting a distorted, shadow world back into the real one. With nothing to do but wait for his son, who was, as usual, taking an unseemly amount of time, Lord Vaultery examined his dark image with a mild sense of curiosity. It wasn’t really his reflection in the mirror, but the eyeless, twisted shade of some monster who had taken on some vague resemblance to his features.

Finally, there was a knock at the study room door. “Yes, Elias, come in,” Vaultery said.

The face he turned to the door, exposed to the light outside, differed greatly from the one in the mirror. Middle-aged and still quite handsome, Lord Vaultery possessed the stately gaze of a scholar and the poise of a politician. That he managed to be both was remarkable. He had achieved two advanced degrees before the age of thirty, while at the same time being elected the young-

est Minister of Affairs, the highest position in his government, in history. Somehow, in his twenties, he also found time to date and marry his family-approved, school sweetheart.

He maintained an active political career after his term as Minister ended, attaining three more advanced degrees in the meantime. He continued in education as a hobby, a distraction from day-to-day political monotony. Lord Valkery was, simply put, very smart. And he knew it.

The boy who entered Lord Valkery's study had lived his life in the shadow of this intelligence. With his blond hair and thin, anemic features, Elias Valkery looked very little like his father. Only their eyes were the same shape and the same grayish-blue.

"Sit down, Elias," Lord Valkery said, motioning to the chair across from his desk. The boy obeyed without a word.

For a moment, father and son regarded each other in silence. Light came in through the doorway to illuminate a sliver of Lord Valkery's face, from the top of his forehead, down the side of his nose, onto his neck. Beneath a black jacket, his white, button-up, immaculately pressed shirt glowed against the shadows. He looked at his son for a while, but soon his eyes drifted back to the distorted image in the mirror.

Elias sat up straight in the stiff chair, hands folded on his lap, knees together, head erect. He did not speak and did not move his eyes from his father's face.

"Why aren't you dressed?" Lord Valkery asked.

Elias said nothing. He lowered his chin and stared at his father from under thin eyelashes.

"Elias..." Lord Valkery rose with a point-making sigh, stepped behind his chair, and rested his arms on top of it. "Must we do this every year?"

The boy did not make a sound.

A crunching noise came from outside—tires on gravel. Lord Valkery moved to the wall behind his desk and drew back a heavy black curtain to reveal a window. Sunlight flashed into the room, and Elias turned his head away from it.

"Your guests are arriving," Lord Valkery said, letting the curtain close again. "Go get dressed."

"They're not my guests," the boy said

"Elias," Lord Valkery leaned across the desk toward his son.

“There are things I must do, and people I must invite, for the sake of this entire family. That is no excuse for this behavior. Now go get dressed.”

“No one will notice if I’m not there!” Elias said.

“Yes,” his father said, “they will. Go. I expect you downstairs in five minutes.”

Elias rose from his chair. He threw the door wide on his way out, leaving it open so that all the light from the hallway could assault his father’s solitude. Five minutes later, in his best black and white suit, he batted a tray of food out of the hands of a passing maid on his way to the grand entryway of the Manor-house.

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The front doors of the Vaultery Manor-house opened into an austere marble foyer. To the right stood two massive, arched, glass doors. Through these loomed a library, complete with bookshelves, gothic arches, and stained-glass windows. To the left, another set of equally massive wooden doors stood open. Four marble steps led down into a grand hall, lit by four chandeliers hanging from a vaulted ceiling and between high, arched windows. A table ran down the center of this hall, and servants in festive, expensive uniforms buzzed around it, setting dishes and food.

Directly across from the Manor-house’s front doors stood the grand staircase. It took up half the foyer and had two sides reaching out like the extended arms of a vice, coming together over the back door. The guests were sent straight up this staircase to a gathering room on the second floor, where, in flowing dresses and perfectly tailored suits, they chatted, laughed, gossiped behind-their-hands, and ate as many of the tasteless cookies and cakes as they could when no one was looking.

When all of the guests had arrived and trickled upstairs, Elias trudged up the steps beside his mother. Lady Adriana Courtryside-Vaultery had long blond curls configured in artistic rows around her head, small, delicate shoulders, a smiling face, and eyes and ears specially designed for catching anything that might be worthy of behind-the-hand comment. Elias left her side as soon as possible, elbowed his way through the crowded gathering room,

and collapsed onto one of the chairs on the wall, hoping to avoid attention for the rest of the day.

It was, however, his birthday, and the guests seemed incapable of forgetting that fact. They insisted on smiling at him, on asking, for the third or fourth time, how he was, or saying hello again every time they happened to glance his direction. The servants kept offering him cookies.

"Boring, right?" someone said from his left. Elias crossed his arms more tightly and looked straight ahead. "Why don't you ever have fun birthday parties?"

"Because my father's important," Elias said, turning his head. Any other day, he would have been at least a little glad to see this group of people. The boy who had spoken had tufts of thick brown-red hair, a round face, and the name Fontesque Cruendel. Beside him stood his sister, Alyssa, and behind them were the cousins, Calvin and Cora Bowler. They were the only people his age among the multitude of party guests.

"Come on," Fontesque said, hitting Elias on the shoulder. "Let's go up to the tower."

"My father will hang me *from* the tower if I leave," Elias said.

"Okay, well... don't say we didn't ask." Fontesque turned toward the staircase.

"You don't mind, right?" Cora asked.

Elias did mind. If he had to suffer through his own birthday party, he saw no reason his friends should not suffer too. He considered telling them this, but just shrugged. Cora was already backing towards the stairs, anyway.

After a few more minutes on his chair, trying to be ignored, Elias caught sight of a woman he did not recognize. He sat up straighter, peering through the crowd for a better look. His father had invited the same people to his birthday parties since year one. They got older, their taste in clothing changed, and they carried different handbags, but he knew every one of them.

The harder Elias looked, however, the more confident he became that he had never seen this woman before. How she had escaped his notice downstairs, he did not know, but she was a stranger.

She looked about his parents' age, petite, with long auburn hair braided and wrapped up on top of her head, and dark green

eyes in a slender face. Her dress was an inky purple, strapless but modest, elegant but simple. As he watched, she picked a sugar cookie up from one of the tables, bit into it, and winced.

"Seeks, how nice to see you."

Brian Vaulkery appeared in front of the strange woman, took her elbow, and backed her several steps closer to the wall, away from the rest of the party guests. Instantly, Elias's interest doubled.

"Lord Vaulkery," the woman said, as if she had just run into an old acquaintance on the street. She glanced at the cookie in her hand. "These are dreadful, you know. Adriana still on the no butter or fat kick, I take it?"

Vaulkery smiled, and Elias knew that smile. His father had a lot of smiles, from his *good, you did what I told you to do smile*, to his *I would rather swim through mud than shake your hand, but since your endorsement will get me re-elected, welcome smile*. The one he now fixed on this strange woman was the one that Elias saw most often. It said, quite plainly, *you are not worth my time; to demand my time is robbery*. The servants lived in dread of it, for each of them received it at least once a week. Even Elias cowered out of its way once or twice a month.

"What are you doing here, Seeks?" Vaulkery asked.

"What is a lowly Middle-blood like me doing at this great and prestigious High-blood affair, you mean?" The woman looked up into Lord Vaulkery's pulverizing smile and shot back a smile of her own, all the while crushing a cookie to bits on the tablecloth beneath her right hand.

*Is she stupid?* Elias wondered. Even the servants could understand what his father meant when he smiled like that.

"It's quite simple, Vaulkery," the woman said. "Dr. Bowler found himself with a meeting that he could not reschedule. And since, about a decade ago, you banned Charles from setting so much as a toe over your property line ever again..." She shrugged. "That leaves me to be the token Secret Keeper guest." With another smile, she turned away from the refreshment table.

Lord Vaulkery seized her elbow. She was tiny beside him, perhaps a foot shorter even in two-inch heels. "Don't play games with me, Morca!" he said.

Something had changed in the woman's face. The smile vanished, and Elias did not quite understand the expression that



replaced it. But it was not fear. “Let go.” Her voice too had changed.

“You think I can’t piece together why they sent you?” Vaulkery said. “You, of all their options?”

“Let. Go. Of. Me.”

Like a shock, or some old trick of witchcraft, Lord Vaulkery’s hand detached from her arm.

Their eyes remained locked for several seconds. Then the woman said, “Not everything is a plot against your survival, Vaulkery. There are about a million things, including having my wisdom teeth pulled out, that I would rather be doing right now. I am only here because you insist the Secret Keepers be present for all your little pageants, and poor Bowler, the usual sacrifice, was unavailable. So, unless you would prefer Megan Giltmen...”

Elias had no idea who Megan Giltmen was, except that *Giltmen* was not a High-blood name, but the white rage that filled his father’s face said it all.

“I thought so.” Without waiting for Vaulkery to find his voice again, the woman called Morca Seeks walked past him, into the crowd.

Elias got up. He braved the adoring attention of the women clustered around his mother because it was the best cover he could find. The last thing he wanted was to let his father know he had overheard that conversation. Not only had a Middle-blood woman defeated Brian Vaulkery, somehow, but two subjects had come up which his father could not stand: Secret Keepers, and Kohar.

Even more than that, though, Elias had strange feelings sometimes, mostly about people. He never told anyone, because on the one hand, he didn’t think it mattered, and on the other, he was afraid that it might. Now, one such strange feeling told him there was something dangerous about this Morca Seeks. What it could be in such a tiny, unimposing person, he had no idea. But it was there, hiding around the corners of her being, and the worst part was, Elias was pretty sure that it scared even the scariest person he had ever known — his father.

# CHAPTER 3

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## ANOTHER KIND OF BIRTHDAY

THE ROOM WAS EXACTLY FIVE FEET WIDE, AND the bunk bed crammed into the top left corner was three feet wide, leaving only two feet between the bed and the other wall. Into this wall, they had built the dresser, because there was no other place for it.

When open, the dresser drawers came one foot, seven inches into the room, leaving less than half a foot between them and the bunk bed. The top two drawers were Hetty's, the bottom two were Henley's. Henley almost always forgot to close her drawers, and Hetty frequently forgot to look.

At that moment, Hetty, in pajamas, with her dark, brown curls like a windblown eagle's nest around her face, came hopping and screeching out of the bedroom into the common room, holding her right leg. "Henley Selma Giltmen!" she screamed, her face red. "Close your bottom drawer!"

The apartment's common room was only about twice the size of the bedroom, large enough for a fridge, a hot plate they were not technically supposed to have, a couch, two chairs, and a coffee table. Henley, dressed in a thread-bare blue sweater and faded jeans, leaped off the couch with a clatter of knitting needles and a gasp. She was the exact duplicate of her sister, down to the last brown curl.

"I'm sorry, so sorry, sorry!" She dashed past Hetty into the bedroom.

Hetty collapsed into one of the two chairs, pulling up the leg of her pajamas as Henley's drawers in the bedroom slammed shut. Next to their open bedroom door, the door to their mother's equally tiny room was closed, meaning she was either asleep or gone.

Hetty glanced at the bright sun out the window. They were on the ground floor, and Henley, probably, had opened the curtains. The open window bestowed on them a view of gray stone buildings, cramped together on concrete pathways, all buried under a generous pile of January snow. It was at least midmorning, so their mother must have left for work hours ago. On holidays, however, Georgiana Giltmen let her daughters sleep in. Not that today was technically a holiday. Everyone else would be in school. But most children stayed home on their birthdays, and the Giltmen twins were no exception.

"There's a toothbrush on the floor," Henley called from the bedroom. "Did you drop it?"

"Yes I dropped it!" Hetty said, examining her leg to see if it might bruise.

Henley emerged from the bedroom with her sister's toothbrush and paste and handed them over with a repentant look. "Sorry," she said.

Hetty sighed, took the toothbrush from Henley, and smiled. "Yeah, well... Just try to remember next time. We are thirteen now, after all."

"We are!" Henley took her knitting from where it had fallen under the couch, and folded it in her lap, sending a dreamy look out the window.

Hetty rolled her eyes and got to her feet. "It's just a number, Hen."

“Please!” Henley said, de-tangling her knitting. “You’re the one going on and on about secondary school, and how great everything’s going to be now that we’re old enough...”

“Yeah, yeah.” Hetty had already opened the apartment door and stepped out into a hall of peeling paint with a crumbling linoleum floor. The outer door stood on her left, and some snow had blown in under it, to melt on the linoleum, then freeze, then melt again. Above her head, a staircase switched back all the way up to the third floor, two apartments per floor. Between their apartment and the one across the hall, stood a shared bathroom. For Hetty, the best thing about her birthday was sleeping in late enough to have that bathroom all to herself.

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By the time the elder twin had returned from a leisurely shower — during which no one yelled at her to hurry up, or threatened to open the curtain on her — the younger twin, Henley, had gone. Hetty knew her sister had gone to get the mail, and not just because it made sense. Both of them always seemed to know where the other was. It had always been that way, and they thought nothing of it.

The mailboxes stood at the edge of their tenement complex, so it took Henley a few minutes to walk there and back in the snow. When she returned, stomping and brushing snow off her coat, Hetty had just emerged again from their bedroom, dressed, and attempting to drag a brush through her wet, unruly hair.

“Mail,” Henley said, dropping several envelopes onto the coffee table.

Hetty gave up on her hair, as she always did, tied it un-brushed into a ponytail, and sat on the couch. Henley took one of the two chairs opposite, and together, they sifted through the envelopes as if digging for gold.

“Oh look,” Hetty said, extracting a stiff card from one envelope. “Uncle Melvin sent us a coupon for his restaurant: *Buy seven meals, get a free snow cone.*” She raised her eyebrows.

“At least he remembered this year,” Henley said. “Here, from Gran.” She paused for a moment, then tossed a card adorned with

the image of a toothless, elderly lady across the table for Hetty to see. Under the picture, her grandmother's feeble and trembling hand had written:

*All my love and well wishes to my favorite living grandchildren on this the advent of their fourteenth year.*

*Love, Granma May.*

"Awe, that's sweet," Hetty said, "reminding us of all the dead cousins she liked better than us."

"That is not what she meant," Henley said, then added under her breath, "consciously."

"Yes, well, our other grandmother sent us thirty sads." Hetty turned a large, blue envelope over and a shower of coins clattered across the table. "That's fifteen for each of us." She divided the bright silver coins quickly and shoved her share into her pocket.

"Great!" Henley laughed. "Now we can pay for about a third of that first meal at Uncle Melvin's."

"Gatch!" Hetty said, so suddenly that Henley dropped the envelopes in her own hands. The envelope Hetty held was average in every way, except for the return address. "Henley," she said, breathless, turning the front of the envelope around so her sister could see. "It's from Aunt Megan."

"What?" Henley snatched the envelope. There, in clear black ink, was the name *Megan Giltmen*.

"Mom must have forgotten this morning," she said.

The girls locked identical brown eyes with each other. They both knew that the aunt they had never met, sister to the father they had never met, sent them a letter every year on their birthday. Every year, their mother intercepted it. She had never forgotten before.

Hetty snatched the envelope back and jumped up. Henley realized what she was doing a split-second too late.

"No, Het!"

Hetty moved too quickly, tearing the envelope open.

"Mom will throw you across the lake!" Henley shrieked in fright. "Give that back!"

Hetty jumped behind the couch, out of her sister's reach. "It's addressed to us."

"You know Mom doesn't want us reading it!" Henley banged her shins against the coffee table, trying to get around it.

"Hen, there's money in here!"

"I don't care, we shouldn't be..."

"Oh, you will care!" Hetty tore several half sheets of paper from the envelope. "It's not sad. Henley, this is a *note*! She sent us twenty note!"

"I don't care what she... Wait, what?" Henley finally made it around the couch, and froze, looking over Hetty's shoulder. Her jaw dropped.

"No, wait..." Hetty shuffled the papers around, extracting a second note. "There are two of them. She sent us twenty note each."

Henley snapped out of a trance and tried to grab the papers from her sister. "No, we can't keep this!"

"Do you know what we could do with forty note?" Hetty said. "About a year's worth of meals at uncle Melvin's, for starters."

"And a whole lot of snow cones," Henley said, then shook her head. "No. No. When Mom comes home we'll ask about it, but no, Hetty..." She chased her sister around to the other side of the couch as she spoke. "We can't just keep that kind of money."

"Says who? She sent it to us."

"We have to at least show it to Mom!"

"They're made out to us!" Hetty set the notes side-by-side on the table. They were each roughly the size of one-quarter of a sheet of paper, with several lines of writing, including the bank name, their aunt's name, the amount of money, and, written on the top line, who was allowed to spend that money. One note declared *To the Order of Henley Giltmen*, the other *To the Order of Henrietta Giltmen*.

"Hetty, be reasonable. Mom has to see these. Neither of us have accounts with the bank..."

"We don't need the bank. You can trade notes, just like sad."

"...and we can't go walking around with twenty note in our pockets! It would take forever to spend it. Why would she even send us so much money?"

"The better question is, has she been sending us money for the

past twelve years?"

"Don't!" Henley said. "Mom would never steal from us!"

"I'm not saying she did," Hetty said.

"You think she's been sending it back?" Henley shook her head. "Hold on, we don't even know she has sent us money before."

"Do you realize what we could do with forty note?" Hetty asked again, serious this time. "We could fix this place, get all new clothes, or pay rent for half a year, probably."

"How can she have so much money? We're all Low-bloods."

"Mom must really hate her to send it back."

"We don't know that she's ever sent us money before. What does the letter say?"

Hetty had forgotten about the remaining paper inside the envelope. Now, she unfolded it and read:

*Dear Henrietta and Henley,*

*Happy 13th birthday! As I'm sure you're aware, the upcoming year is a landmark one. I still remember the day we got my school uniform. It made the future seem real for the first time. But actually, I think I remember the day your father got his better. That was the day the future became more than just mine. On that note, I expect you to use most of the enclosed for school, but not all. I don't know what you girls like, so I'm trusting you to buy yourselves something nice.*

*You have great days ahead of you, girls, and I hope that you both get to experience every one of the wonderful things these next few years could bring. But for today, I wish to say Happy Birthday, best wishes, and God bless,*

*Your Aunt, with Love,*

*Megan Giltmen*

“See,” Henley said. “She probably didn’t send us money before. It’s for school.”

Before Hetty could respond, the door opened. Their mother, home to say happy birthday on her thirty-minute lunch break, stood in the doorway dripping snow, a large bag over her shoulder and her face red from the wind under a patched, knit hat. With the adeptness of a mother, she needed only one glance to take in her daughters, the letter, and the sizeable sum of money on the coffee table.

“What are you doing?” Georgiana Giltmen asked.



# CHAPTER 4

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ACCEPTED

**G**EORGIANA GILTMEN, THE SINGLE MOTHER OF twins, was too smart to think she could salvage the situation she had walked in on. So instead, she set about managing the fallout. She snatched up the money, but let them keep the letter. That damage was done, and she was to blame for forgetting about it, anyway. She told her daughters they would talk when she got home that night, grabbed an envelope from the desk in her room, tore the notes in half, stuffed the halves and nothing else into the envelope, sealed it, addressed it to Megan Giltmen, and dropped it in the outgoing mailbox on her way back to work.

In the apartment, the twins sat across from each other on the edges of their seats, the remaining pile of birthday letters forgotten between them.

“Mom’s locray,” Hetty said.

“Don’t call her that!” Henley said.

"Why not? It's not like it's a bad word."

"It's not a *nice* word either!"

"It means she's out of her mind, and she must be. We could've used that money for school. We're gonna need that money for school."

"She must have a reason, and we'll be fine," Henley said. "We always are."

"Secondary schools aren't like Primary," Hetty said. "We need to buy our own books. We'll need uniforms, housing, transportation ..."

"The only time I've ever seen a note before was when Mom was paying rent."

"And she just tore them up. *Tore* them, Henley!"

"It just invalidates them. Aunt Megan can just exchange them for blank twenties at her bank..."

"Obviously. That's not the point! Mom just threw out all that money. If that's not locray, I don't know what is."

"She must know what she's doing."

"She must really hate Aunt Megan! What happened between them? She's Dad's sister. Why have we never met her?"

"She says we'll talk about it when she gets home."

"You think she means it this time?"

"I think she has to mean it this time. We saw everything."

"Some birthday." Hetty flopped back on the couch and stared, arms crossed, at the ceiling.

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An hour later, Hetty was still staring at the ceiling when Henley started to sift through the letters again. It wasn't any fun without her sister, though, and Henley was about to give up on the cards when something caught her eye.

"Het ..."

"Humph."

"Hetty, really, look at this."

"Mih."

"Henrietta!" Henley tossed an open birthday card at her sister's face, glaring.

"What?" Hetty asked, sitting up and shaking off the bright yellow card.

Henley turned a large, red and purple envelope toward her sister's face. "Look at this."

Fancy, medieval letters that must have been difficult for the postal carrier to read covered the front of the envelope. An intricate pattern of hand-sketched leaves surrounded the address and the return address. Hetty sat up straight.

"Today?" she asked. "It came today? Gatchin!"

"You open it." Henley dropped the letter on the table as if it had stung her. "I can't. What does it say? No, if it's bad, don't tell me. What does it say?"

"Hang on!" Hetty opened the ornate envelope to reveal an equally ornate card.

"Well?" Henley asked, her eyes squeezed shut.

Hetty didn't respond.

"Hetty?"

Nothing.

"I didn't really mean it when I said don't..."

"*'From Rachele Vantinfehr,'*" Hetty read, "*'esteemed Headmistress of Vladimir Baker's Academy of Secondary Education, To Mrs. Georgiana Giltmen, On January the twenty-second' ...*"

"You don't have to read all that," Henley said, opening her eyes.

"...*'Dear Madam,'*" Hetty continued, "*'It gives us greatest pleasure to inform you that...'*"

Henley squealed. Hetty told her to "Shut up," then continued reading.

"...*'your daughters, Henrietta May Giltmen and Henley Selma Giltmen, have been accepted to attend the esteemed V-BASE academy, beginning in the next school year. To reserve their spots, or to cancel them, please return each of the enclosed statements of intent to V-BASE, postmarked no later than February first. Also enclosed, please find information on tuition, housing, board, and uniform purchase. Classes for the first year are pre-assigned and need not be registered for separately...'* Where's that form?" Hetty dropped the note and dug her hand deeper into the envelope.

"What are you doing?" Henley asked as her sister extracted two sheets of paper.

Hetty got a pen from a plastic tub under the coffee table. "They want these back in three weeks. I'm not wasting time," she said, unfolding the Statements of Intent.

"Het..." Henley held another paper from inside the envelope between her fingers, hesitantly, like a scorpion's tail. "It's seventy note each for the year, and that's not even counting room and board."

Hetty bit off the pen cap and held it in her teeth. "So?"

"So rent for this apartment is fifty a year!" Henley snatched the papers away before Hetty could mark the Henrietta Giltmen will attend box.

"Girit back," Hetty said through the pen cap.

"I'm thrilled we got in," Henley said. "But we can't go."

Hetty spat out the pen cap. "Of course we got in," she said. "Our grades are perfect, and our CHAT scores were amazing. And they give scholarships. Now give!"

"Even with a full-tuition scholarship, we can't afford it," Henley said, pushing the depressing set of papers at her sister. "I've been telling you this for years. Look at those numbers."

Hetty did not give the numbers so much as a glance. She had memorized them long ago, along with every other piece of information she could find on the V-BASE school. The numbers did not matter. Nothing did, except her own determination, certainty, that she and her sister would attend that school. It was fact, set in stone, and always had been. "Mom went to Baker's! So did Dad, him and his sister."

"Yeah, and all of them had two parents working full time. Mom can't do this," Henley said.

"You were the one saying we'd manage!"

"Yeah, to go somewhere *manageable*!"

The argument ended with Henley tearing up the stairwell in the center of their building, the statements of intent flapping in her hands, Hetty close behind. At the top landing, Henley ripped open a window, balled up the papers, and threw them hard into the fluttering snow. Hetty screamed at her, turned on her heels, crashed back down the steps and barefoot out the door. She snatched the papers out of a snowdrift and spread them on their apartment's heater to dry.

The result of all this, much to Georgiana's delight, was that,

by the time they got to dinner, both girls had forgotten about their aunt Megan.

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"You got a letter today, son," Brian Vaulkery said, smiling.

Seated on the right side of a thirty-foot table, sparkling with candles and crystal, Elias looked up from his dinner. His parents sat at either end of the table, and he sat halfway between them, to the exact inch.

"No, I didn't," he said.

Elias knew the smile on his father's face. It was his *I will boast about this to everyone, but if you hadn't done it, you wouldn't be a Vaulkery* smile. Lord Vaulkery had a habit of looking at his son that way.

"Don't be rude, Elias," Adriana Courtryside-Vaulkery said, wiping her mouth with a gold-embroidered cloth.

"Well, it was addressed to me," Lord Vaulkery said, still smiling. "From the V-BASE academy."

"Isn't 'academy' already in the acronym?" Elias asked his plate, pushing broccoli from one side to the other.

"Oh, that's wonderful, Elias!" His mother reached for the porcelain, swan-shaped bell beside her plate. "I'm so proud."

"Yeah," Elias said. "It's Vladimir Baker's *Academy* of Secondary Education, so saying V-BASE academy is like saying Vladimir Baker's Academy *academy*."

"The best school in the country," Lord Vaulkery said. "My son is starting in the fall. I sent in the papers two hours ago."

"Gatchin." Elias hacked at his broccoli with the edge of his fork.

"Ah, Hilda!" his mother said when a maid came into the dining room to answer her bell. The maid's name was Marietta, but that hardly mattered. "Whatever was for dessert, cancel it. We'll be having orange sherbet to celebrate. It's my son's favorite."

"When I was six," Elias said under his breath. He still liked orange sherbet very much, but did not feel like admitting it to her right then.

"What do you say I take off next Saturday?" Lord Vaulkery

was saying. "We can go have a uniform tailored."

"Yes, a great family outing," Elias's mother said.

"Yes, my dear, excellent idea. Of course, next Saturday won't work, now I think of it. I have two meetings I can't put off."

"And I have origami club the Saturday after next."

"Spring would be a better time to go anyway," Lord Valkery decided.

"It's settled then," Elias said for no one to hear, moving from the hacked remains of his broccoli to his carrots.

# CHAPTER 5

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## BLOODS HIGH AND LOW

**L**ET'S JUST ASK HER!" HENLEY WHISPERED, SO THAT her mother, seated across the aisle, could not overhear. "It's a perfectly reasonable question."

"And risk her taking it back?" Hetty asked.

The twins sat on a tram moving through farmland between their home city, Ebren, and the nearest major shopping center. The tram had two long rows of seats, facing each other across a two-foot-wide aisle so that everyone had their backs to the windows. To stave off motion sickness, they could look over the heads of the people sitting across from them, but it was rarely possible to see anything except the sky.

For most of their trip that morning, every seat was taken, with several people standing, and young children on their mothers' laps. But the twins were lucky enough to find two seats together. They attracted double-takes and second glances from other pas-

sengers, as always happened, which made them both smile with the mischievous knowledge that they could so easily trick people if they wanted.

Even Georgiana had long ago given up on trying to tell her daughters apart. She felt guilty about it for a while, then decided to give up the guilt, too. They were just too alike, and no differences appeared as they aged. So even their mother resorted to clothing to tell Hetty from Henley. They each had one sweater and one t-shirt that they were not allowed to share. Hetty's were orange and Henley's were blue. In summer, they wore the t-shirts. On cool spring days, like this, they wore the sweaters. It was the only way to see a difference between them.

"If we don't have the money, she should take it back!" Henley said. "It's not unreasonable for us to wonder where she got so much money."

"Oh, for once in your life would you just be grateful for something and let it be!"

"I am not going to be grateful for something that hurts Mom!"

A voice over the tram's speaker interrupted their argument, announcing their approach to the Burbon Square station. More than half the people in their car got up, gathering packs and children, clogging the aisle. The tram lurched to a stop, and the twins were swept out with the rest of the disembarking passengers. Their feet cleared the doorway only seconds before the tram sped off again.

The twins held hands and backed to one side of the open-air platform, waiting for their mother. As the other passengers moved on and their view of the surrounding world cleared, they found themselves above a green field covered in tents, landscaped parks, and a few small buildings – the shopping center known as Burbon Square.

The tram stopped about a quarter mile outside of this colorful cluster of shops, and from the raised platform, the girls could also see a flat land covered in the patchwork pattern of cultivated fields. It was spring, so the fields were newly plowed, with men and women and machines going back and forth, hard about the work of planting. Far off in the distance, a single tower loomed over the landscape. The tram track bent toward it and the Highblood Manor-village that lived under its shadow.



“What High-blood family is that, do you think?” Hetty asked, trying to remember her few absent-minded glances at the maps in school.

Henley shook her head. “I don’t know.”

“Girls!” Georgiana appeared in the thinning crowd, holding her hands out for them. The twins went to her, each attaching to one of her hands as if they were still tiny children, and the three of them descended the platform together.

On the ground, the pedestrian stream wound through a parking lot and into the square. Inside, vendors spilled from semi-permanent wooden structures, or tents, lean-tos, even blankets spread on the grass, selling anything anyone could need all in one ten square mile space.

Georgiana stopped just inside the square, ignoring the pushy soap vendor under a bright red awning to her right. She looked around, then checked her watch.

“The person I’m meeting is supposed to be here in ten minutes. So, I’m going to let you go now. Here...” She let go of her daughters’ hands to dig something out of her bag. “Get a map from the Welcome Booth there and take these.” She handed a large envelope to Hetty. “There’s a list of stores in there, and what you need. Also, your enrollment letters. Do not lose them. You’ll have to show them to the tailor, at least, and probably others.”

“Because who could believe two Low-girls got into Baker’s?” Hetty said.

“And don’t call it *Baker’s* in front of the vendors,” Georgiana said, digging deeper in her bag.

“You call it Baker’s,” Henley said.

“Not to V-BASE administration or official vendors I don’t,” Georgiana said. She handed Henley a small, embroidered wallet with a shoulder strap. It had one zipper across the top and no other openings. “Put this over your shoulder,” she said, doing it for her, “and keep your hand over the zipper. There’s a twenty note in it, and some sode for lunch—and I do mean lunch, not ice cream. You have your birthday money for that. I’ve already signed the note, so if you drop it, anyone can spend it. Do you understand me?”

They both nodded.

“Okay.” Georgiana glanced back at a cloth banner suspended

on two poles above their heads. The title *Parking Entrance* had been stitched into it in bright golden thread. "We'll meet back here at three, right?"

The twins nodded again.

"Be safe." Their mother gave each girl a quick hug and vanished into the swelling crowd.

"Come on!" Hetty seized her sister's hand as soon as their mother disappeared and dragged her off to the Welcome Booth for a map.

The twins had only been to Bourbon Square once before, several years earlier, and their mother had kept a firm hold on them the entire time. They were used to navigating the city alone, but the city was brick, concrete, tenement houses, and factories. The few shops brave enough to open their doors kept their merchandise back behind windowless entrances, out of the greedy eyes of those passing on the street. People hurried by and kept their eyes to themselves.

Here everything was open, and a little wild, a bombardment of color and sound and smell. Grass and sparkling water replaced the dull gray of stone and concrete. Vibrant awnings protected the vendors from sun or rain, and bright banners flew from the wooden buildings and booths. There was a gurgle of water from the fountains, a rush of feet and voices, a string group in one corner playing for spare sads, and above all, the clean, spring air that wafted in from the fields.

With growing excitement, the twins snatched their map from the smiling woman in the Welcome Booth and found a corner at the base of a massive, marble fountain. They spread the map open between them and began marking off places they needed to go.

"The Baker's store's closest," Hetty said, pointing to an icon on the map. The *V-BASE Supply Outlet*, according to the key below the map.

"Okay," Henley said. "We'll go. But remember what Mom said..."

"Don't buy your books from the V-BASE store. I know, I know." Hetty stood, folding the map. "Come on."

The twins held hands over a little brook that trickled down the center of Bourbon square, skipping as long as they could along either side of it. They ran laughing away from the sprinklers that

came on sporadically to water the grass and pointed birds out to each other in the trees, then stopped for almost five minutes to watch a squirrel watching them suspiciously from under a bush.

Hetty wanted to stop at every booth that sold anything more interesting than soap, and some of the soap booths, too. Henley kept dragging her away. They got lost at least three times and stared at the map with increasing confusion. Finally, a fish vendor they had just passed for the third time took pity on them, and his eight-year-old son ended up leading them to one of the largest wooden buildings in the square.

With a wave, the boy left them standing under alternating purple and dark red banners. A wooden sign swung over the main door, reading:

**Vladimir Baker's Academy  
of Secondary Education  
Official Bookstore and Retail Outlet**

“Remember, Hetty,” Henley said.

“Yes, yes, we’re only to buy uniforms and bookbags here!” Hetty shot her sister an annoyed look and threw the door open.

A world of red and purple greeted them. To their left was the bookstore, to their right, a shop filled with everything anyone could need for school, and quite a few unnecessary things as well. All bore the V-BASE name or crest. Despite their mother’s warnings, and Henley’s reminders, Hetty took a few halting steps toward the books. Henley grabbed her by the arm and dragged her past all the official V-BASE school supplies to the tailor’s desk at the very back of the store.

A thin man with bleached hair stood up to meet them. He got halfway through the pre-programmed greeting before noticing their patched sweaters and jeans, and then his eyes narrowed as the programmed words faded away. “Are you girls lost?” he asked.

“No, we need uniforms,” Hetty said, more sharply than she should have.

Henley gave her twin’s arm a sharp squeeze and pointed at the

envelope sticking out of her pocket.

"You're going to V-BASE?" the tailor asked, his eyebrows raised.

Hetty just glared at him.

"Yes sir," Henley said and snatched the envelope from her sister's pocket, extracted the enrollment letters, and handed them over.

The tailor read the letters over twice, went behind a counter to make sure the format matched his example copy, held both letters up to the light to study their watermarks, checked the signatures, the watermarks again, and finally handed them back to the twins with a resigned look.

"You'll want rack pieces," he said, moving to several metal racks pushed against one of the windows. On them hung pre-made uniforms, protected in plastic bags. Only High-bloods could afford to have their uniforms tailor made. Most Middle-bloods had to buy off the racks too, but Henley suspected that the tailor would still have asked a Middle-blood which option they preferred. And she knew that Hetty had the same suspicion.

Henley could see Hetty opening her mouth to say something scathing and stepped on her foot before she could. "Yes sir," she said.

"Medium, I'd say." The tailor produced two plastic-wrapped uniforms and handed them to Henley. He was looking over her head at the front door, which had just opened.

"Well can we at least try them on?" Hetty asked.

The tailor was still looking over their heads. A large party of nine people had just come in the front door. "Yeah, fine, over there," he said, waving his hand over their heads toward the back wall. "Changing rooms, over there."

"And what's wrong with these?" Hetty asked, pointing to the curtained-off stalls behind the tailor's desk. Henley grabbed her arm and dragged her off to the dark back wall.

Before they vanished into the furthest stall, they overheard the tailor's crooned greeting, "Lord Vaultery, welcome, welcome. Such an honor to see you this morning, sir – and my Lady, I must know who made that dress..."

"What?" Hetty freed her arm from her sister's viselike grip.

The lights were dim in this part of the building, barely high

enough for the girls to make out an accurate reflection in the full-length mirror. Henley yanked the curtain closed behind them, backing away from it as if it might bite her.

"Do you realize who that is?" she asked.

"Someone more worthy of notice than Low-girls," Hetty said, pulling off her sweater.

Henley's nails dug into her sister's arm. "Het, that's Brian Vaulkery!"

They froze for a moment, Hetty with one arm hanging out of her shirt, her other arm gripped by her sister's icy hand. Then she sprang at the curtain.

"No!" Henley said, as forcefully as she could in a whisper. "Stay here!"

"I'm just going to look." Hetty stuck her face through the curtain. Behind her, Henley hopped from one foot to the other, holding her breath. "There's a boy," Hetty said after a moment. "I think they're measuring him for a uniform."

"That would be Elias Vaulkery," Henley said in a strangled voice. "It makes sense he'd be at Baker's. The whole Vaulkery family has gone there."

Hetty grunted. "And you know this because...?"

"Because it's common knowledge. Seriously, Hetty, don't you ever read the papers?"

"Not those useless sections, no. I have better uses for my time. Gatch—" Hetty made a choking noise. "You'd think the tailor was in love with him, the way he's acting."

"Hetty please, please, please close the curtain."

"Not until you come look at this."

Henley gave up, stood on her toes, and leaned over her sister's back to see out. She could barely make out a boy with blond hair, standing in the middle of a gaggle of grownups. The tailor flitted around him, taking measurements. An elegant woman, in the most elaborate dress either twin had ever seen, stood by, nodding in approval. Half a dozen people hovered around them, a few servants, two armed guards, and some clerks. Lord Vaulkery stood at a distance from his family, speaking to one of the clerks over a pile of papers.

"So that's the Killer of Kohar," Hetty said.

Henley reached up and pulled the curtain closed.

Hetty turned on her sister, putting her hands on her hips, made slightly less dramatic because one arm still stuck out under her shirt. "We have as much right to be here as they do."

"Doesn't mean they should see us."

Hetty rolled her eyes. "If you're like this now, what'll you do at school? We'll have classes with High-bloods every hour of every day."

"It'll be different."

"How?"

"I don't know, Het. It will be. Okay?"

Hetty shook her head, then ripped the plastic bag off one of the uniforms. "You'll have to get undressed to try this on."

Henley shrugged. "Why bother. If it fits you, it'll fit me."

Hetty put on the blouse first. It was red chiffon, light and breezy with long sleeves and a tie around the neck. Over it went a simple A-line skirt and a jacket. Both were dark purple, with gold pinstripes running diagonally through the cloth. The jacket bore the V-BASE crest, a golden circle with a purple B entwined with a red V. Hetty buttoned the jacket all the way up, so that only the high neck of the blouse was visible, then opened it again, turning around in the mirror.

"I look so official," she said.

Henley fingered the price tag attached to the untouched suit, glanced at the numbers written there, then flipped the tag over. Meanwhile, Hetty took the jacket off and spun once more in the mirror.

"Okay, take it off before it gets dirty," Henley said.

"Relax." Hetty got back into her own clothes and tucked the uniform back into the safety of its plastic bag.

Henley peeked around the curtain. The gaggle around Elias Vaultery had only grown, with attendants from all over the shop coming over to watch or help gather fabric samples from behind the tailor's desk. A parade of ever more expensive silks and cottons passed by Lady Vaultery, who gushed over them all. Lord Vaultery nodded at anything she showed him as he discussed paperwork with two of his clerks.

"He doesn't seem to be enjoying this," Henley said, her eyes on the youngest Vaultery. He stood stiff as a board on the measuring block, eyes straight ahead, with a pinched look, almost like

the children two units over in their tenement, who hardly ever ate. It made no sense at all for the son of Brian Vaulkery to be starving, so Henley thought he must be sick.

"He's probably mad he has to give up a day of playing in his castle — spoiled child," Hetty said.

The girls took their uniforms and left the dressing rooms. Henley's attempts at stealth were unnecessary. No one cared about anything except the Vaulkeries right then. Still, she flinched when Hetty said, in a slightly louder than normal tone of voice, "Hey, what about sweatpants? They're not *that* expensive. Oh, wait... there's a zero..."

"No!" Henley pulled her sister away from the rack of folded lounge clothes. "Mom said!"

V-BASE students had to wear their official uniforms for all school days. However, they only had to wear the entire uniform on Mondays or at important school events. A three-page letter had accompanied the girls' enrollment certificates, detailing all permissible forms of clothing. Suffice it to say, having black pants, black, red, and purple shirts, and an official V-BASE sweater would be a good idea. For Phys class, students were required to have purple sweats, purple shorts, and a red t-shirt. They also needed purple or red mittens, hats, and scarves for winter school events.

The three-page letter strongly encouraged students to purchase these extras at the V-BASE store, but it wasn't required. Henley had spent the last month knitting appropriate hats and mittens. Hetty could not knit, or crochet, or sew. Every attempt had ended in a disastrous tangle of wasted yarn. But she adored the things her sister made for her and didn't even glance at the official V-BASE mittens as Henley pulled her along.

Henley led her sister toward the front of the store, dragged her away from the aisles of women's shoes, and stopped in the next cluster of shelves.

Two extras did have to be purchased at the V-BASE store. The school required bookbags and sweaters, each sold separately, that had the school's official crest. Hetty had taken her mother's old sweater, and Henley believed she could alter their father's to fit her, but there hadn't been official V-BASE bookbags back when their parents went to school. Henley marched her sister straight to the most generic of the bags, checked the price, took a hissing



breath in, and grabbed two.

"Couldn't we just *look*?" Hetty asked as her sister steered her toward the register.

"No," Henley said.

Behind them, the Vaulkery mob broke away from the tailor's desk and began combing the shoe aisles. The woman at the register was watching them and took several seconds to turn her head to the twins.

"Are you girls lost?" she asked when she saw them.

"No," Hetty said.

"Here." Henley handed over their enrollment letters, and the checker went through the same examination the tailor had, before ringing up their meager purchase. Two uniforms and two shoulder bags—Only Low-bloods would buy so little. That was what her expression said, anyway.

"That's twelve note," she said, as if expecting them to run out of money. *Does she think we can't add?* Hetty wondered while Henley got the twenty out of their mother's purse.

The checker examined their money as closely as she had the enrollment letters, and while she did, Hetty turned to look at the book section. A woman drew her attention, picking up books, methodically, section by section, opening the covers, then putting them back. She had a co-pad in one hand, writing something on it after every book.

It was the co-pad that most interested Hetty, because she had only seen them occasionally, at school, and only from a distance. They were about the size and shape of a pad of paper, and could be used as a telephone, a computer, a television, or written in just like a notebook.

Finally, the checker accepted their twenty-note and handed Henley an eight-note back. The woman in the book section scribbled one last thing into her co-pad and moved toward the door.

"Spying again, are we Vanessa?" the checker asked, stamping the note Henley had given her with the store's name. She smiled as she spoke.

"It's not spying, it's reconnaissance," the woman said, smiling herself and stowing her co-pad in the bag that hung from her shoulder. As she did, her eyes met Hetty's. A second later she had taken in everything significant about the twins, their patched



clothes, the minimal purchase.

"The official term is corporate espionage, actually," the checker said, but she was still smiling.

"Good day, Cleeta," the woman said. The bell over the door sang her out.

The twins scooped up their things. They had not paid for shopping bags, and the checker had not asked if they wanted to. With uniforms over their arms, they left the store just as the Vaulkeries moved into the second aisle of shoes.

"We should put the uniforms in the bags," Henley said. Hetty was already folding hers. The door closed behind them, and someone spoke.

"I didn't want to say anything inside, but are you looking for books next?"

Henley jumped, but Hetty had already noticed the woman standing just outside the door, the same woman she had seen taking notes in the bookstore.

"I'm Vanessa Payson," the woman said, "of *Payson's Resale Shop*."

Henley leaned over her sister's shoulder to say, "That's on Mom's list."

"You were in there getting book lists, weren't you?" Hetty said.

Mrs. Payson smiled, then invited the girls to follow her down the street with a wave of her hand. "I always do when the new semester's inventory comes in. The school board wouldn't like it, but shopkeepers look the other way. First-years, right?" She glanced back in time to see the girls nod. "Good, I'll definitely have all the books you need then. That list hasn't changed in ten years."

They were lucky to have met Mrs. Payson beforehand. The resale shop was a wooden building buried in a sea of tents, and if they had gotten lost looking for the V-BASE store, finding this tiny shop would have been impossible. It didn't help that its sign hung half broken and faded almost into invisibility. "We've been meaning to get a new one," Mrs. Payson said with a mournful glance up at it, holding the door for the twins.

The inside was dim and cluttered, smelling of books and laundry, with all kinds of items crammed onto the wall-to-wall shelves.

It was clean, however, and well organized.

"You can leave your things behind the counter," Mrs. Payson said. "Books are in the loft."

Mr. Payson materialized from a shadow behind the counter, just long enough to take the twins' uniforms and bags, then disappeared behind a book. The girls followed Mrs. Payson up an ancient flight of stairs to a loft covered in bookshelves. A good number of books lay stacked on the floor as well.

"How long have you owned this place?" Hetty asked.

"Oh, Payson's Resale has been here for generations," Mrs. Payson said. "We inherited it from my husband's parents. Our daughter will get it from us. You have your booklist?"

Henley handed it over. "We have our enrollment letters too."

Mrs. Payson shrugged. "Cleeta sold you uniforms. Besides..." She smiled at the header on the booklist. "I recognize this name. Giltmen. You come from a long line of Low-bloods who have attended the High-blood school."

The girls stared at her. Hetty looked angry.

"Sorry," Mrs. Payson said. "But you're going to hear that from everyone. And really, it's something to be proud of."

"That we managed to rise above what Low-bloods are capable of?" Hetty asked.

"No," Mrs. Payson said, turning to the bookshelves. "Any High-blood can buy their way into Baker's. A lot of Middle-bloods get in simply because they're legacies—believe me, I was one of them. Only Low-bloods can know for certain they got in purely on merit. Ah, here's *World History*." She pulled a thick textbook off the shelf. "Do you want one copy of these books, or two?"

"Just one," the girls said in tandem.

Mrs. Payson nodded, as if the choice made no difference.

"Are you Georgiana's daughters?" she asked suddenly.

"Um... Yeah..." the girls said, surprised.

Mrs. Payson pulled a copy of *Introductory Biology* off the shelf. "I've just been wondering. I heard she had twins. And you have her hair."

"How do you know our mom?" Henley asked.

"Oh, well, we were all at Baker's together." Mrs. Payson stood on her toes to reach *First Year Algebra*. "They only admit a hundred students a year, and only about seventy come, so you get

to know each other pretty well. I was in your aunt Megan's year, actually. Georgie was the year after us." She got *A Comprehensive Anthology of Earth Literature: Volume 1* out of a stack on the floor.

"But you're a Med—a Middle-blood," Hetty said, correcting herself when she thought the slang term might be somehow impolite with an adult. Henley wished she were close enough to step on her sister's foot.

Mrs. Payson took *A Friendly Guide to Politics* off a shelf and handed the pile of books over to Henley.

"Things were a little bit different when we were in school," she said, then turned to the list, pointing. "We won't have any of these art supplies here. Or, if we do, they're in such bad shape, you really are better off paying more at an art store. If you still need notebooks and paper, we do have some. Pens are iffy—you should buy those new. A drug store back in the city will have them cheapest, probably. You need anything else?"

"Clothes," Henley said. "I sew, so I just need to get Baker's colored fabric."

Mrs. Payson nodded. "We have some here. I'll show you. You can leave the books at the counter."

Henley spent the next half hour or so examining fabric. Hetty gave up on helping her after four minutes, went to grab twelve of the least used notebooks she could find, then came back and yelled at Henley to decide already.

Mr. Payson morphed out of his shadow and rang up their purchases in silence. His wife, meanwhile, chatted with them about where they were going next and drew out directions on their map.

"Seven note, thirty sade," Mr. Payson said.

"You want bags?" Mrs. Payson asked.

"It's okay," Henley said, trying to figure out a way to fit everything into their two bookbags.

"No charge," Mr. Payson said, stamping the twins' eight-note with the store name. Mrs. Payson was already dividing the books, bags, notebooks, clothes, and uniforms between four large paper bags.

"Thank you so much," Henley said as she and Hetty took two bags each.

"Just come back next year," Mrs. Payson said. "Oh, and girls..." She came around the counter. "Your mother would have known

me as Vanessa Kerter. Tell her hi from me?"

The twins nodded, thanked the Paysons again, and went blinking out of the gloom, onto the bright street.

"Where's that art store?" Henley asked. "I hope we have enough money left." She was beginning to worry that she had gone overboard on the fabric.

"It's this way. And we have a whole note left," Hetty said.

"Actually, we have seventy sade plus our lunch money."

"We'll be fine," Hetty said, taking the lead between colorful tents.

It turned out they did have to spend nine sade of their lunch money. Try as they might, they couldn't double up on art supplies, and nothing was cheap. Henley felt terrible about it. Hetty rolled her eyes and tried to explain this was why their mother had given them so much money for lunch in the first place.

At one-thirty, the twins found an open space surrounded by food tents. Starving, they followed their noses to the nearest stall, then found an empty table and inhaled their fries and burgers.

"We still have an hour before we meet Mom," Hetty said. "Where you wanna go?"

"Hetty..."

Henley's eyes had fixed onto a monument, set up in the very center of the food space. Someone had pushed aside several tables to make room for it, and it was nothing more than four TV screens mounted on a tall, wire stand. At the very top, a wooden plaque with three faces read: *To the Dead of Kohar*.

"Does that say what I think it does?" Henley asked.

Hetty didn't answer. She stood, gathered up her bags, and went toward the monument. Henley followed, drawn like magnets across the food court. They were not the only ones. Some came with scowls and disapproving words, some with solemn, grim, or pained expressions, others with nods of approval. Each of the screens scrolled through a seemingly endless list of names, all under that plaque, *To the Dead of Kohar*.

"Henley!" Hetty dropped one of her bags so she could grip her sister's hand. There, as the scrolling list reached the Gs, they both saw, plainly as if it were the only name: *Giltmen, Cory Rhys*. Henley's fingers twisted around her sister's as she fought a sob.

For a while, there was nothing but their father's name, the

father they had never known, and for whom their mother still cried when she thought her daughters couldn't hear. It was the name that had given them life and then died, ripped from his children by the High-bloods.

All too soon, and not soon enough, the name vanished, and the list scrolled on. Blinking in an effort to see through water, Henley focused on the monument itself. It was held together with tape and wires. Even the sign was hastily carved. And then the tables, shoved unceremoniously aside to make room for it. "This isn't supposed to be here," she said.

Hetty nodded. "It's not on the map, I'd've noticed."

"Who put this here?" Henley wasn't sure if she wanted to thank them or scream at them.

Before Hetty could even think about answering, a different voice, male and furious, repeated Henley's question for all in the food space to hear. Everyone stopped what they were doing to look in the same direction, toward the voice, the man the question.

Lord Vaultery, in his pristine gray suit, stood at the edge of the food space with his family, followed by their guards and clerks, followed by servants carrying dozens of bags, all looking where everyone was looking, at the impromptu monument. He was not smiling. He was not scowling. He had no expression at all.

The Lady Vaultery put her arms around her son, drawing him close to her. Servants, clerks, and guards all stood very still, mirrored by the suddenly motionless crowd in front of them.

"Who put this here?" Lord Vaultery asked again. The crowd stood silent. Food burned in the tents, and the meat on one of the grills caught fire. Still, no one moved. Maybe they had all done it, Hetty thought, all the restaurant keepers, getting together to set the thing up. Regardless, they were all culpable. Not one of them had torn it down.

Then she realized something else. Someone like Brian Vaultery did not just go places. People in Bourbon Square would have heard about his visit days before he arrived. And, of course, his path would eventually cross the main food space. This monument, erected of tape and wire To the Dead of Kohar, was for him.

# CHAPTER 6

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## THE KILLER OF KOHAR

ONE MORE TIME," LORD VAULKERY SHOUTED across the food space. "Who did this? One of you knows." No one answered. Instead, a wave of confused chatter washed through the space, and Hetty felt Henley's hand clench in hers. The screens continued to scroll, naming the ghosts.

"Don't worry," Hetty said. "Even I wouldn't say anything in this crowd."

"We have to get out of here," Henley said.

Hetty kept a hold on her sister, grabbed her fallen bag with her other hand, and began to back away.

"Fine!" Brian Valkery said. He motioned to one of his guards. "Tear it down."

His guards advanced toward the monument. Hetty hesitated. Those men were about to wipe away her father's name, and she felt a surge of anger pull her toward them. Henley's hand, how-

ever, was firm in hers, pulling her backward, away from the monument.

Then suddenly, someone, not far from Hetty's shoulder, shouted, "Coward!"

It was just about the stupidest thing anyone could have done short of throwing stones at the High-blood Lord. Henley felt a surge of terror, and Hetty half wished she had been the one to say it. The guards changed direction, looking for one person and ready to trample anyone in their way.

The crowd surged backward, almost tearing the twins apart twice. Then Hetty fell backward over a bench, and her hand twisted out of Henley's. Someone screamed as a guard hit him. Henley was dragged off by the moving crowd, and Hetty saw the guards' boots less than a yard from her head.

And then another, smaller pair of feet appeared on the ground in front of the guards. A woman put herself into the guards' path, put up her arms, using her body as a block against both of them. "Stop!" she said, a whisper meant for only them to hear. The guards tried to push through her, and her hand grabbed at a chain that hung around her neck.

Both the guards froze.

The crowd collected itself. Those not on the ground scuttled back. Those on the ground got up, crawling backward. Hetty got onto her elbows but stayed where she was.

The woman standing two feet from her had dark brown hair and was dressed simply, with a few patches on her clothes. But around her neck hung a pendant that every person recognized: a tiny, red flame inside a frosty glass teardrop. She was a Secret Keeper.

After eying the guards for several more seconds, the woman dropped the chain around her neck and looked over their heads. "Brian Vaultery!" she called. "I'm sorry. I know men like you are far too busy to worry about displays like this."

The crowd murmured as Lord Vaultery made his way through them to the Secret Keeper. His guards parted so he could stand toe-to-toe with her.

"What are you doing here, Giltmen?" he asked.

Giltmen. The shock of that name pulled Hetty's spine up straight.



"None of your business," the Secret Keeper said.

Lord Vaultery inclined his head toward the monument. "That is."

"Men like you know how to choose their battles," the Secret Keeper said, her voice barely above a whisper. "I swear that the Secret Keepers had nothing to do with this. But my brother's name is on that list, and not one person here is on your side. Wars have started over less. I suggest you choose your next move with the same insight and care you usually bring to such situations."

Lord Vaultery bent his head toward hers. "Well done, Giltmen. I remember when you were too scared to say even one word to me."

Then he backed up and, smiling, said for everyone to hear, "Once again, the wisdom of the Secret Keepers proves itself beyond equal. I'll leave the problem in her capable hands." He nodded to the woman, who nodded back, then hissed, "Obliterate it," to his guards on his way past them. The smile never left his face.

As Lord Vaultery's guards tore the monument apart, a group of restaurant keepers gathered behind the Secret Keeper. Slowly, she turned to them, asking, "Who did this?"

They shook their heads. "It was here when we arrived," one of them said.

"But you didn't take it down?" The Secret Keeper's eyes passed over the group for a long, appraising moment. "I understand. We all lost someone at Kohar. But you must realize what might've happened if I had not happened to be here. No good can come from making a fool of Brian Vaultery. Next time, take it down yourselves."

There was no response, and she did not wait for one. Instead, she turned and saw Hetty lying on the ground. "Hey, are you all right?" she asked, leaning down to help the girl up.

Hetty could not move. She did not even see the offered hand. She could only stare at this woman's face.

"Hetty!" Henley, finally, disentangled herself from the crowd and rushed at her sister. She stopped short when she saw the Secret Keeper leaning over her. Hetty crawled up onto her feet. The Secret Keeper straightened up, looking from one twin to the other.



“You’re Megan Giltmen,” Hetty said.

Recognition filled the Secret Keeper’s face, whether of their mother’s hair, or their father’s eyes, or just the name – Hetty, short for Henrietta, who had a twin. For a while, she seemed as unable to move as Hetty had been.

“Girls, what by the lake!” Georgiana pushed through the crowd and grabbed Hetty by the shoulders. “Megan, what happened?”

“Her?” Hetty shoved her mother away. “This is who you came to meet?”

Georgiana froze, her face draining of color. Her daughter was jumping to conclusions, but they were the right conclusions, and she didn’t deny them.

Meanwhile, Henley and Megan scrambled to retrieve the things that had fallen from Hetty’s bags. Henley kept dropping books and art supplies because she could not take her eyes off her aunt. Megan set the last items in the bags, then handed the bags to Henley without a word.

“Asta, Georgiana,” she said, then vanished into the crowd.

“Wait!” Hetty said.

“We should go.” Georgiana took all four bags from Henley and steered her daughters away from the food court.

“I want to meet her!” Hetty said.

“You will. For now, back to the tram.”

“What do you mean we will?” Henley asked.

“Not now,” their mother said.

They walked in silence for a while. “Vanessa Kerter says hi,” Henley said, unable to bear the stony quiet that had settled between her mother and sister. “She’s Vanessa Payson now, of Payson Resale.”

“Nessa, really? That’s nice to hear. She’s doing well then?”

“I guess.” Henley couldn’t think of anything else to say, and stony silence fell once more.

They boarded the tram a few minutes later, unable to find even two seats together.

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In the Vaulkery Manor-house, Elias Vaulkery knew that he was

not allowed to go upstairs. He sat in one of the stiff, elegant chairs in his mother's favorite sitting room, surrounded by servants unpacking the spoils of their trip to Bourbon Square.

His mother went through the shopping spree again in reverse, saying all the same things about how marvelous everything was. Lord Vaultery stood in a corner, talking business with a few clerks, and nodded at everything his wife showed him. Elias glared at everything, crossed his arms, sat stiffly, and told his mother that all five pairs of official V-BASE shoes looked exactly the same. His mother laughed, called him a joker, and pointed out every minor distinction, again.

"Just wait until your clothes get here!" she said and dug into a bag of mittens. She had not been able to choose between the purple striped red ones and the red striped purple ones and had therefore purchased two pairs of each.

Elias took to watching the secondhand move in his mother's ornate, brass wall clock. It had a hypnotic effect which almost made him forget his mother's incessant voice. The monotony made him remember other things, though, things that he very much wanted to run to the tower to think about.

The tower, out on the battlement, looking down toward the lake—that was the only place where Elias could be alone with his thoughts. He hoped there was a tower at Baker's. If not, maybe he could get his mother to buy him one.

"I hate to say it, my dear," Lord Vaultery said, halfway through the set of official V-BASE hand towels. "But I'm afraid I have to get to work." He sounded entirely sincere in his disappointment, but Elias knew that smile.

"Can I go get some homework done?" Elias asked.

"Oh, but we're not done unpacking!" Adriana said.

"You have tomorrow to do your homework," Lord Vaultery said. "At least one of us should be able to enjoy this." And then there was another smile, the do as you're told smile. Elias jumped to his feet.

"What happened today?" he asked, stopping his father in the doorway.

Maybe it happened because Elias had not gone to the tower to release his questions into the sky, forced, instead, to keep them crushed inside himself for almost half a day. He knew better than

to ask his father questions, especially these kinds of questions. Since that afternoon, however, the image of a monument, and the words above it, *To the Dead of Kohar*, had been burning deeper and deeper into his mind.

He had learned about Kohar in school, of course. Even Low-blood schools called it a last, glorious strike against the Braud terrorists. But there was more to the story, obscure things that no person spoke of, whispered by the air after dark.

"That stupid monument!" Elias said. "Why'd you let it get to you?"

"Elias, this is neither the time nor the place," Lord Vaultery said.

"And it never will be if I leave it to you."

"Enough! Help your mother with the unpacking. I'm going to work."

"Not until you answer me!"

Oxygen vanished into vacuum, like the space their ancestors had traveled through between worlds. The clerks' hands grappled with their clipboards, and all the servants were suddenly very busy with the shopping bags. Lord Vaultery marched across the room to stand toe-to-toe with his son. He was almost twice the boy's size, but Elias clenched his fists at his sides and did not back down.

"You are out of line, Elias," his father said.

"What happened at Kohar?" Elias asked, his fists turning white.

"You know what happened. Don't tell me you're listening to Low-blood lies now!"

"You think I don't know what they call you?" Elias asked. "Not the Low-bloods, but the Middles at school, and even some of the High-bloods, whispering behind-their-hands when they think I can't hear..."

"I don't believe this, from my own son..."

"The Killer of Kohar, that's what they call you."

"It's not important what some Low-bloods..."

"You think I'm stupid?" Elias asked. "Do you really think I'm stupid enough to believe there were only Braud left in our biggest city that night?"

"Braud and Low-bloods, yes, that was all!" Lord Vaultery

loomed over his son. "As for the stupid things your classmates say – you will never survive a life in government if you take such nonsense so hard?"

Elias crossed his arms. He felt a darkness stir inside him, and that darkness prodded a dangerous question from his mouth. "If it's just nonsense, then why did that monument bother you so much?"

"Elias, that is enough!" Lord Valkery shouted.

Everyone in the room froze, because everyone in the room knew the impossible had just happened, that Brian Valkery had actually lost his temper. Only a moment later, however, he regained it, told his son to sit down and help his mother, and marched off to work, followed by his army of clerks.

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"I'm sorry we spent so much," Henley was saying, accompanied by the rattling of the staircase overhead as the outer door to their tenement building slammed shut.

"Henley," her mother said, pushing the apartment door open with her shoulder, "I'm actually surprised twenty note was enough."

"And nine sads," Henley said.

"Whatever. The bookbags must have been less than I expected."

"Two note each."

"I expected three." Her mother dropped the shopping bags on the couch. Henley came over to her, but Hetty remained lurking in the doorway.

Their mother reached into one of the shopping bags. "And I have a feeling that the Paysons... Ah yes, here. Twenty percent store discount."

"What?" Henley snatched the receipt out of her mother's hand. "Why would they do that?"

Her mother laughed. "Nessa's official excuse is probably that she and I both went to Baker's. But if not for that, she would have found something else."

Georgiana looked at her daughter's aghast expression and laughed again. "Payson's Resale has a reputation for helping

low-income students going to high-priced schools. In return, they get customer loyalty, and that has allowed their tiny shop to stay in business for about four generations. So you see, Henley, this is not a handout. I put them on your list because they helped me when I was a student."

"Why didn't you tell us Aunt Megan was a Secret Keeper?" Hetty asked.

Henley and their mother turned toward the door where Hetty stood with her arms crossed, glaring. Slowly, their mother put the receipt down and let out a long breath.

"We all could have been," she said. "Your father, me, Megan... We were all in the program."

"You and Dad were Secret Keepers?"

"No!" Their mother shook her head. "No. I dropped the program when I was fifteen, like most initiates do. So did your father. But Megan took the vows."

"Why didn't you tell us?" Hetty asked.

"Because it's not important. It's a profession, Hetty, not some supernatural destiny. I know, I know, there are so few Secret Keepers they seem all mysterious... But there are so few simply because Baker's is one of only six schools with an active chapter. You have to get into one of those six schools just to be selected. And then most people who do get selected realize they're not cut out for that life. Your father and I, for instance, we wanted to get married, have a family..."

"Secret Keepers don't get married?" Henley asked.

"There's no rule against it. But it's discouraged, and most of them don't."

"Why didn't you tell us?" Hetty asked. "Why do you hate Aunt Megan so much? Why did you send her money back? And why, why, *why* were you meeting her today?"

"Henrietta, do not use that tone with me," her mother said in her most motherly voice.

Henley was twisting her fingers in her sweater. She didn't like shouting, and she had never understood how Hetty could get so angry so quickly, especially at their mother. She also expected Hetty to storm out of the room at this point. Apparently, however, this was one of those rare occasions when Hetty wanted answers badly enough to wait for them.

"Sorry." Hetty crossed her arms, chin down, and looked at the floor.

Their mother took a deep breath. "The issues between Megan and me are not what you think. The truth is really messy and complicated. I don't hate her. I never did. It's way harder than that. As for why I met with her today..." She took another deep breath.

"It has to do with our tuition, doesn't it?" Henley said.

"You're taking money from her *now*?" Hetty asked.

"No." Their mother leveled a pointer finger at each daughter. "Not money. That is the one thing I will never take from Megan Giltmen again."

She began to organize their schoolbooks, taking them from the bags to the coffee table, stacking and re-stacking by some criteria Henley could not figure out. "Because Baker's has a Low-blood dorm, they're required to employ at least one Low-blood teacher."

"Aunt Megan's a Baker's teacher now too?" Hetty asked.

"Art teacher," her mother said. "And in charge of the Low-blood dorm."

"Wait, wait wait..." Henley handed the last book to her mother. "I remember reading... Students with a relative employed at Baker's..."

"... get half their tuition covered automatically," Hetty finished.

Excitement made Henley's eyes grow wider and wider as she scrambled to do the math in her head. "That, with our legacy scholarships, and our academic scholarships..."

Hetty cut her off, her own, annoyed tone, muting even her sister's excitement. "Ninety percent of our tuition is covered now, isn't it?"

The mother nodded. "There was a form. Both Megan and I had to sign it. That's why I met her today."

"Why didn't you just tell us this?"

"Because I needed to talk to her first," their mother said. "I don't expect you to understand that, Hetty, but it is something that *I*, as your mother, needed to do."

"Gatchin! You are ridiculous!" Hetty marched off, slamming her bedroom door behind her.

That night, Elias dragged a large quilt up to the Valkery tower and slept out on the battlement. It was freezing, but staring into the stars, he did not care. He felt safe in the tower because his father hated it, and dreaded the arrival of morning, breakfast, facing the Lord Valkery again. He should never have brought up Kohar. He should never have asked questions.

# CHAPTER 7

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## MOVING DAY

ON THE MORNING OF MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 7TH, Henrietta Giltmen woke in an empty room, almost everything she owned packed away into three bags. All that remained were the sheets and a blanket that Hetty now pulled off her bed and folded. She then moved into the main room where she found Henley folding two neat piles of red and purple clothing.

"Het, here!" Henley bounced in her seat, pushing one pile toward her sister. "I couldn't sleep at all last night, could you? Good thing, though. Gave me time to finish sewing. I've been trying them on all along, so they should fit you. Our bags are there."

"Henley," Hetty asked with raised eyebrows, "how much coffee have you had this morning?"

"None!" Henley hopped up onto the couch and then jumped to the floor. "It's all adrenaline. How come you're so calm? We should get breakfast. Mom doesn't want us drinking coffee, any-