

CHAPTER ONE

FORGING—THE WORD FOR THE MOMENT A KEEPER DISCOVERS THEIR POWERS FOR THE FIRST TIME. THE PROCESS, THOUGH MILD FOR MOST, CAN BE DANGEROUS AND VOLATILE. DANGER IS MOST PROMINENT WHEN A FORGING OCCURS IN RESPONSE TO A TRAUMATIC EVENT.

- ORAILA ACADEMY ELEMENTARY: NEBULA'S ABSOLUTE LAW



Moonlight taunted Godiva through sheer curtains as she mused over the rhythmic words she had stared at far too long. Warm orblight spilled across the writing desk from her lantern, illuminating a poem on the page.

Distrust the affinities of Nebula's exiled children.

How do they have the precision to smother the frail today?

Yet, centuries it takes to alter the course of nature.

She often enjoyed deciphering Trinity's writing, melodramatic as it was, yet these words eluded her. *Now, what era are you from?* She turned the words sideways, peering through tired eyes just as pain shot through her abdomen.

Godiva rose abruptly, shifting into the sixth stance. The book fell from her hands as she glanced around. The stone walls were unburdened by moving shadows—no one was there.

Her ability, now enhanced by the sixth, blossomed within her mind. With it came terror, and far more pain. Godiva doubled over, gripping the chair. The source wasn't here; the terror now echoing in her mind came through an Imp connection. One far stronger than she should have allowed it to be.

"Robin..." Godiva dove into the channel, seeking the girl. Her cool, comfortable room faded from sight, and a new one materialized around her. She could see a musty cellar, full of cobwebs and forgotten paint pots. It would be late evening here in Ausron.

Robin lay on the floor in the corner, a figure standing over her. Robin was naked, her body almost unrecognizable but for the auburn hair that fell across her face. She barely moved, dark purple welts covering her skin, and her breathing was ragged.

"Robin," Godiva reached out for Robin's mind without hesitation. She would take the council's punishment if it meant she could bring this girl one moment of comfort. Robin raised her head weakly, looking at the person above her. Neil was a youth that Godiva had been watching closely; the darkness in his heart had been growing for some time. In his hand he gripped a knife. "Robin!" Godiva called out more urgently.

"You're here," her relieved voice sounded within Godiva's mind. "I knew you would come."

"You have to get up," Godiva told her.

"It's too late," Robin replied. "I can feel it, even if he leaves right now, I'm dead." Godiva could feel the resonating ache in her chest, her stomach and limbs; it was the truth. "This is my fault, I shouldn't have—"

“No,” Godiva interrupted her. “Don’t say that and don’t give up. This doesn’t have to be the end.” Her words sounded weaker as if from further away. Godiva watched as the figure of Neil crouched, the knife still in his hand. Panic clawed at Godiva’s soul. This couldn’t be happening.

“I need you to go,” A whisper in Godiva’s mind. “I don’t want you to see this.”

“*No!*” Godiva tried to call out, but it was too late. She had been pushed out. The dusty cellar vanished, and she returned to her body, standing in her room with a white-knuckled hand gripping the chair.

She launched herself back, trying to reconnect with the girl. It was like running into a wall. Godiva’s knees gave out under her. “Let me back in!” Her sob echoed around her chambers.

The girl *couldn’t* die. The council needed her safe; they had assigned Godiva to keep tabs on her for that very reason. Was that really why Godiva couldn’t breathe, though? Was that why it felt as though her own heart was about to give out?



It was another peaceful night during Vason’s two-week exile. He sat against the bony knots of a tree in the woods that bordered a human school. He read a book written by his predecessor. Maybe, by the time his exile was over, he would know just enough not to blunder when he returned.

Maybe.

But maybe not.

Vason had been thrust into a role he had spent years working towards—that he had once only dreamed of—yet still didn't feel ready for. It was as he set the book down on his sleeping mat that he felt something that he had thought to be impossible.

A rippling wave of intangible energy surged past him, and his body was momentarily swathed in an echo of Nebula Energy. He sat in shock for a moment as Bayne—who had been sleeping at his side—pushed himself onto his hind legs. Had the vilk not reacted, Vason *might* have believed he had imagined it. The girl they guarded was now eighteen; far past when most forged, and only a few in the council still held out hope that she was who they waited for.

Bayne whimpered deep in his throat, his ears pressed back. Vason sat in wide-eyed silence until the impossible wave came again. It set his hairs on end but didn't cause a stir in the surrounding grass. He was on his feet in the next second, sketchpad, books and clothing in disarray as he fumbled to shove it all into pouches and attach Bayne's saddle.

Vason launched himself onto Bayne's back, securing the last few clasps as the huge wolf began to hurtle towards the source of the energy.

The light of the moon shone brighter as the tree-line began to thin before them. Bayne came to a halt as he reached the edge of the forest and dismounted.

Not far into the miles of plains beyond, stood a large, lone willow tree, its trunk and roots had cracked through the hard ground below it. Nebula's energy rested now and Vason waited in silence, body tensed as he watched.

Had he missed her?

A glistening blur caught his eye as a figure ran from the tree-line far to his right. She wore an elegant bodysuit of white that shimmered as she tore across the plains, an image illustrative of the royalty they hoped her to be. She flung herself into the roots of the great willow with desperation. This girl had never touched Nebula's Energy before today, and the willow—a creation of that very power—served as a beacon to her.

Vason took a few steps to approach but stopped in his tracks as he saw two others breach the tree-line. He stepped back, his instincts telling him to wait. The other watchers were of his people, and this what they had been hired for. He noticed that they approached with less caution than he had been expecting. These two must have been warned to be wary of her powers, yet he could see their disregard for that warning.

Upon a swift approach, one raised an arm. Vason saw an indistinguishable dark mass swirl above the man, hovering in the air. The girl—almost obscured from vision among the huge roots—lifted her head, perhaps hearing them. The next few seconds happened in slow motion. She spun, pulling her body into a crouch like a frightened creature. Then she struck.

Everything around her turned white. The giant willow stopped swaying in the wind, each branch cocooned in a crystalline coat that shone in the moonlight. White extended outwards across the ground below her like an infection. The air around Vason went cold.

Ice.

As the sheet of frost reached the two on-comers, spikes erupted from the ground, and stuck both through the chest. Both slumped forward, dead before they could cry out.

Vason stepped backwards, cursing under his breath as he saw the manifestation of her strength. Where had she drawn the moisture from, to form the ice? There hadn't been rain since he had arrived.

Vason touched his tongue to the top of his mouth on impulse and felt it stick as he inhaled a dry breath. *Nebula's light*. Even his mother could not draw moisture from the air as this woman had. The dead fools before him had never stood a chance.

As the newest council member of Knoxen, he would surely lose everything if the Iliate was to escape under his watch. He was, however, having difficulty telling his feet to move.

He had thought he was clever, convincing his mother to send him to this place as a punishment. It had meant avoiding pretentious foreign leaders pretending to appreciate having him visit their city. He had expected an uneventful trip. Now he felt foolish—and critically under-qualified.

He forced one foot in front of the other. If he failed in this, he'd lose all the power he had fought for. That would be worse than death at the hands of The Iliate. Vason signaled Bayne to wait behind him and crept towards the field of ice.

He wished he had a plan. Since she had been two years old they had suspected who she was. For the sixteen years since—a good portion of his lifetime—she had been a singular, shining hope to his mother.

When he stepped up to the edge of the layer of ice on the ground, she turned to face him. He was sure he had seen a flash of auburn when she had run to the willow, but her hair was now black. The rigid parts of his mind that had been clinging to denial, faded at the clear image of Nebula's Chosen. He stared straight at proof. Now he paused.

Instead of approaching, he kneeled. She had turned on the watchers without mercy. He would give her no extra reason to do the same to him. He waited for a long time, his head bowed—his reluctance to look up as much out of fear as it was of deference. If she wished to kill him, his power would count as much as a candle in the wind.

Being struck down on the outskirts of a forsaken human city was an undignified way to die, yet that was not why he was afraid. If he died here, no one would continue the search for his sister. He felt the tremble in his clenched fist as he thought of her forever lost within the Knoxen Slave Network.

He jumped at the crunch of footsteps on thin ice, his eyes were closed. The footsteps stopped, and with slow reluctance he looked up.

What he saw was not what he had expected. She stood a few feet from him, one foot back in a defensive posture. What he had thought to be a bodysuit was not that at all. She was bare of clothing, instead encased in opaque ice. It glimmered with every move she made, and reached up her neck, tailing off in thin claws along her cheeks.

The Iliate—for there was no shadow of a doubt that she was the one—was mesmerizing. Once he had looked up at her, Vason was unable to look away.

For the first time in a very long time, he was focused on something other than his endless struggle for power in Knoxen.

What was this woman capable of?

He thought of the graceful manner in which she wielded the power she had acquired less than an hour ago. The most daunting thing about her though, was the transformation she now embraced. Her black hair seemed to dissolve any moonlight that touched it, while her amber eyes glowed unnaturally. Of the four forms that The Iliate could take, this one was the last he would have chosen to face.

She observed him for a long time and his racing pulse did not ease. He said nothing, waiting until she spoke.

“You’re not from the estate.” It was a statement rather than a question, but he still shook his head.

“I’m not,” he said, glad his voice still worked.

“Why are you here?”

“To take you home,” he was taking a chance. He knew very little of her, which was his own fault. Aspen had made a file on her, but he hadn’t read the damned thing. No one, not even his mother, had expected something to *actually* happen when he was here. Even if it had, the watchers should have been able to take care of it. Those same watchers were currently impaled on spikes of ice.

“Where is home?” she asked. Vason tried to ignore the touch of cynicism in her tone.

“Where I come from, a city in the mountains called Knoxen. You were born there.” For a second, her gaze held the faintest trace of longing. Then she smiled, and it was something quite vicious.

“What about them?” she asked, and she glanced back at the two dead keepers. Their deaths could have been an accident. She would not be the first keeper to hurt, or even kill others in her situation. Knoxen even had laws to recant a keeper’s responsibility for accidental injury during forging. Staring at her, however, Vason could not be sure it *had* been an accident.

“Were *they* born in the city in the mountains?” Vason held his expression motionless.

“You are important,” Vason reached out to her with an open palm. “Come with me and I will show you.”

“You’re too late,” she shook her head. “If I am from this *city among the mountains*,” she spat the words. “Then why have I been here for as long as I can remember? Why have you only come now if I am so important?” Her voice was laced with malice. At his lack of response, she smiled again, the contempt in her eyes now unfettered. She turned from him. Vason stood, needing to keep her engaged.

“I am barely five years your elder, Robin, those are not things I can account for.” He realized he shouldn’t have used her name the moment it left his mouth. She spun back to face him, her eyes alight with rage. Crystals of ice formed in the surrounding air.

“How dare you,” she said, stepping towards him now with unnerving aggression. She did not strike him, but instead stopped only inches away. “You pretend to come here to rescue me?” she sneered. “A white knight?”

Vason worked not to step back from her. “Where were you tonight, then? Where were you all the other nights I was...?” the words seemed to halt on her tongue. She stepped away from him, her demeanor shifting from

aggression to uncertainty. “I came here for something.” Her voice cracked as she turned to the great willow before glancing back at him. Then her transformation faded; her hair turned from black to auburn, the glow in her eyes dissolved to grey. She collapsed.

Vason barely caught her in time, so surprised by her volatility. He lifted her into his arms, pulling her in tightly before he felt the ice stiffen around her body. He called for Bayne, unable to look away from her. In contrast to her previous temperament, her expression was now peaceful.

He noticed that her ears were perfectly curved as were his own, despite the telling auburn hair and tawny skin of Anayans. She was a lot smaller than he had been expecting; it had not felt that way during their interaction.

What if she didn't wake up? He pushed the thought away. Better question, what if she *did* wake up? He couldn't guarantee he could keep her from killing him the next time. He pulled inharin cuffs from Bayne's saddle, knowing that what he was about to do was wrong. He tried to imagine what Vix would do in this situation. *What would my mother do?*

Dammit. They weren't here, and if they were here, they wouldn't be so sorely unprepared. He pressed the cuffs on her wrists, and then he wrapped her in a cloak and mounted Bayne with difficulty, still holding her in his arms.

His teeth chattered and his arms trembled as he clutched her body, still encased in ice as they began the journey back to Knoxen. He held out hope for an Impp transmission. It was possible that one of the watchers communicated with Knoxen before they had engaged, but

not likely. Could this situation have been handled any worse?

He felt the ice melt through the cloak as the hours passed. As it did, he saw—from what was revealed of her blackened neck—what the beautiful mask had been hiding. The Iliate had not forged naturally this night. Instead, something terrible had happened to her. His stomach twisted in apprehension as he pushed Bayne past taverns along the path. What further wounds could the ice have been concealing? There would be no healers until they arrived back in Knoxen.