**STAR-SEER**

Chapter 1

By April Marcom

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It was on the night of my youngest sister’s birth that my dangerous obsession was also born.

The wind blew softly through the warm air, ruffling the hem of my dress. The stars shone like flecks of gold against the velvet black sky, a bright silver moon keeping watch over them all.

It was the perfect night for those gifted with star-seership. I was just returning home from a long night at school for the youngest star-readers of my people. We had to attend classes late at night, since it was the only time the stars were available for this specialized form of studying.

The moment my circular house came into view, I knew something was wrong. Men in dark cloaks were just entering the dwelling. Their hoods waved carelessly behind them, ready to shroud the natural light cast by their pale skin and pure white hair when they reached the Surface.

Light cast by my own body must have shone brighter at the realization of what was happening: my mother had just given birth to a defect.

My feet raced over the bridge connecting the tops of two valor trees. Our entire city was set at the highest boughs of these giants, older and stronger than anything else of our world, simply to keep us guarded from the savage defects living on the ground below.

“Sleigh, wait!” Auree, my elder sister, called after me when I followed the last man into our house. I noticed her sitting against the outside of our house with my little sister before I disappeared inside.

It was the sound of my mother’s voice coming from her bedroom that stopped me dead in my tracks. It broke and came out in painful shards. “Don’t let them take her, Devin. She’s our daughter.”

“I know…” my father’s voice came just as strangely, laced with sadness, something he had never displayed before. “Auree was right to send for them, though. Think of the danger we would be putting our daughters in if we kept her.”

“She *is* our daughter.”

“I’m sorry, Bloom.” The last transporter disappeared into my parents’ room. “Every defect poses a great threat to us all. That’s the entire reason the Avarice had this city built in the sky, to keep them away from us.”

I wanted to follow the transporters into the room. I had never seen a defect before.

“But she’s only a baby,” my mother pled.

A new cry rang out. Our house began to quake. My arms swung around wildly as I fought to catch myself, falling back against the curved hallway wall. A crack split through the wall right behind me. I scooted across the floor to the opposite side of the hall. The baby’s cries grew louder, a burst of fiery light erupting from my parents’ doorway.

“Give this to her,” one of the transporters said, raising his voice.

A moment later the baby became silent. The trembling became still and the light went out.

“You see, Bloom? To keep her here could destroy everything we’ve worked so hard to build. She must be delivered to the Surface. The other defects will know how to care for her.”

“She’s *my* child,” my mother said.

“You know the Avarice would never allow it.”

“There’s not anything I wouldn’t do to change this.” My Father’s voice was so gentle; I scarcely recognized it. “But we can’t put our girls at risk by upsetting the Avarice.”

I wondered what he meant. The Avarice was a group of six men who lived in a tree-castle at the heart of our city, surrounded by guards. They were in charge of keeping peace and order. They made certain everyone had a house and all the things they needed. They wouldn’t harm anyone.

“Can’t I just finish giving her this bottle?” my mother sobbed. “It’s the only chance I’ll ever have to feed her.”

“There’s a powerful sleep aid in what she’s drinking that will keep her from waking until she’s reached the Surface,” a transporter said. “She won’t be aware enough to keep drinking it for much longer.”

No one spoke after that. My mother kept crying. I could scarcely make out her muttering to my baby sister about how much she loved her.

I stayed where I was in the hallway, still wanting to see my defect sister but too afraid to move.

The terrible images I’d conjured since childhood of what a defect might look like danced through my mind as I waited. A tiny body with four long arms. A giant forehead and crooked fangs. Eyes red as blood that filled your soul with evil and ice. I’d never managed to discover anything about them, because it was a forbidden subject to discuss.

I stood when I heard footsteps crossing my parents’ room. The transporters were coming. The defect would be with them.

“I don’t want them to take her,” my mother cried desperately. There was suddenly a lot of scuffling.

“Call for the guards,” a transporter shouted.

“NO!” my father shouted back. “I’ll take care of her. Just leave us be.”

“It isn’t fair,” my mother moaned.

My father shushed her soothingly and began whispering so I couldn’t understand anything he was saying.

Our translucent roof let in the first feeble traces of morning’s light. It was enough to reveal the transporters filing out of the room in a straight line, like ghoulish apparitions come to harvest my sister’s spirit. The first three only held a bag at their side. The fourth held a bundle of blankets to his chest, concealing my sister from me.

I wanted so badly to ask them if I could see her. But the men transporting her were so grave and so haunting. Their faces were solemn and filled with shadows cast by the hoods now hiding them. Even their skins’ natural light did nothing to detract from this disturbing effect.

Three more men walked past me after the carrier of the baby. None of them acknowledged me in any way. The first exited our house, then the second and so on.

My mind was racing, though my body had suddenly become immobile.

I had to see my sister. Nothing could make me want to face the transporters, though. They were, perhaps, my greatest fear.

Secretly, I had always wanted to visit the Surface, if only to see what the world below was like. At fourteen years old, I was young but not afraid. There had simply never been a reason good enough to risk trying to sneak down the only passageway connecting the two worlds.

Until now.

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Henna’s grandfather was a transporter. As her best friend I was her keeper of secrets. Therefore I knew she had one of her grandfather’s old cloaks hidden beneath her bed due to her own curiosity about the Surface. It was one of the reasons we’ve always gotten along so well, the forbidden wish we shared.

She kept the cloak in case she should ever find the courage to sneak down through the passageway. It was only a dream, though. I knew she would never do it.

But I would.

My non-defective sisters were crying where I’d left them when I walked outside our house. No doubt the loss of Blush had hit them hard. That would have been the baby’s name.

“D-did you see her?” Eve, the youngest of the three of us, asked.

I shook my head, then walked quickly toward the short bridge connecting our house to a neighbor’s. Every house and building was constructed alongside a valor tree, with a decent-sized landing running all the way around the structure.

“You just got home. Where are you going?” Auree called to me.

“For a walk,” I called back before quickening my pace to a jog, then to a run.

The night still offered enough cover that I felt well-hidden racing around houses, over bridges, and under irrigation pipes.

We lived in the section of our city most heavily populated by star-seers, those who can see forthcoming events by reading the stars. Since we’re most active at night, this was the most challenging area. The other four talents would still be resting, or just barely waking up, not likely thinking of coming outside just yet.

Builder housing lay just past our area, where those primarily responsible for constructing, repairing, and adding on to our city resided. It was the only part of my city separating me from the weavers, who provided us with fabric and clothing. This was where I would find Henna. Although she was also a seer, both her parents were brilliant weavers.

There were also irrigators to supply our people with fresh water and healers to care for our ill and prepare medicines. I was grateful there was no need to tear through their housing, too.

I was especially careful to avoid the Avarice castle, since the most watchful eyes surrounded it both day and night.

I couldn’t stop thinking of Blush as I ran. My other two sisters looked so much alike. Blush was supposed to be *my* little replica. That would never happen now.

The branches became thicker. A pink and blue sunrise began to peek over them. I knew I was close.

Then, there it was, branches hanging all around it. The overgrowth near Henna’s house was always a mess. Her parents preferred it that way.

Henna’s window was staring right at me when I reached the open walkway around her home. I found myself out of breath as I pushed the heavy cloth covering aside and climbed into her room. She was already in bed fast asleep, her skin’s light dimmed slightly by slumber. She was a star-reader, as well, so she’d been at school all night. Star-readers generally slept through the early hours of the day.

There was no reason to disturb her. She wouldn’t notice if the cloak disappeared for a day or two. And I knew she wouldn’t be angry when I told her what I’d done.

I crossed the open space slowly, careful not to make a sound. There was only a short bench on the side of her room opposite her bed. Quite a few simple dresses had been laid over it. The scrolls she’d taken notes on at school rested upon them. Two pairs of soft slippers were placed neatly underneath the bench. Henna managed to keep her room tidy by hiding nearly everything she owned under her bed.

The room was all hers. She was an only child—sort of. Her parents had given birth to a son when she was two. He was a defect, which was part of the reason she wanted to visit the Surface so badly. Her parents were heartbroken enough they’d made certain not to have any more children.

Lying on the floor, I pushed dusty papers, fabrics, and hair adornments aside so I could get to the box behind it all. I gasped and bit my lip when a needle stabbed my hand through a little sack of what must have been her sewing things. I rubbed my hands together before going back to pushing things around a bit more carefully.

Finally I saw the old wooden box. I slid it across the floor as quickly as I could manage while still keeping silent. It was short, but plenty wide enough to hold everything I would need.

Inside it I found the thick, padded undershirt that would give me more of a manly look. Then I took out the boots Henna had modified to make her appear taller. It was a struggle getting them on since her feet were a good bit smaller than mine. My toes were curled under and my feet pinched tight, but I managed it. Lastly, I removed the most important piece, the transporter’s cloak. I slid the box back under Henna’s bed and pushed her things in front of it again. Then I put the cloak on as I went back to climb out her window.

The early morning sun shone brightly now.

The sound of water spraying outside startled me. Jordan was standing just outside his house. He was Henna’s neighbor and a classmate of ours. He was tall and handsome, a serious crush of mine for as long as I could remember. Water poured from the pipe beside him into the cup he was holding.

It was a good thing my identity was already hidden within the cloak. But had he seen me exit Henna’s window?

I didn’t have time to worry about it. I set my pace at a fast walk to avoid looking suspicious and hurried on my way.

Watching him made me thirsty. My people relied heavily on always having water nearby, since our bodies used it along with sunlight to keep us alive, much the way plants do.

Jordan shivered at the grim sight of my attire before I looked away, walking as quickly as I could. It was important that I reached the passageway before the other transporters did or the men who stood guard there would have no reason to let me go down.

The boots were hurting my feet. It felt like I might fall at any moment. Still, I ran when I was certain Jordan couldn’t see me anymore.

It would have been peculiar had he seen a transporter dashing all over the place.

My ankles were throbbing and my chest was on fire by the time I reached the bridge leading to the passageway. It was the longest one ever built and led straight to the peak of a mountain. Stairs had been cut into the mountain’s side. They worked their way back and forth all the way to the ground. At least twenty men stood at the enormous ledge where the bridge met the mountain, spears in hand.

There was no sign of the transporters. Either I had missed them or they hadn’t arrived yet. The latter seemed more likely, considering how much closer Henna’s house was to the passageway than mine and how fast I’d gone.

I turned around so I could work my way through bridges and around trees back into the city, hoping I could come up behind the transporters and join their line. There were little more than bridges and small landings so close to the passageway. No one wanted to be near it.

My heart pounded, nearly audibly. I was as frightened as I was determined. Of being caught. Of facing an adult defect. Of what might happen to me on the Surface.

What hope I had of ever seeing my sister began to die when the first houses came into view. And then a man in brown appeared from the back side of one, followed closely by another. I felt a rush of joy at seeing the tiny bundle of blankets carried by the fourth.

My muscles seized for a moment. Everything suddenly became very real.

Ten men in cloaks had rounded the house by the time the last one emerged. Number eight’s hood turned to face me. He lifted an arm to motion for me to join them. It seemed a natural thing for transporters to fall into line as they moved through the city, making what I did next much easier.

Swallowing all my fear with the help of every Surface daydream I’d ever had, I pulled my hood lower over my face and made my way to become number eleven in their line. I made certain to keep the enormous sleeves hanging down over my hands. They would have been a dead giveaway to my deception.

I turned right onto the bridge that would take me to the transporters. Number three was just passing by at the very end. My head hung lower until I could only see my feet.

The breeze blew toward them, pressing gently against my back.

*It’s not too late. You can still turn back*, fear seemed to call from where I’d buried it deep down.

I ignored it. No matter what happened, I was doing this.