

THE KNIGHT IN SILVER

by

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DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my parents, Robin Mickle and Marijean Crow, who instilled a love of literature and learning in me.

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ABSTRACT

THE KNIGHT IN SILVER

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This thesis is a novel which tells the story of Arthur Bellamy a freshman who is constantly bullied until he stumbles into a hidden world where knights still reign. Arthur interacts with new friends, grand figures, mythical creatures, and magical armor, all of which help to shape the Arthur's growth and the story's plot. The novel focuses on Arthur's growth from a nervous, uninspired youth into a young man who believes in himself and fits into the new chivalric realm that he found.

CHAPTER ONE: THE GIRL WITH BLONDE HAIR

The thing Arthur Bellamy hated most about field trips was the bus ride. He was always the last one to board and today had been no exception. His backpack had been turned inside out and he'd had to take out all of his papers then stand on them while he'd flipped the pockets back to normal. By the time he'd stuffed everything back in the bag Ms. Allen was tapping her foot impatiently in the doorway. He'd joined the end of the line heading to the bus and by the time he'd climbed the stairs there was only one open seat.

Of course it's next to Kai, Arthur thought. We're the only two without any friends in this class.

Kai looked up at Arthur when he sat down. He looked about to say something but shrugged, sliding his headphones back in place. Arthur could almost hear the lyrics of his music leaking out from the earpieces. Kai turned toward the window, his sandy hair blocking his expression from Arthur.

Arthur slid to the edge of the bench, as far from Kai as he could.

This is going to be a long day, he thought, as he was almost bounced off his seat by the bus jerking over a speed bump. I wish I could just walk around the museum by myself.

"Hey, Arthur," murmured a voice behind him.

Arthur ignored it.

“Hey, Arthur, how’d you like your backpack?”

It’s James. If I ignore him maybe he’ll leave me alone this time . . . even though it hasn’t worked yet.

“Hey, Arthur, you ignoring me?” James growled.

Something smacked into the back of Arthur’s head. Snickers filled the bus.

“Hey, hey Arthur.”

Something smacked him again. It crinkled against his neck. The snickers grew when the third paper wad hit the back of his head.

“Keep it down,” Ms. Allen shouted, without looking back from her conversation with the chaperones.

The laughter was muffled but didn’t stop as another paper wad hit Arthur.

Don’t react. He’ll get tired of it, Arthur heard the guidance counselor’s advice running through his head. He sighed. *There’s got to be a better way.*

A paper wad hit him again.

“It’s like pitching,” James explained. “Here, Turner, if you hit him it’s a strike.”

Arthur winced as the next paper wad caught him in the ear.

“Aren’t you going to do anything?” Kai asked. He’d lifted one of his headphones and was watching Arthur.

Arthur shook his head.

“They’re not going to stop,” Kai said. “Especially if you never react.”

“They will,” Arthur said softly. “When they get bored.”

Kai shook his head and slid his earpiece back in place as he looked away.

Or once they run out of paper.

He flinched as another wad bounced off.

#

When they got off the bus, Ms. Allen divided them into groups of six. Arthur had crossed his fingers and toes but he'd ended up in a group with James and Turner, a quieter classmate named Enrique and two girls he'd never spoken to. When James and Turner heard their group assignment they nodded politely to Ms. Allen, before smirking at Arthur.

“Now you all have your scavenger hunts?” Ms. Allen waited until each student lifted their sheet into the air. “Good. You have two hours to finish them. And remember, I expect all of you to behave like adults.”

Arthur looked up from his shoes and found James watching him. He winked at Arthur before ducking his head close to the two girls, whispering to them through a wide grin.

“The Smithsonian is a very important institution and we're lucky Turner's father could get us this arrangement,” Ms. Allen continued, tugging on her purse strap.

Lucky his dad is a senator and can bully the historians into shutting everything down for a single high school class, Arthur thought.

“Stay with your groups at all times. There will be chaperones on each floor if you need anything, so don't bother the employees either. And remember to act like you're adults,” Ms. Allen said.

With James and Turner? Arthur rubbed the back of his head self-consciously. *It can't get any worse than that.*

“We'll meet in front of the elephant in two hours,” Ms. Allen explained, pulling her purse strap tight against her shoulder again.

“Yes, Ms. Allen,” the freshmen chorused.

“Okay, you can go in,” she said.

James put an arm around Arthur's shoulders.

“And remember,” Ms. Allen called after them.

“Act like adults,” James finished in unison with her.

Adults don't bully each other, do they? Arthur wondered as he shrank away from James's arm.

“Come on, Arthur,” James said loudly. “We're going on an adventure.”

I'm pretty sure he doesn't understand what that word means.

“This way,” James said to the group. He pulled Arthur through the front doors.

“Arthur wants to see the dinosaurs.”

I don't even like dinosaurs any more. Arthur looked back at his group, but none would meet his eyes.

“But I want to see the diamonds,” muttered one of the girls, as they passed an employee standing at the front desk.

“Shut up and come on,” James snapped. “We're going to see the dinosaurs.”

James stopped the group when they entered the dinosaur exhibit hall. The skeletons rose around them, each massive enough to crush any of the freshmen if they'd been alive.

"We're going to play a game," James declared.

"We are?" Enrique asked.

"We are," James said, finally loosening his hold on Arthur's shoulders. "It's called Predators and Prey."

I am definitely not going to like this.

"How do you play?" One of the girls asked. Her eyes were interested and studied the rest of the group intently.

Intense, like a hawk? Or maybe an owl?

"Well one person plays the prey, like that one," James said, pointing to a skeleton. It had no horns or spikes or sharp teeth. It looked exactly like James called it, Prey.

"And the rest of us are the predators," James continued. He pointed to the Tyrannosaurus Rex skeleton that loomed behind him, with its massive jaws stretched open above him.

I wonder who'll be the prey, Arthur thought sarcastically. There's only ever one person who ends up like this. It's always me. And they're not going to stop. Especially if you never react. Kai's words echoed through his head.

"Arthur, you know a lot about dinosaurs, right?" James asked.

"Not really," Arthur said, truthfully.

“Oh, sure you do,” James said. “Better than the rest of us I’m sure. I bet you’d play the Prey great.”

Arthur stared at James.

Don’t react. He’ll get tired of it. Arthur tried to focus on the counselor’s words.

“Do I have to?” Arthur asked quietly.

James’s eyebrows knit together.

“Yes,” he said. “You do.”

Arthur nodded.

Of course I do.

James’s eyebrows smoothed and a smile split his face.

“Okay, Arthur you head that way,” James said, pointing deeper into the exhibit.

“And we’ll give you a minute before we start hunting for you.

It’s like hide and seek, Arthur thought. Maybe I can find a place where they won’t find me.

Arthur walked into the hall between the tyrannosaurus and the long necked skeleton. The girls were giggling behind him.

They’re going to hunt me down. Just like when they chase me down the halls and shove me into lockers.

He rubbed his elbow and remembered the bruise he’d gotten the last time James had slammed him into a metal locker door. He turned at the end of the exhibit hall and saw that the dinosaurs had been replaced by skeletons of mammoths and pre-historic sloths.

Will the girls help? Of course they will, if they ever look up from their phones.

Arthur hurried further into the mammal exhibit, until he reached an alcove where dark curtains separated it from the rest of the exhibit hall. Sound leaked beneath the curtains in a fuzzy jumble of half words from a movie playing inside.

I could hide there. But there's no way out if they find me.

He glanced past the exhibits and there were no exits except at the very ends of the hall. The skeletons' wide jaws grinned and smirked back at him with hundreds of polished white teeth. He ducked inside the alcove.

Hiding it is.

Arthur closed the curtain behind him, shutting himself in the dark. He held his breath and waited. The movie continued its looping dialogue about an explorer finding a mammoth skeleton. The words were a faded buzz in Arthur's ears as he listened for James or Turner coming down the exhibit hall. He started counting and kept holding his breath.

Twenty-five, twenty-six, twenty-seven . . . Where are they? They have to be looking by now. It's been more than a minute . . . forty-two, forty-three . . . He breathed in again . . . sixty-four, sixty-five, sixty-six.

The movie restarted.

Where are they? James never takes this long to hunt me down.

He peeked around the curtain. The hall was just as empty as when he'd entered the alcove. He pulled the curtain closed again.

Why aren't they looking for me here? This isn't that great a hiding spot. He groaned. *They aren't looking for me. 'Stay with your groups at all times', that's what Ms. Allen said. Now who's the only one not with their group? Me. Who's the only one who'll get in trouble? Me.*

Arthur pulled the curtain open and stepped back into the exhibit hall. He looked both ways but there were still no signs of his group or any group.

I bet James is laughing so hard right now. And no one will believe he set me up, not even my parents. He stepped from the alcove and looked around the hall, the smiling toothed skeletons were sneering down on him. *But where are they now? With the diamonds? Those were upstairs last time I was here. There aren't any stairs by the dinosaurs, so I'll keep going this way. There have to be some up ahead.*

Walking deeper into the exhibit hall of prehistoric mammals Arthur shivered as the sightless eyes of the skeletons followed him. He walked faster until he passed under an arch into a new, vibrantly colored exhibit hall.

"Voices of Africa," he read, as he continued into the new area. "There have to be stairs near here."

He walked past brilliantly blue and red walls lined with hundreds of glass encased artifacts. The hall extended on through rows of displayed pictures, pottery, and ceremonial jewelry.

I bet James is already telling Ms. Allen, Arthur thought as he exited the exhibit. He glanced right.

"Stairs," he sighed in relief.

He looked up the flight of stairs in time to see a girl sprinting down them, right toward him. Her blonde hair flared behind her like a banner. She saw him and cursed.

“Move,” she shouted. She swerved to her left without slowing.

“Oh,” Arthur exclaimed. He jumped to his right, directly into her path, again.

“Idiot,” was all she had time to say. She lowered her shoulder just before colliding with him.

Arthur’s head snapped back as she struck him squarely in the chest. His arms flung forward as he was thrown back. His feet tangled with the girl’s and they were tumbling over in a flurry of arms and upended legs. When his back struck the ground all of the air rushed from his lungs and his head bounced off the stone floor. White lights flared in front of his eyes and the black edges of his vision slowly converged until Arthur felt he was in a narrowing tunnel.

CHAPTER TWO: THE MEN IN WHITE

“Let go of me.”

Arthur opened his eyes and stared at the ceiling high above him. He squeezed his eyes shut before quickly reopening them, flecks of pale light swimming in front of his eyes.

“What happened?” he said groggily.

“Will you let go of me already?”

Arthur looked down at the blonde head of the girl pressed tightly to his chest, her pale blue eyes glaring up at him. She writhed but the way his arms had wrapped around her kept her arms pinned at her sides and useless.

She ran into me and I fell. The thoughts came slowly. I hit my head.

“Hey, idiot, don’t space out on me again. Hurry up and let me go.”

His arms were laced across her back and she felt soft pressed against him. He opened his arms quickly and blushed.

I am an idiot, he thought, watching her scramble to her feet.

“Are you okay?” Arthur asked.

She towered over him, still sprawled across the marble floor. She glanced down at him contemptuously. When she lifted her chin the light caught in her hair and it glowed.

“No thanks to you, commoner.” She sniffed, turning away.

Heavy footsteps sounded on the stairs.

“Damn,” she muttered.

Arthur had almost regained his feet when two men in white suits turned the corner of the stairs, descending the last flight. They wore silvered sunglasses and Arthur could see himself in the mirrored lenses. They were average height with average features, average haircut, and they both held a sword firmly in front of them, pointed toward the girl.

Swords! They have swords, Arthur gaped. You can't just carry a sword around like that can you?

“There she is,” one of the men exclaimed. His deeply tanned face creased into a predatory smile that firmed when his white teeth snapped shut. He swept his thin blade through the air, whistling.

His companion only grunted and pointed his sword at the girl's chest.

How can he use a sword like that? Arthur wondered, staring at the massive sword the man held effortlessly.

Arthur stumbled away from the stairs.

“Watch out they have swords,” he called to the girl.

“I know, just stay out of my way,” she growled. She stretched her hand to the side and her wrist twisted sharply. When she brought her hand up in front of her she held a sword with a long, straight blade. It started broad, like the quiet man's and about as thick as Arthur's hand, but it tapered to a needle like point.

“You have a sword? Where? How'd you get that?”

It wasn't there before. Her hand was empty and then the sword was just there.

“Did you use magic?” Arthur blurted. “You couldn't, there's no such thing. But where'd it come from?”

“Will you shut up?” the girl snapped. “This is all your fault anyway.”

“How's it my fault?” Arthur asked.

“Just shut up.”

“This is quite amusing,” the tan man laughed. “A squire who thinks she can fight two knights and a boy who can see our swords. And I thought this would just be a snatch and go.”

His companion grunted and stepped from the last stair.

“Just give it back, girly,” the tan man said. His thin sword flicked and darted in front of him. “Then we won't have to hurt you, too badly.”

Like a snake's tongue, Arthur thought, watching the man's sword move.

“I am a Chevalier,” the girl announced haughtily. “Two traitors don't scare me.”

“Chevalier, eh?” The tan man laughed. He tapped a finger to his left breast where a red cross was stitched into his white suit jacket. “Do you think that name scares us? You're father's no master in our order.”

“You're no order. You're Vili,” the girl said.

“You know nothing about it. We . . .” the man caught himself beginning to shout. A grin slid back onto his face. “Very clever, trying to keep me talking but you won't trick me into a soliloquy. Raul take her.”

What's going on? Arthur wondered, stumbling a few halting steps backward.

The quiet man moved toward the girl, his sword point still aimed toward her heart. His next two steps slid across the marble floor as if it was ice and his sword thrust forward to impale her.

No. Arthur wanted to shout but his jaw wouldn't open. The world seemed to slow as the man's sword sought the girl's chest.

Her hands became a blur and her sword spun, connecting edge to edge with her attacker's thrust. A harsh clang filled the air.

She blocked it. I thought he'd kill her.

The girl's feet twisted as if she were dancing and the needle edge of her blade swung toward the quiet man's head.

She's going to kill him, Arthur realized. *No way, that doesn't happen in real life.*

The air filled with the clash of metal again. The tan man laughed delightedly.

"Not an ounce of hesitation," the tan man noted. His sword vibrated from blocking the girl's swing.

"She was really trying to kill you, Raul," the tan man said.

"So was I," Raul said in a low rumble.

The girl spun away from the two men and started to run the opposite way down the hall.

This can't be happening, Arthur thought. He stood stark still watching as the tan man gracefully slid in front of the girl.

The thin blade barely deflected the girl's slash at his white clothed leg.

"Whoa, not bad girly," the tan man said.

His sword flicked forward, striking out for pale blue eyes. She caught the blade across her crossguard but he was already moving to close the distance between them. She took a grudging step back and blocked his next thrust.

Arthur watched the blades swirl together and bounced apart. He watched feet pivot and tap, as if to an unseen beat.

“Boy.”

The quiet man’s deep voice pulled Arthur from his reverie. The man was right in front of him and his sword was pointed at Arthur’s chest.

“Boy, can you see my sword?” the man asked.

Arthur stared at the huge length of steel until his eyes almost crossed.

“Yes,” he whispered.

The man nodded.

“Raul, a little help,” called the tan man, his voice breathless.

Raul ignored him.

“Her name is *Aguja*,” Raul said softly. He looked affectionately at the sword, its point unwaveringly aimed at Arthur’s chest.

He’s going to kill me. He’s telling me the name before he kills me, just like in the stories.

“Raul!” A note of desperation entered the tan man’s voice. “She’s going to get away.”

“She is merciful,” Raul said.

He doesn’t want witnesses. Oh, God.

Raul's hand flicked forward, the steel lunging toward Arthur's face.

Arthur heard himself scream as he scrunched his eyes tightly shut. He felt pain crease his cheek. *I'm not dead? Why didn't he kill me?* He cracked an eye open.

Raul held his sword pointed toward Arthur again. Then he slowly lifted the sword hilt to his left breast lining the cross of the hilt and crossguard up with the red cross on his white suit jacket. Then he walked away, toward where the girl had backed the tan man against a wall down the hall.

When did they get so far away?

Arthur exhaled in a rush.

"This can't be real," he murmured.

The girl noticed Raul and cursed. She beat aside a series of desperate thrusts from the tan man before clipping him in the side of the head with the flat of her sword. He staggered and she used the opening to sprint off. She didn't glance back.

The tan man growled something at Raul, who didn't react. The tan man's white coat was tattered across the chest and shoulders, blotches of red having bloomed across the slash marks decorating him. He turned and found Arthur staring, his jaw tightened.

Now he's going to be the one to kill me. Arthur backed toward the exhibit hall he'd come through.

The tan man stalked toward Arthur, with Raul following at his shoulder. The thin blade flicked back and forth as he approached. When he was a blade's length away he stopped and glared at Arthur.

Arthur kept edging away until his back struck a wall. He tensed.

The tan man studied Arthur then spat at Arthur's feet. He turned and reclinced the stairs. Raul followed silently.

Arthur's knees gave out and he slumped to the floor.

No way did that just happen. He tilted his head back, resting against the wall. *No one carries swords. Not just carries, pulls the sword out of thin air. I must be seeing things.*

He looked around the corridor and up the stairwell, everything was perfectly empty.

Just seeing things. Footsteps echoed across the marble floor and Arthur flinched. The steps came closer.

He looked up and to find Ms. Allen standing over him. Her hands were wrapped around her purse strap like she wanted to strangle it. She inhaled deeply and her face flushed, but no words came out. Her eyes widened.

"Arthur, you're bleeding," She exclaimed.

"What?" he said.

She pointed to his face. Her hands reaching into the purse, rummaging.

He lifted his hand to his cheek and it felt damp. When he looked down it was covered in blood. His fingers looked like they'd been painted.

"What happened?" Ms. Allen asked. "I heard you scream."

"I don't know," Arthur said.

“You don’t know what happened? Do you know why you’re alone then?” Her voice was tight with irritation. She pressed tissues against his cheek, her hands as brusque as her voice.

It’s James’s fault. He tricked me and left me to get lost. Arthur wanted to shout it as loud as he could. *But she’ll never believe that.*

“I got lost,” he mumbled.

“I told you to stay in your groups, we’ll see what Principal Hanson has to say about this.”

Arthur groaned.

“Now follow me,” Ms. Allen snapped. “We’ll wait out front until everyone else is finished up.”

Arthur struggled to his feet under Ms. Allen’s steady glare. When she was satisfied he could stand, she turned on her heel and walked away. Her purse swung wildly as she walked, Arthur followed.

It was real, he thought. He patted the tissue against his cheek, wincing. *All of it was real.*

He followed Ms. Allen silently, his head spinning through all the questions he couldn’t answer.

CHAPTER THREE: LOST AND FOUND

Arthur touched the edges of the bandage the museum employee had taped to his cheek and thought about the quiet man who'd cut his face with a sword.

Who was he? What was he doing there, with a sword? And what am I going to tell my parents? They're going to kill me.

Something smacked against the back of his head. He turned to look over his shoulder and found James grinning at him.

Of course, Arthur sighed. He slouched down in his seat..

The next paper wad glanced off the top of his head.

Kai looked to Arthur, his headphones still blaring, and then back at James.

“Are you going to do anything this time?” Kai asked.

“Why do you care?” Arthur muttered. He pulled at the corner of his bandage.

Kai's grin spread lazily across his face. His hand flicked out behind Arthur's head. He opened his hand to reveal a paper wad.

“Hey, Kai, what are you doing?” James called out.

Kai's hand darted over Arthur's head again, catching a second paper wad.

“Maybe I just like annoying him,” Kai said conspiratorially. He caught a third.

“You suck, Kai,” James growled but no more paper wads flew.

Kai dumped the paper wads in Arthur's lap.

“Thanks,” Arthur murmured.

“Don’t mention it,” Kai said, turning to look back out the window.

Why did he help me? He’s just going to get James mad at him.

Arthur shoved his hands in his pockets and felt an odd lump in his right one. His fingers edged around it, feeling a smooth metal circle. When he went to touch the center of the circle his thumbs passed through.

What is it?

He drew it carefully from his pocket, keeping it close to his lap so no one else could see.

A bracelet? How’d that get in my pocket? It was cold to his touch. Is it silver?

He shifted it in his lap to catch a little sunlight, careful not to attract Kai’s attention. When the sunlight hit the bracelet it glinted and shone.

Where’d it come from? He remembered the girl barreling into him and how they’d fallen feet over head. Did she put it in my pocket?

Arthur turned the bracelet around in his hand. It was only marred by a series of well-worn scratches. He cautiously lifted the bracelet to eye level once he was certain no one was paying attention. The lines that had seemed nothing more than a cluster of scratches became a visible image when he squinted.

A chair?.

He turned the bracelet over and flicked it with the side of his finger nail. There was no hard resistance when his finger struck. Instead it flexed under the blow, bending inward before springing back into its circular shape.

Metal doesn't bend like that.

He slid his thumbs inside the bracelet and gripped it firmly. When he twisted his hands in opposite directions the bracelet rolled with them, flexing and folding as he continued twisting. He stopped and then released his grip. The bracelet sprang back to its normal shape.

What is this? He flicked the bracelet again gently. It rang faintly, like a distant bell. It was metal but it moved like rubber

“What’s that?” Kai asked.

Arthur jammed the bracelet back in his pocket. When he looked up Kai was staring intently at his pocket.

“What was that? Where’d you get it?” Kai asked again.

“Nothing,” Arthur muttered.

“Let me see it,” Kai said. He reached toward Arthur’s pocket.

Arthur slapped his hand away.

Did I just do that? Arthur’s cheeks flushed.

Kai stared at him in shock, his jaw working to form words. Then he laughed.

“You’ll let the bullies bully you without a fight but when I want to look at something you slap me? You’re a strange kid, Arthur.”

Arthur bristled.

“I wonder how they’d treat you if they saw that fire in you,” Kai said, still laughing.

“Sorry,” Arthur mumbled.

“Don’t apologize,” Kai said. “No need, I shouldn’t have reached.”

“Why are you so interested anyway?” Arthur asked.

“I like to look at artifacts,” Kai said shrugging. He’d slid his headphones off, hanging them around his neck. He eyed Arthur’s pocket intently.

“It’s not an artifact,” Arthur said. He slid his hand into his pocket, protectively over the bracelet.

She could’ve stolen it. I could be an accomplice. His breath quickened.

“You’re sure?” Kai asked.

Yes, Arthur thought. No.

“I could have sworn . . .” Kai began.

“It’s not,” Arthur said. “It was a gift.”

“A gift?” Kai asked dubiously.

Of course he’s suspicious. It’s a horrible lie.

“From who?” Kai asked.

“None of your business,” Arthur said quickly.

Kai raised an eyebrow. He chuckled again.

“They’d really be surprised if they saw that fire in you.”

Arthur shifted further away on the bench.

“You’re really not going to show me?” Kai asked.

“No,” Arthur said.

Kai sighed.

Arthur’s fingers tightened around the bracelet.

“Fine, fine. But if you do ever want to show it I’d be happy to look at it,” Kai said.

That’s a weird thing to say.

Arthur grunted an acknowledgement and looked away from Kai.

Kai slid his headphones back on and gave one last glance at Arthur’s pocket before looking back out the bus window.

I wonder if she got away, Arthur thought as he ran a finger around the circle of the bracelet. He thought about the two men in white who’d been chasing her. And he thought about their wickedly sharp swords.

I hope she got away, he thought, though he was unsure why the feeling came over him. *I wonder what her name was.*

CHAPTER FOUR: SILVER ON HIS WRIST

Arthur closed his bedroom door and dropped face first onto his unmade bed. With his face smothered in the mismatched pile of blankets he shouted as loud as he could. It sounded muffled and weak. He took a deep breath and yelled louder.

The principal had been gone for the day by the time they'd gotten back from the fieldtrip but Ms. Allen had sent Arthur to the front office to make an appointment the next day anyway. The lady at the front desk had shaken her head disapprovingly when he'd told her the reason for his visit was disciplinary. She'd looked so disappointed, without even knowing him, that Arthur had known he wouldn't be able to face his parents' disapproval. And he'd been right, he hadn't been able to tell them when he first saw them or when they'd asked him about the fieldtrip had over dinner.

I'll tell them tomorrow. I'm not hiding it, I just can't tell them right now. That's called hiding it, he told himself. No it's not.

His mom had been concerned when she saw the big bandaid on his face; she'd wanted to take care of it immediately. But when Arthur told her he'd just tripped, his dad had said a scratch wouldn't hurt him and had insisted everyone calm down and finish their dinners. His mom wasn't so easily dissuaded and right after dinner she'd changed the bandaid. She'd glared at him suspiciously when she saw the long, straight cut across his cheek but hadn't pressed any further.

Arthur rolled onto his back, staring at the ceiling. Occasionally a passing car's headlights flared across his walls casting light across the framed pictures of family trips to Ireland, Italy, and Yellowstone.

He reached into his pocket and drew out the bracelet. He held it up as headlights flashed through his room again. The bracelet trapped the light, glinting for a moment after the car had gone.

"What are you?" Arthur asked, twisting the bracelet from its circular form, then letting it spring back into shape.

Is it mercury? He thought about the liquid metal he'd seen in chemistry class. He remembered that mercury was poisonous and dropped the bracelet as if it'd bitten his hand.

Arthur stared at the bracelet warily. The silver metal sat unmoving, unthreatening on his pile of blankets.

It can't be mercury, he told himself. Mercury's a liquid and this is definitely a solid. It just bends. So what is it then? He picked up the bracelet. It was cool in his hands. *I wonder if it'd fit.*

The bracelet stretched around his left palm and paused on the crest of his thumb. Tension built as if a force was pulling the bracelet away from his wrist, trying to keep Arthur from putting it on.

"Come on." Arthur grunted and yanked the bracelet on.

Weird. He shook his wrist out to loosen its tightness.

Arthur stared at the bracelet, sitting loosely around the thin part of his wrist. The silver metal made his skin appear paler than usual. He touched it and spun it in loose circles. When he stopped spinning it, Arthur noticed the chair he thought had been scratched into the silver. But what had before been rough scratches were now crisp and intentional engravings. He poked the chair with his finger and yelped.

The engraving was painfully hot to touch.

Only the engraving that's hot. The inside still feels cool. That's too strange, it looks too weird on. I gotta take it off.

He gripped the bracelet, ignoring the point of heat from the engraving and tried to slide it off. It wouldn't budge.

"Stupid bracelet," he muttered.

He tried to slide it off again and the bracelet tightened against his wrist to stay in place. He yanked on it hard and the tension flexed his right arm. He kept pulling and the bracelet kept tightening on his wrist. The metal twisted beneath his fingers and he lost his grip.

He tugged again to no avail. The bracelet relaxed on his wrist. Arthur growled. *I need leverage. Something to pry it with.*

He crossed the room and sorted through the piles on his desk. He shoved pictures and papers and gum wrappers to the side until he found what he was looking for. The wooden mini-bat came free from the pile and Arthur swung it testingly.

"Okay bracelet, meet your match," Arthur said, slipping the handle of the mini-bat under the bracelet.

He paused.

Wait, what am I doing? There's no way that the bracelet's actually moving. It's just too tight to get off. But it did tighten. And that's not possible.

He started pulling with the bat and the bracelet slid slightly. He grinned and pulled again. The bracelet snapped tighter and refused to budge, trapping the bat hard against Arthur's wrist. He pulled hard but the bracelet continued to tighten around the bat. Arthur winced when he heard a snap. The handle of the bat fell away and Arthur was left holding the broken wooden barrel. The bracelet lay, relaxed again, against his wrist.

It moved that time. That's not possible. He looked at the broken barrel in his hand. But it did, the bat broke. Magic? There's no such thing as magic.

He remembered the blonde girl from the museum, how she'd made a sword appear in her hand from thin air. He remembered the bracelet was hers too. *Maybe it is magic*, Arthur conceded. *I need to get this thing off me.*

He looked around the room for something that could help. His eyes reflected wild from the mirror over his desk as he glanced past it. He spun in a slow circle until he caught sight of the closet door handle.

"It can't break a whole door," Arthur muttered.

When he brought his hand toward the door handle the bracelet began to tighten again. He kept raising his arm toward the door and the bracelet kept tightening, his fingers started to tingle. When he was about to loop the bracelet over the door handle the bracelet tightened sharply. Arthur yelled in pain and yanked his arm away from the door.

Okay, it definitely doesn't want to go near the door. It's cutting off my circulation. How can it know how I'm going to try to take it off before I start trying? Magic? There's no such thing as magic, he told himself, less firmly. But what could it be then?

Arthur walked slowly back to his bed and sat. He kicked his feet in frustration.

“Now what?” he asked the empty room.

There was no answer.

Arthur flopped back on his bed and closed his eyes. He started laughing at himself.

How am I going to hide the fact that I'm wearing a silver bracelet at school? James is going to kill me for it.

Arthur reached down and half-heartedly tugged at the bracelet. It tightened warningly. He left it alone.

#

His dad's suitcase was in its usual place by the front door when Arthur came down for breakfast. It always heralded one of his dad's long business trips.

“Where are you going this time?” Arthur asked, sitting at the kitchen table.

His dad looked up from his morning coffee and his mom folded down her paper, listening.

“To Damascus for a week,” his dad said.

“You're leaving again?”

Arthur turned to see Morgan bounce into the room, her mass of curly brown hair flared behind her like a flag. Her always present smile dimmed when dad's suitcase concerned her fear.

"Do they even have banks in Damascus?" she grumbled.

"They have banks everywhere, honey," Dad said as he stood to make their breakfasts.

"Don't I know it," Mom said, rolling her eyes. Dad shot her an apologetic look that she ignored.

"What do you guys want for breakfast?" Dad asked.

"Egg whites," Morgan said. "And orange juice."

"Just toast today," Arthur said.

"Are you going to bring me anything, daddy?" Morgan asked sweetly.

"Sure, honey, what do you want?" Dad asked.

He always gives in to that voice.

"What do they have in Damascus?" Morgan asked.

Dad set toast in front of Arthur and turned back to the eggs.

"Swords, they have swords in Damascus," Arthur said, picking up a toast corner.

"Can I have a sword Dad?"

The pan clattered against the burner and Dad's back stiffened.

"Sorry, sorry," Dad muttered as he scooped the eggs out of the pan.

"Peter, are you okay?" Mom asked.

Mom turned on Arthur. “No, you may not have a sword, Arthur Bellamy. In what world do you think you’d be allowed a sword.”

“But Mom, they make the best swords in the world,” Arthur said. “The metal looks like a river.”

Dad set eggs and orange juice in front of Morgan. She glared at Arthur then started eating.

What’s she mad at me about?

“Where did you hear about Damascus Steel?” Dad asked. He sat and smiled, though his eyes were troubled.

“In a book,” Arthur said.

“You’re not getting him a sword, Peter,” Mom said firmly.

“Of course not,” Dad said. “Not in this world.”

“What are you going to get me, daddy?” Morgan broke in.

Brat. Arthur slumped back in his chair. He rubbed the cut on his cheek. *If I’d had a sword I could have protected myself . . . maybe . . .*

“It’ll be a surprise, like usual, honey,” Dad laughed.

Morgan pouted.

“No pouting at the table,” Mom said. “Hurry up and finish your breakfast so Dad can take you to school.”

“We’re getting a ride?” Morgan said excitedly, shoveling eggs into her mouth.

“If you don’t make your dad late,” Mom said.

Arthur chewed the last of his toast. *Can I just not go to school at all today? That would probably be better for everyone involved.*

CHAPTER FIVE: A LAST MEAL

“So I hear you’re going to see the principal,” Dan Goldstein said, setting his lunch tray next to Arthur. He sat on the rickety bench and grinned with his too big front teeth.

“Yeah,” Arthur grumbled.

“What’d you do?” Fred Harvey asked.

“Nothing.” Arthur shoveled lukewarm vegetables into his mouth.

“Nothing?” Dan mimicked Arthur’s dejected tone. He laughed. “I heard Ms. Allen found him screaming and bleeding on the floor, alone in the Smithsonian.”

“Bleeding?” Fred said, dubiously.

“Look at his cheek,” Dan said, reaching for the bandaid on Arthur’s cheek.

“Leave him alone.”

“Aw, Eric.”

“Leave him alone,” Eric Archer repeated. He pointed his forefinger warningly across the table.

“What happened, Arthur?” Fred asked.

I saw a girl with a magic sword fighting two men who also had swords.

“James tricked me into getting lost,” Arthur said.

“How?” Eric asked. He set his fork down in his uneaten vegetables and cracked his knuckles.

Arthur told them about how James had suggested they play Predators and Prey in the dinosaur exhibit. How he'd realized he'd been tricked when no one had gone looking for his hiding place. He told them everything up to the point when he'd found the stairs. He stopped before telling them about the girl.

"Predators and Prey? Dude, that kid's got it out for you," Dan said. "What did you do to him?"

"I didn't do anything to him," Arthur snapped. "He just started last year, I don't know why. Maybe you should ask him, Dan."

Dan flushed and looked away.

"He didn't mean it was your fault, Arthur," Fred said.

I didn't do anything to him. Arthur inhaled deeply and his anger deflated.

"I know," Arthur said.

"Sorry," Dan said.

"Yeah, no worries," Arthur mumbled.

"How'd you start bleeding?" Eric asked.

"What?" Arthur asked.

"How'd you get cut in a museum?" Eric asked. "Don't they have all the sharp things behind glass?"

"I fell down the stairs," he said. *They'll never believe that.*

"Ow," Dan said, rubbing his own cheek in sympathy.

"That sucks," Fred agreed.

Eric said nothing, just nodded.

“So what are you going to tell the principal?” Fred asked.

He definitely wouldn't believe the truth.

“You should tell him about James,” Dan said.

“Principal wouldn't believe him,” Eric said flatly. He took a bite of his square pizza. “None of the teachers ever believe anything bad about James Dittman.”

“Yeah,” Dan said. “You're right. He gets away with everything.”

“So,” Fred said, glaring at his interrupting friends. “What are you going to tell the principal?”

“I don't know,” Arthur said.

“You can't tell him nothing,” Dan said.

“I know,” Arthur grumbled.

They lapsed into silence, picking at their lunches. Dan and Fred started debating the movie they'd seen over the weekend and Eric stayed quite. Arthur tried to chip in but his effort was half-hearted. The conversation skimmed from the movie through t.v. shows to games and cards. They laughed loudly and the people at the other end of the table glared and muttered about nerds and geeks.

“Dude, what's on your wrist?” Fred asked, pointing with a fork.

Eric raised an eyebrow. “Are you wearing a bracelet?”

Arthur yanked his arm off the table. His face flushed.

“Starting a new trend?” Eric grinned a wry, good-humored smile.

“It's not a bracelet,” Arthur said.

“Then what it is it?” Dan asked, trying to peer into Arthur's lap.

“It’s just a band,” Arthur said.

“It looked like metal,” Fred said.

Arthur looked up at the clock.

Almost out of lunch, almost out of here. But then I have to see the principal. I don’t know which situation is worse.

He lifted his hand back onto the table and his friends leaned closer.

“It is metal,” Fred said.

“It is a bracelet,” Eric said at the same time.

Dan whistled and reached out to touch it. It flexed as his finger touched it.

“Whoa,” Fred said, poking the bracelet as well. “How does it move like that?”

“I told you it’s just a band. Like one of those rubber ones,” Arthur said.

“Where’d you get it?” Eric asked as he also poked the bracelet.

“My dad got it when he was travelling,” Arthur lied.

“I want one,” Dan said.

“Why? It looks awkward,” Fred said. “Sorry, Arthur, it does.”

It is awkward. Especially since I can’t take it off.

“Okay, maybe, I don’t want to actually wear it. But I want to know what it’s made of,” Dan said.

The lunch bell rang.

“Damn,” Eric muttered. “I don’t want to go to that math test.”

They all gathered their bags and lunch trays.

“At least you don’t have to go to the principal’s,” Arthur muttered.

“Oh yeah, true. Sorry, Arthur,” Eric said.

“Good luck, dude,” Dan said.

Fred slapped Arthur across the back.

“Yeah, thanks,” Arthur said.

“At least it’s Friday,” Dan said.

Why is that good? I’m going to be grounded for the whole weekend when my parents find out.

They crossed the crowded cafeteria, weaving between people who either didn’t see them or pretended not to. A couple of the baseball players gave Eric a wave but no one else gave any acknowledgement. They set their lunch trays on the conveyor belt and were the last through the double doors. Fred and Dan waved as they headed toward their classes and Eric trailed dejectedly after them.

“You’ll be alright, Arthur,” Eric called over his shoulder.

“So will you,” Arthur said. *He* hitched his backpack higher and prepared to march to his doom in the principal’s office when an armed rapped across his shoulder. He froze and tensed.

James, come to make sure I don’t talk.

He looked up and found Kai staring down at him. Kai’s normally calm face was creased with tension.

“Kai?”

What’s with him? He never talks to anyone and now twice in two days.

“Why did you put it on?” Kai asked.

“What?”

“Why did you put the . . .” he struggled for words and then pointed at Arthur’s wrist. “Why did you put that on?”

Arthur shrugged awkwardly under Kai’s arm.

“Do you even know what it is?”

“A bracelet?”

“No, you idiot,” Kai snapped.

Arthur flinched away.

“Do you really just put on any . . .” Kai caught himself as he was about to say something. “Do you really just put on anything you find?”

“It’s just a bracelet,” Arthur said defensively.

“It’s not a bracelet,” Kai shouted.

Arthur slipped from under Kai’s arm, the taller boy didn’t try to hold onto him. Arthur backed away from Kai, looking up and down the now empty hallway nervously.

“I’m going to be late for the principal’s.”

Kai grimaced.

“Arthur, I wasn’t shouting at you.”

Arthur kept backing away.

“I’m not a bully. I’m not going to do anything to you.” Kai took a step forward.

“I’m going to be late,” Arthur repeated. He turned and hurried away from Kai, listening reflexively for footsteps pursuing him but none came. He looked over his shoulder and saw Kai standing with a chagrined smile.

“Arthur, I was trying to help.”

Arthur kept hurrying down the hall.

Help with what?

“Arthur, I’m sorry,” Kai called after him

CHAPTER SIX: ALONE IN THE HALL

Arthur walked down the hall, his hands shoved deep in his pockets. He studied the patterned floor tiles.

In-school suspension for three days, he groaned for the hundredth time. He scuffed his shoes in frustration. At least Dad's out of town, I'll have a couple days before he kills me.

He entered a locker lined hallway and an arm dropped across his shoulders.

“Hey, Arthur, how's it going buddy?”

Arthur flinched away from James. The taller boy's grin was malicious as he held onto Arthur's shoulders. He was with Turner and two other members of the freshman football team, Roy and Marcus, standing behind him.

“I heard you were meeting the principal. I hope you didn't try to blame anyone for your mistake,” James said.

Why won't he leave me alone? Just leave me alone.

“How are you here?” Arthur murmured, taking another step back.

James grinned and dangled a wooden board with the word “Hall” written on it.

“We're in the bathroom,” James laughed. “All at the same time, isn't that a great coincidence?”

The others laughed.

“What do you want, James?”

“Watch your tone,” James snapped.

Arthur took another step back. He bumped into a row of blue lockers. He winced at the lock digging into the small of his back.

“What did you tell the principal?” James asked.

“Nothing,” Arthur said. He edged down the lockers but Marcus leaned in front of him, cutting off his escape.

“Nothing?”

“Yeah, nothing,” Arthur said, nodding vigorously.

“I don’t believe you,” James said.

“I’m telling the truth,” Arthur pleaded. He looked at the others. Turner wouldn’t meet his eyes.

“Well, I don’t know,” James said, rubbing his chin in feigned thought. “Do you believe him, Roy?”

“Nope,” the lanky boy said.

“Sorry, Arthur. Roy doesn’t believe you. Maybe you should have tried harder to convince him.” James spun his arms in slow circles to stretch them out.

“I don’t really want to do this, Arthur,” he continued. “But you’ve left me no choice. I hope you understand.”

Kai’s words bounced through Arthur’s head. *They’re not going to get tired of it, especially if you never react.*

James lunged at Arthur.

Arthur tried to get out of the way but James's shoulder caught him in the chest. He crashed painfully into the metal lockers, the shock stole his breath.

Someone has to wonder what the noise was, he gasped.

"What'd you say?" James asked, stepping back.

"Nothing."

James nodded to the others. Roy and Marcus cracked their knuckles.

I need to get away. Arthur looked down the empty halls for somewhere to run but all the class doors were closed.

Roy's shoulder slammed Arthur back into the lockers again. Arthur tried to catch his breath but Marcus didn't give him the time. The bigger boy drove forward through Arthur's middle as if making a football tackle. He lifted Arthur off his feet when he hit.

Arthur looked to where Turner hung back from the others. *Help me please.*

Turner looked away, unable to meet Arthur's eyes.

He's not going to help and they're not going to stop if you never react. But I can't do anything, there's four of them . . . I could run.

"Alright, my turn," James said. Roy and Marcus stepped back.

"So what're you going to say to the principal about this?" James taunted.

"Nothing," Arthur mumbled.

"Exactly," James said. He lunged at Arthur, shoulder first again.

Do something, Arthur screamed at himself. *Anything.*

James was almost on top of him.

His feet. Arthur reflexively lifted one of his own feet, waiting for James to plant his left foot. He slammed his foot down on James's toes. The bully howled.

Arthur started running. *He can't follow me if his toes are broken. I did it. I did something.*

"Stop him," James growled.

Arthur heard footsteps behind him.

Marcus grabbed him by both shoulders and spun him face first into the row of lockers.

Arthur collapsed with a groan. He rolled onto his back, blood leaking from the reopened cut in his cheek.

"Bastard," James spat as he limped over. "We have a game tomorrow. What the hell do you think you're doing?"

I shouldn't have done anything.

"I'm going to make you regret this." James's face was flushed and the veins on his forehead throbbed angrily.

This is going to be worse now. So much worse. But part of Arthur was happy he'd finally done something. He grinned up at James. *I did something. I was afraid of him but I didn't just take his bullying.*

"What are you smiling about, dumbass?" James raged.

Did stamping on his toes make him this mad? Or is he mad cause I didn't take his bullying?

"Stand up and I'll wipe that smile of your face."

Arthur stood.

This is going to really hurt. He watched James ball up his fists. *But I did something.*

“Stop smiling, you bastard.” James swung a punch at Arthur but Turner grabbed for his arm.

“Wait, James. You’ll get in trouble for that. Don’t hit him,” Turner pleaded.

James shook Turner off. “I don’t care.”

“He’s got it coming,” Marcus said.

James swung again.

Arthur closed his eyes. *This is going to hurt.*

An incredible chill ran from his left hand to his forearm, as if it had been dunked in ice water. He raised his arm instinctively to cover his face and something thudded into it. Arthur couldn’t feel what had actually hit his arm.

James screamed.

Arthur opened his eyes and saw James clutching at his hand. It was a mangled mess, with several knuckles having reversed direction and bending toward his palm. A long cut had opened across the back of his hand and Arthur could see the white of bone sticking out.

James looked down at his hand and screamed again when he saw the mess.

What happened to him? Arthur felt a heaviness around his left hand and glanced down. *What is that?*

His left hand was encased in silver metal. Hundreds of tiny scales outlined his fingers and palm, allowing surprising flexibility. The back of his hand to just below his elbow was covered in thick, curved metal ribbing, forming the supports of a long gauntlet. He twisted his arm to get a better look but the gauntlet grew heavier, dropping to his side.

James's face had lost all of its color as he clutched at his forearm. He cursed weakly. "Why are you standing there?" he said hoarsely. "Look, he can't even hold it up anymore. Get him.

Turner backed away, shaking his head.

"I don't know, James," Ray said. He looked to Marcus for support but his friend was staring at the gauntlet.

"Just do it. Kill that bastard. Oh, my hand," James moaned.

Roy and Marcus stepped forward.

"I wouldn't," a voice said from down the hall.

Kai wore his headphones slung round his neck as he strolled toward them. His hands were stuffed in his pockets.

"Don't worry about the loner," James snarled, through clenched teeth.

Roy swung at Arthur, watching the gauntlet nervously.

Arthur tried to lift his arm again. *Come on, I need you again.* His arm strained and flexed but he couldn't lift the gauntlet.

Kai flowed the final few steps until he stood between Roy and Arthur. He caught Roy's fist and squeezed until Arthur imagined he heard bones grinding together.

“I told you not to,” Kai said. His empty hand snapped forward and he struck Roy in the jaw with his open palm. Roy’s his eyes glazed and his knees buckled.

How can he move like that?

“Leave, now,” Kai said, his voice was as relaxed and carefree.

The bullies looked at each other and began to limp off down the hall. Marcus supported the wobble-kneed Roy.

“You’re gonna regret this, loner,” James said.

“You might want to get your hand checked out so you don’t lose any fingers,” Kai said.

James’s eyes widened and his steps down the hall quickened.

“I wonder what he’ll tell her,” Kai mused.

“Will he really lose fingers?” Arthur asked.

“No, but it gave him something to worry about.”

Kai spun to face Arthur. His face was a mixture of annoyance and anger.

“I can’t believe you put that on,” Kai said, pointing toward the gauntlet.

“I don’t know where it came from,” Arthur said.

“Remember that you put the bracelet on?”

Arthur nodded.

“That’s what happens when you put on a magical artifact without thinking.”

“I didn’t know it was magic,” Arthur caught himself. “I mean, there’s no such thing as magic.”

Kai snorted. “Of course not, you’re just a weirdo walking around in armor. Well not armor, you’re a weirdo who walks around in one gauntlet.”

“I don’t know what happened.”

Kai took a breath and the tension around his eyes eased a bit. He sighed.

“You’re right. How could you know? And you were the one getting bullied again. Sorry,” Kai said. He ran a hand through his hair and tapping a finger against his headphones.

“It’s okay.”

“Did you do anything before the artifact protected you?” Kai asked, studying the gauntlet.

“I stomped on James’s foot to try and get away.”

Kai looked up in surprise. “You fought back?”

“Not really,” Arthur said. “I just tried to slow him down so I could run away. It didn’t even work.”

“Still you tried, that’s something at least,” Kai said.

Yeah, it is, Arthur thought, puffing out his chest a little.

“Now, go ahead and take that off.”

Off? I wish I could. He was about to tell Kai when the school bell started ringing and kids began pouring out from classrooms into the hall.

“Damn.” Kai stripped off his sweater and wrapped it around Arthur’s arm.

I didn’t even think about what people would think if they saw me wearing a gauntlet. That’s why I’m an idiot.

“Alright, follow me. Then you can take that off,” Kai said, heading off down the hall.

“But . . .”

“No buts, just hurry up.”

Arthur groaned. *He’s going to be mad when I can’t take it off.* Arthur followed Kai down the hall.

CHAPTER SEVEN: FROM THIN AIR

The mass of students parted in front of Kai as he stalked down the hall. They eyed him with discomfort as he passed, like he was diseased.

Arthur hurried after Kai.

How can they be disgusted by him? It's not like he's dirty or smells.

A girl gasped when Kai passed and dashed over to join a circle of her friends. She pointed and giggled.

Maybe things could be worse than having one bully, with a couple of friends. His chest throbbed and he winced. *Maybe they're both bad.*

"Hurry up," Kai called over his shoulder.

Arthur ducked around a senior and followed Kai into the library. They wove between tables and bright plastic chairs. They passed Mrs. Warrenton, her hair coiled around the back of her head and neck like a snake, who sat sorting through books. The aging librarian raised her eyes as Kai and Arthur moved deeper into the stacks.

"Alright," Kai said, putting his body between Arthur and Mrs. Warrenton. He pulled his sweater from Arthur's arm. "Give me the artifact."

"Artifact? You mean the gauntlet?"

Arthur looked down to find the gauntlet was gone. The only thing on his wrist was the bracelet.

“Come on, give me the bracelet,” Kai said, talking a step forward.

Arthur slid his wrist behind his back.

“Quiet,” Mrs. Warrenton called. “Don’t you boys have class now?”

“It’s our study hall, ma’am,” Kai said. He turned and politely waved to her.

Arthur glanced around for an exit, but Kai had led them into a dead end in the stacks.

Kai looked back at Arthur and the hard lines of his face softened. He took a step back but kept himself between Arthur and the exit.

“Look, Arthur. I don’t want you to be afraid of me, I’m not like James. I’m sorry about that. But you don’t know what that is. You don’t want to be involved with it. You really don’t.”

He means that. Arthur studied Kai’s face. *And he knows what it is.*

“What is it?” Arthur asked, taking his arm slowly from behind his back.

“I can’t tell you that,” Kai said. “I only know a bit, but if you even knew that bit then you’d be involved.”

And you don’t want me involved. The edges of Kai’s eyes were creased with nervous tension. *Now I want to know why.*

“So, come on, Arthur,” Kai said.

“I can’t,” Arthur said.

“Can’t?” Kai asked. He leaned against a bookshelf, trying to be nonchalant but Arthur could see that his muscles were tensed.

He thinks I’m lying.

“It won’t come off.”

Kai blinked. “What do you mean?”

“I can’t take it off. It’s stuck.”

“Well, if it’s stuck we can get some grease.”

“You don’t get it. It won’t let me take it off, it stops me.”

Now I sound crazy.

“Stops you?” Kai’s eyebrows rose.

“Yeah, I know it sounds weird . . .” Arthur trailed off and shrugged awkwardly.

“I could help. Pull it off or something.”

“I don’t think it’ll work,” Arthur said.

“At least let me try.”

But it’s magic. I don’t want to lose that. Nothing like this will ever happen again.

Kai stepped closer, grabbing and lifting Arthur’s arm. He studied the bracelet and took hold of the metal. He let out a muffled yelp and released his hold.

“How can you wear that?” Kai shoved his fingertips in his mouth.

“What?”

“It’s so hot. How is it not burning you?”

“It’s not hot at all.”

Kai took his fingers out of his mouth and winced. The pads of his fingers were an angry red.

“Damn, that hurts,” Kai muttered. “It’s really not hot for you?”

“Nope.”

“Weird,” Kai said. He clenched and unclenched his hand.

“Are you okay?” Arthur asked.

“Yeah,” Kai said. “We’re gonna have to find another way.”

Do we have to? Arthur wondered, surprised at himself.

“I have an idea,” Kai said. “You won’t see what I’m doing, so you’ll have to trust me.”

“Okay,” Arthur agreed nervously.

Do I trust him?

Kai put his hand on his hip. It looked like he had grabbed ahold of something but nothing was visible in his hand.

What’s he doing?

Kai drew his hand up from his hip. A long, serrated sword became visible as Kai raised his hand, as if it was being drawn from a sheath Arthur couldn’t see.

“Whoa,” Arthur shouted. He stumbled back into a bookshelf with a thud.

“What are you doing back here?” Mrs. Warrenton said, her voice much closer.

She’s going to see him with a sword.

Mrs. Warrenton turned the corner and stared right at them.

She’s going to see.

“Mr. Bellamy, you know better than to shout in my library.” She glared at Arthur.

She’s mad at me? Arthur gaped. *Does she not see the sword? It’s right there.*

“We’re sorry, ma’am. Arthur just tripped. We didn’t mean to be loud,” Kai said.

Kai leaned the sword against the book shelf. The serrated edge reminded Arthur of shark teeth.

It's right there, Arthur wanted to scream. He's holding a sword right there. Right there! Why can't you see it?

Mrs. Warrenton looked Kai up and down.

“What have I told you about leaning on my shelves, Mr. Mosby?”

Kai straightened up.

“Sorry, ma'am.”

She sniffed.

“And Mr. Bellamy, try not to trip so loudly next time.”

Arthur stared at her.

Try not to trip so loudly? What?

A small smile curved Mrs. Warrenton's lips.

She's joking. Mrs. Warrenton's joking?

“Yes, Mrs. Warrenton.”

She nodded curtly and the smile disappeared as she walked away.

How did she not see the sword?

Kai turned back toward Arthur.

Arthur bumped backward into the bookshelf. He muffled a curse.

“Get that thing away from me,” Arthur muttered.

“What?” Kai looked at him, confused.

“That sword. Don't bring it near me.”

“You can see it?”

“Of course,” Arthur said.

“You shouldn’t be able to,” Kai said. He looked questioningly at his blade. “It’s not broken, Mrs. Warrenton didn’t see it. So how do you see it?”

“How could I not?”

Kai tapped the sword against his forehead.

“It must be the bracelet showing you,” he said.

“I wasn’t wearing it when I saw the girl’s sword at the museum.”

Kai looked up from studying the floor, his sword resting on his forehead and running down the bridge of his nose between his eyes.

“What girl?”

“I’d never seen her before but she ran me over. Then ended up fighting with two men in white suits and sunglasses. They had swords, too,” Arthur said.

“Did their suits have red crosses over the left breast?” Kai asked.

“How did you know that?”

“Damn, Templars,” Kai muttered.

Templars? Like the knights? They did have swords, so they could be knights.

“So they were looking for that artifact, too.” Kai closed his eyes and breathed deeply.

“What does that mean?” Arthur asked.

“It means it’s worse than I thought,” Kai said, stepping closer. “We have to get that off you now.”

The bracelet started tightening on Arthur's wrist.

"I don't know if this is a good idea," Arthur said, looking nervously at his wrist.

"We have to get it off you, Arthur. You don't know how dangerous the Templars are really. If they knew you had this they wouldn't stop 'til they got it from you."

The bracelet kept tightening, digging into the skin of Arthur's wrist. His fingers were tingling as if they were about to fall asleep.

"It's tightening, Kai," Arthur warned.

"I'll be careful," Kai said.

The bracelet pulsed and then snapped tighter. Arthur dropped to his knees clutching at his left wrist desperately. His fingers were red and continued to darken as he watched.

"What the . . ." Kai said, staring at Arthur's hand. He took a step closer.

"Back up," Arthur hissed through clenched teeth.

"What?"

"It only did this because you're close. If you back up maybe it'll stop hurting."

Kai took a step back and looked at Arthur questioningly.

The bracelet didn't loosen.

Arthur shook his head.

Kai took another step back.

The bracelet stayed tight.

Arthur shook his head again.

Kai stood puzzled for a minute before grinning.

“What’s so funny?” Arthur growled, the pain in his wrist making him irritable.

“It’s so simple.”

Kai began sliding his saw-toothed sword back into its sheath.

When hilt touched the scabbard the tension of the bracelet disappeared and Arthur gasped. He rubbed at the red line the bracelet had dug into his skin.

“Well, you’re right. It won’t let you go.” Kai’s grin slipped off his face.

“So now what?” Arthur asked.

“We need to talk to someone who’s smarter than me,” Kai said.

They wouldn’t be hard, Arthur thought bitterly as he rubbed at his wrist.

“Who?”

“She’s in charge of a very prestigious school near here,” Kai said, his grin returning.

“A principal?” Arthur flinched as he remembered his in school suspension.

“I’d like to see you call her that,” Kai said, laughing. “No, she’s the Headmistress of the school.”

“Headmistress?” Arthur said dubiously.

“Yeah, if anyone can fix this it’ll be her.”

She can’t do worse than you.

“Where is she?”

“In the city,” Kai said. “Don’t worry, I’ll drive us so it won’t take long to get to her.”

“What about school?”

“I’ll take care of it,” Kai slid a phone out of his pocket and began typing.

Wait, he said he’d drive us.

“You can’t drive,” Arthur blurted.

“Shh, Mrs. Warrenton’ll get mad at you,” Kai said winking.

“But . . .”

Kai held up a hand. “Do you trust me?”

“I guess.”

At least he knows what’s going on.

“Good enough. Just follow me and I’ll take care of the particulars. Just think of it as a half day or another field trip,” Kai said.

“My last field trip didn’t go so well.” Arthur raised his hand to his cheek.

CHAPTER EIGHT: TOWARD THE UNKNOWN

Arthur leaned back in his seat as Kai sped them toward the city. Kai's car wasn't anything special, it fit in alongside all of the other silver cars on the road, but Kai drove it like a sports car. He wove in and out of traffic, never touching the brakes

He's going to get us killed. Or arrested, Arthur looked over his shoulder for signs of cops. *That would be a perfect way to end today. Arrested, while ditching after being suspended. My parents are already going to kill me.*

Kai whizzed by a semi-truck which honked at him.

"Wait, you shouldn't be able to drive," Arthur said.

"You realize this now? We've been going for twenty minutes already," Kai said, laughing.

Arthur slumped lower in his seat.

Arrested while driving with someone without a license, while ditching after being suspended. I'm so dead.

"Don't worry so much. I'm 16 already."

"But you're a freshman," Arthur said.

"Technically."

"Did you get held back?"

"Not really," Kai said. "I sort of missed a couple of years."

Missed a couple of years? Arthur thought incredulously.

“How?”

“I was working on something,” Kai said.

“And you didn’t go to school for a few years?”

“Pretty much.”

“What were you working on?”

“Can’t tell you yet,” Kai said.

“Come on.”

“Really, I can’t. I’ll get in trouble.”

Arthur flinched as they sped past another car.

He’s not even looking.

“Sorry,” Kai said.

“It’s okay,” Arthur said, gripping the door handle tightly. “Will you just look at the road?”

“Sure, sure,” Kai said laughing. He looked forward again, but his grin never slipped.

“So where are we going?” Arthur asked.

“I told you already.”

“You said to a school, I know. But you never said where it was.”

Kai was silent for a long moment.

“You won’t just accept me saying, you’ll see, will you?” Kai asked.

“No,” Arthur said.

“You’ve heard of the St. John’s School?” Kai asked.

“It’s one of the schools by the National Cathedral,” Arthur said.

“Yeah, it’s one of those.”

“I think I’ve seen it once, when I went on a tour with my parents,” Arthur said.

“Cool,” Kai said, absently.

Did he stop listening to me?

“Well, we’re going to the St. John’s School,” Kai said.

“To see the Headmistress?”

“Yeah.”

“And she’s going to help me?” Arthur asked.

“If anyone can it’s her.”

Arthur turned to face Kai. His sandy-haired friend was staring hard at the road, purposefully ignoring Arthur.

Is he my friend? Arthur wondered. He is trying to help, but he’s not telling me anything helpful. Maybe he’s not quite a friend yet.

“What’s going on Kai? What aren’t you telling me.”

Kai’s mouth quirked into a grimace. “I can’t tell you yet, Arthur.”

“Can’t or won’t?” Arthur snapped.

“Hey, you were the one who got in my car,” Kai said defensively. “You trusted me enough to do that. Trust me a little longer.”

He’s right. I did trust him.

“I’m telling you, I’m trying to help. When we get there you’ll get your answers, I promise. More answers than you expect,” Kai said.

What else can I do now? Ask him to drop me off? But then I’d never learn about magic, if it’s real.

“If I can’t ask you about what’s going on, can I ask another question?”

“Sure, shoot,” Kai said. Tension eased from his shoulders.

“Is magic real?” Arthur asked.

Kai choked and the car swerved momentarily. Then he laughed in a high-pitched, forced laugh.

“What a silly question, what makes you think magic’s real? You know we’re not in elementary school, right?” Kai rambled.

He definitely wasn’t expecting that, Arthur thought with a grin. But does his reaction mean there’s magic or not? He could just be surprised by a stupid question.

“Well, you do have that sword that appears out of thin air,” Arthur said. “That has to be magic.”

“Magic?” Kai muttered. He seemed offended.

“Yeah, it’s magic right?”

“No, it’s not magic. It’s Tech,” Kai said indignantly.

Tech?

“Magic sword?” Kai snorted derisively. “I wouldn’t be caught dead using one of those magic swords the Talents love so . . .”

His eyes widened.

“Damn,” he muttered.

He just said there are magic swords. Arthur stared at Kai, stunned.

“So there is magic,” Arthur breathed in awe.

“We’re done talking until you meet the Headmistress,” Kai snapped.

Arthur thought he was angry until he saw the flush in Kai’s cheeks.

He’s embarrassed. Why would he be embarrassed? Because no one’s supposed to know about magic? But how does Kai know?

Questions tumbled through Arthur’s mind. His grip on the door handle tightened in eagerness.

I wish Kai would drive faster.

#

They pulled right into an underground parking garage, Kai flashing a piece of metal the size of a card to the man in the toll booth as they passed. They wound down through the parking levels, passing through another gate, before Kai pulled into a small alcove.

“The cathedral is amazing,” Arthur said, as he got out of the car.

“If you like that kind of thing,” Kai said.

“You don’t think it’s amazing?”

Kai shook his head, but he couldn’t repress his impish grin.

“You’re messing with me.”

“Got it in one,” Kai said. “Now come on, you can’t keep standing there, she’s waiting.”

Arthur realized he'd been standing motionless holding the car door open. He slammed the door and hurried to join Kai.

Kai winced.

"Will you tell me about her now?" Arthur asked.

"Come on," Kai said. He headed toward a pair of elevators.

"Nothing?" Arthur groaned.

"Her name is Headmistress Ettarre," Kai said, holding the elevator door open as Arthur stepped inside.

Her name is Headmistress? Arthur chuckled.

"What's funny?" Kai asked.

"Is her first name really Headmistress?" Arthur grinned.

Kai didn't laugh. He studied Arthur blandly.

"It will be to you," Kai said.

The elevators opened and Kai stepped out.

Arthur followed him out onto the front lawn of the National Cathedral. He stopped and stared at the stone towers jutting up into the sky, each dotted with hundreds of intricate carvings and gargoyles. The great rose window above the main doors glowed warmly in the fall sunlight.

It's like someone captured the actual sun in glass.

Kai turned back toward Arthur, irritation lining his face. Kai opened his mouth, then grinned ruefully.

“You’re right, sometimes I really do forget how awesome the Cathedral looks when you don’t look at it every day,” Kai said. “When did you say you came here last?”

“A couple of years ago,” Arthur said.

“Did they have the scaffolding up then?” Kai pointed to the metal frames that encircled each of the Cathedrals towers, hundreds of feet above the ground.

From down here they look like metal spider webs.

“No,” Arthur said. “I was wondering what they were for.”

“Remember the earthquake a few years ago?” Kai asked.

“Yeah.”

“Well it broke off some of the gargoyles toward the top. Or maybe it just cracked them. I don’t remember, but they’re fixing them now.”

“How long have they been working on it?”

“Since the earthquake,” Kai said, with a shrug. “But we do have to go. We’re probably already in trouble for keeping the Headmistress waiting.”

Arthur began to follow Kai again but paused and looked up at the scaffolding around the towers. A figure with a white shirt and dark pants was looking down at the Cathedral’s front lawn.

He’s looking right at me, like hawk or a falcon or something, Arthur thought with a shiver. *Nah, he probably can’t even really see me from up there. But still . . .*

He hurried after Kai.

CHAPTER NINE: THE HEADMISTRESS

Headmistress Ettarre's office was smaller than Arthur expected. It was tucked into a corner of the top floor of a three-story building, between two classrooms. Kai had led Arthur up the large central staircase, passing dozens of students who tried to get Kai's attention. Kai had ignored them, taking Arthur straight to the Headmistress's office.

It's like watching a movie star walk through. Do they know he's a knight?

They waited in overstuffed chairs facing an empty, dark wood desk. Arthur had already surveyed the room's contents multiple times noting the packed bookshelves, the carved globe, the massive desk and chairs. But what he'd noticed first when he'd entered the room, and had been avoiding looking at, was the plaque on the wall behind the desk which held an enormous sword.

Who could carry a sword like that? She must be a monster or a half-giant.

The sword rested on two pegs and even in the dim light the polished blade glowed with captured light. And below the sword a word was etched in gold script into the dark wood, *Arbiter*.

“Arbiter?”

“What?” Kai's head snapped toward Arthur in the broken silence.

He's as nervous as I am.

“Why does it say Arbiter below that sword?” Arthur asked.

“You can see it?” Kai asked, surprised.

“Yeah,” Arthur said. “Why couldn’t I? I saw yours.”

“You’re right, I shouldn’t be surprised at this point,” Kai muttered. He lapsed into moody silence, tapping his foot in a restless cadence across the wood floor.

“Well?”

“It’s called Arbiter because that’s what Mistress Ettarre named it,” Kai said.

“Are all swords named?” Arthur asked.

“I told you I can’t talk about stuff like that.”

“How am I supposed to know what I can or can’t ask about?”

“Just don’t ask anything then.”

“What’s your sword’s name?” Arthur asked.

“Its name is Five,” Kai said reluctantly.

“Five?” Arthur asked.

Kai glared at him. “Are you saying something’s wrong with that?”

“No, no,” Arthur said quickly. “I was just wondering why you named it that.”

Kai’s eyes narrowed, suspicious that Arthur was making fun of him.

“I’m just curious,” Arthur said.

“It’s the fifth sword I’ve made,” Kai said, a note of pride tinging his voice.

“You made it?”

“Yeah,” Kai said, he was smiling. “It’s worked better than any of the others. It’s not bad but Six . . .”

He was about to go on when the office door swung open. A middle-aged woman swept into the room and behind the desk. She was of average height and slender. *How can she carry that huge sword?*

The matched crow's feet at the corners of her eyes deepened as she studied Arthur and Kai. The strong angle of her jaw and prominent cheekbones gave her a birdlike perspective. Her lips twisted together and toward the left.

"Headmistress . . ." Kai began.

She raised a hand and his mouth snapped shut. She sat in the leather desk chair, arranging herself so that she lightly gripped the front of the chair's arms.

She looks like she's perched and ready to strike. Arthur shifted nervously.

"Well, this is unusual." The Headmistress's voice was clipped but not unkind. A hint of weariness sounded underneath her words.

Kai just nodded, his lips remained pressed shut.

He's terrified of her. I probably should be too.

"It's unusual for a student who left my school to demand a meeting, during the middle of his and my school days. Very unusual wouldn't you say, Kai?" She raised a sculpted eyebrow.

Kai nodded.

"It's even more unusual that that student would bring a child who is neither a Tech nor a Talent to me, isn't it Kai?"

"But . . ." Kai began.

Her eyebrow quirked skyward again.

“Yes, ma’am,” Kai replied in a small voice.

Her focus shifted to Arthur and he shivered. She studied him, her eyes flowing over him only stopping for a brief moment when they touched the bracelet.

“Well, Kai, what is it that’s gotten you so worked up?” the Headmistress asked.

Kai squirmed uncomfortably in his seat.

He faced down four bullies an hour ago, how terrifying is she really if she scares him this badly? Arthur began to sweat.

“I found what Eliane was looking for in the museum,” Kai blurted.

The Headmistress’s eyes darted toward Arthur and then back toward Kai. When she spoke her irritation was plain.

“If you found it, then why did you bring him?” She snapped out the last words as curt mono-syllables.

Kai grimaced. “Well, it’s kind of stuck to him,” he said, uncomfortably.

“It’s the bracelet then?” the Headmistress asked.

“Yeah,” Kai said.

“And you’re sure it’s what she was looking for?” the Headmistress asked.

Kai gave an apologetic half-shrug. He swung his fist at Arthur’s surprised face.

Arthur raised his hands to protect his face. His hand grew frigid and then became heavier as the bracelet smoothly shifted into the gauntlet.

Kai grinned at him, waggling his fingers mischievously in front of Arthur.

“I see,” the Headmistress said. “And you say it’s stuck on him?”

“Yeah, it resists being taken off,” Kai said. “The only thing that might work is cutting it off but it reacted badly when I drew my sword. Arthur didn’t seem to like the sword idea either.”

“He could see the sword?” She crossed her arms across her chest.

It’s like I’m not here.

“Yeah, he could see it.”

“That could just be from the bracelet,” the Headmistress said dismissively.

“I saw the sword the girl had at the museum, before I put the bracelet on,” Arthur said.

“You did?” The Headmistress’s eyebrows rose again and she leaned forward.

Arthur nodded.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

“Arthur.”

“Your full name.”

“Arthur Bellamy.”

“Bellamy,” she murmured as she leaned back into the leather chair. “It could be a coincidence. Where are you from Arthur?”

“Virginia,” he said.

“And your parents?”

“Ma’am?” Arthur said, following Kai’s example of address.

“Where are your parents from?”

“From Virginia,” Arthur said.

“And your grandparents?”

Arthur looked at Kai in confusion.

Kai shrugged.

“They were from Virginia, too,” Arthur said.

“And what do your parents do?” she asked.

Why is she so curious? Does she know something?

“My dad’s a banker and my mom does something for the government, I’m not sure what,” Arthur said.

“Bellamy, and a banker. A coincidence,” the Headmistress said slowly. She closed her eyes and leaned back into her chair.

“Kai you can go downstairs for practice now.”

“Ma’am?”

“Go downstairs and practice. It’s not good to just practice on your own all the time.”

Kai looked at Arthur, about to say something.

“Go, Kai,” the Headmistress said. “Arthur and I have some things to discuss.”

Kai stood immediately and headed toward the door. He mouthed sorry as he stepped into the hall.

The Headmistress’s eyes opened when she heard the door close. She made sure Kai had closed it completely before smiling at Arthur.

“I’m sorry about all of this, Arthur. I’m sure that a lot of this must be a shock to you,” she said.

Arthur nodded. He looked down at his hands and noticed that the gauntlet had receded back to the bracelet.

“What is it?” Arthur asked, looking up.

“I’m not sure yet,” the Headmistress said. “Eliane wasn’t retrieving it for me. But if you come here we’ll be able to help you find out.”

“Come here?” Arthur repeated.

“To St. John’s,” the Headmistress said. “I’m willing to let you transfer here even though the semester’s half over. You’ll learn things here that no one else in the world will teach you. Would you want to transfer here?”

Arthur thought of James and how angry he would be when Arthur was back in school. He thought about how he still had to tell his parents that he’d gotten in-school suspension. Then he thought about Dan, Eric, and Fred.

They’ll understand, he thought. They know how bad it is. They’ll understand.

“What do I need to do?” Arthur asked.

“First we’ll need to call your parents,” the Headmistress said.

CHAPTER TEN: THE ST. JOHN'S SCHOOL

Arthur followed his mom and Headmistress Ettarre through the halls. They stopped to look in immense classrooms, with long, polished wood tables instead of laminated desks, and at the library which dwarfed Mrs. Warrenton's library. They'd stopped for a minute while Headmistress Ettarre had explained the library had been brought over from Europe when the school was founded. Arthur's mom couldn't stop staring at the crown molding and the mother-of-pearl wall sheathing.

"Thank you for coming to visit us on a Sunday," Headmistress Ettarre said. "I know it's an inconvenience but we really would like Arthur to begin as soon as possible so he doesn't fall behind."

"Oh, it's not a problem at all," Arthur's mom said. "I'm just still surprised, this is all happening so suddenly. How did you all decide that Arthur would be a fit here?"

"He was recommended to us from a respected colleague," Headmistress Ettarre said with a slight smile.

"I see. This is all so surprising," his mom repeated.

You mean you're surprised that a place like this would even want me? Wouldn't you be surprised if you knew the real reason. He glanced down at the bracelet

"What would you say your favorite subject is?" the Headmistress asked.

"What? My favorite subject?" Arthur mumbled. "History, I guess."

His mom looked over her shoulder, frowning disapprovingly. “Please pay a little attention,” she hissed under her breath.

“Oh, excellent,” Headmistress Ettarre said. “We have an excellent freshman history professor. She used to teach in one of our sister schools in Austria. She’s quite respected as a European History scholar, her books have been well received.”

“Wow,” Arthur’s mom said. “And she works for a High School? I mean she sounds like she’d fit better in a university setting. I mean, not that she doesn’t fit here.”

Arthur watched his mom stammer and rolled his eyes. *She’d rather go here than send me, I bet.*

“All of our professors are extremely talented, they’re leaders in their fields,” Headmistress Ettarre said, her tone matter-of-fact. “The St. John’s School is considered an elite college preparatory institution so we maintain the highest standards for our instructors, as well as for our students.”

“Of course,” Arthur’s mom agreed. She looked back at Arthur, her face pinched with nervousness.

Headmistress Ettarre stopped outside a classroom that was lined with long, granite topped tables. Each was separated by metal dividers into individual work stations with sinks and storage racks of empty beakers, burners, test tubes, and dozens of other instruments Arthur couldn’t recognize. Standing at one of the stations in front of a test tube suspended above a blue-flame was Kai. Arthur stared at the viscous solution bubbling in the test tube and he would have sworn the silver liquid flared pink for a moment.

“What was that?” Arthur asked.

Kai jumped when he heard Arthur’s voice. He quickly turned off the burner, turning toward the door sheepishly.

“Kai,” the Headmistress said, her voice harsh with disapproval.

“Oh, this lab is amazing,” Arthur’s mom exclaimed. “Are you a student here?”

“Well, err,” Kai stammered and looked to Headmistress Ettarre for guidance.

The Headmistress nodded.

“Yes, ma’am,” Kai said quickly.

Arthur stifled a laugh. *Wouldn’t mom be disappointed to know he’s just a sixteen year old freshman who actually attends a public school.*

“What are you working on?” Arthur’s mom asked.

“I missed lab this week, so I’m just trying to catch up on my work,” Kai lied ably. Then he looked down and his face paled.

The solution in the test tube had continued to bubble after the burner had been turned off and had changed from its silvery, metallic sheen into a dark blue, like deep water. The color change was strange but the fact that the solution was trying to float out of its test tube and winced.

Arthur looked to see if his mom had noticed but her attention had returned to Headmistress Ettarre.

“Kai, I’ve told you not to experiment in the upstairs classrooms. Clean that up and then meet us in my office,” the Headmistress snapped, her voice was frigid.

“Yes, ma’am.”

They turned back toward the hall and Arthur's mom was already speaking to the Headmistress again.

"It's amazing that you have students doing their work on a Sunday," she said.

His mother and the Headmistress began heading down the hall. Arthur looked back at Kai and stifled a laugh.

The solution Kai had been trying to keep in the test tube had escaped through his fingers and was floating a foot over the work station table. It had coalesced into a sphere that rippled, its blue color throbbing with each ripple. The pulses of color came faster as Arthur watched.

It's floating. That's no trick. It's like a balloon, a magic balloon.

"Arthur, keep up." The Headmistress's voice wasn't harsh but it commanded obedience.

"Arthur," his mother whispered. "Hurry up."

Arthur rolled his eyes but winced when he saw Headmistress Ettarre watching him.

"Damn," Kai cursed.

Arthur looked over his shoulder and saw that the solution had stopped floating. It had fallen back to the work station and had splashed over everything. The work station was coated in the blue solution that looked like slime. Kai glared at Arthur, his face dripping with thick, goopy drops from his nose and ears. Kai picked up a rubber test tube lid and aimed to throw it at Arthur.

Arthur laughed and took off after the Headmistress and his mom.

“You see, St. John’s is a year round boarding school,” the Headmistress was saying. “It’s not a year round academic institution but we do require that our students stay with us over the summer. We teach them practical skills over the summer.”

No Summer Break? They can’t do that. I can’t go here.

“That sounds expensive,” Arthur’s mom said.

“We’re offering Arthur a full scholarship, due to his situation,” the Headmistress said.

“His situation?” his mom asked.

“His transfer being mid-year,” Headmistress Ettarre said without missing a beat.

“Would it just be for this year then?”

“Oh no, it would be for all four years. Once a scholarship is offered it is a full tenure offer.”

“I see,” said Arthur’s mom, nodding.

It’s like I’m at swap meet, being swapped.

Headmistress Ettarre led them up the wide stone stairwell at the school’s entrance. She stopped at the landing, pointing down more hallways at where the History and Language classrooms were located, before leading them to the third floor and her office.

What if mom sees the sword? Would this will all be over? Would I be sent back to how things were before?

He followed his mother and Headmistress but as they drew closer his steps became slower and slower. His mom looked over her shoulder about to chide him but stopped when she saw his expression.

“Could I have a minute with my son?” she asked Headmistress Ettarre.

“Of course, I’ll just step inside,” the Headmistress said. She stepped into her office but she didn’t close her door.

She’s going to tell me how good an opportunity this is, how I’m so lucky, how I should take advantage of it.

“If you don’t want to come here, you don’t have to, Arthur,” his mom said.

Arthur gaped at her.

“What?”

“This is amazing opportunity. It’s so much better than what your dad and I could have hoped. But if you don’t want to come here you don’t have to,” she said.

“I don’t?” Arthur asked in surprise.

But if I don’t she’ll be disappointed. And I’ll have to tell her I’m suspended.

“No, you don’t,” his mom said. “I won’t be disappointed with whatever you choose. I know it’d be hard mid-term, I wouldn’t make you do that if you didn’t want to, no matter how good the opportunity is.” She gave him a small, loving smile that always made him know she trusted whatever decision he made.

“It is a good opportunity,” Arthur said. *I could learn magic.*

“It is,” she agreed.

“I won’t miss my school too much.”

“If you’re sure.” She seemed worried that he might actually miss the school.

“I’ll do it,” he said.

“Oh, Arthur.” She flung her arms around him. He put an awkward arm around her shoulders and felt them heaving.

Why is she crying? I made the choice she wanted.

“I’m going to miss you so much,” she murmured between sniffs.

“We do have breaks for fall, winter, spring, and summer,” Headmistress Ettarre said. She sat behind her desk and her words had carried clear to where they stood in the hall.

“Well, that’s good,” Arthur’s mom said. She let go of his shoulders and took a tissue from a pocket to dab her eyes.

“I’m really proud of you, Arthur,” she said. She beamed at him as another tear crept from the corner of her eye.

“I’m sure Arthur won’t want to sit through the boring paperwork,” Headmistress Ettarre said. “Kai, can you show Arthur to some of the student-only sections?”

Arthur was surprised to see Kai only a few feet further down the hall. The sandy-haired boy leaned against the wall, trying awkwardly not to look at Arthur and his mom.

“Of course, ma’am,” Kai said.

“And what have I told you about slouching against my walls?” the Headmistress called.

Kai straightened from the wall as if he’d been shocked.

“Come on, Arthur,” he said and took off down the hall.

“I’ll see you later, mom,” Arthur said, following Kai.

“Have fun,” his mom said, as she entered the office.

The sword. He slowed his pursuit of Kai and waited for the exclamation he knew his mother would make upon seeing the sword. It never came.

“What are we hanging around her for?” Kai asked, having doubled back.

“I didn’t think my mom would like the sword in the Headmistress’s office. I figured that be the end of this.”

“She can’t see it.” Kai grinned.

“Why not?”

“Well, now that you’re for sure going to come here I can tell you,” Kai said.

“Really?”

“Yeah,” Kai’s grin widened until his face almost split around his white teeth.

“This is my favorite part of meeting new students.”

“What is?”

“Are you ready for the real tour?” Kai asked mischievously.

CHAPTER ELEVEN: THE REAL TOUR

“Real Tour?” Arthur asked.

“The tour where all the questions I couldn’t answer for you before can get answered. Well, most of them,” Kai said.

“Really?”

“Follow me and you’ll see,” Kai said and headed down the grand staircase.

Arthur followed.

They reached the first floor and turned down a hall lined with classrooms. The hallway took a sharp angle away from the entryway and the spaces between the classrooms lengthened and each of the wooden doors were firmly closed. The hall turned sharply again and Arthur found himself staring at a blank stone wall.

“Are you ready?” Kai asked, his grin still flush across his face.

“Ready for what?” Arthur asked.

Kai reached out and pressed his hand to the stone. It sank into the wall to his wrist.

“What?”

Arthur heard a beep and a door slide open in front of Kai. A small metal sided room waited. Kai stepped inside.

“Hurry up,” Kai said, motioning for Arthur to join him in the room. “Before the door closes.”

“It’s an elevator,” Arthur realized.

“Of course it is. You don’t think they’d keep the fun stuff up here where anyone could find it, do you?”

Arthur stepped into the elevator.

There was only one button on the elevator’s panel. When Kai pressed, it lit up green.

“What is this place?” Arthur asked, as the elevator dropped smoothly. “Why is there a secret elevator?”

“It’s all the St. John’s School,” Kai said. “But they teach more here than they do at a normal high school.”

“Like magic?” Arthur asked.

“Yeah,” Kai said. “Among other things.”

“Really?”

“You think I’m lying?” Kai asked.

Arthur nodded.

“Well, it’s true. But magic isn’t the focus here. There are at least twice as many students here that can’t use magic.”

“Do they know about this then?” Arthur gestured to the slowly descending elevator.

“Of course we know,” Kai snorted.

“We? But you know magic.”

“Cause I can keep my sword from being seen?”

“And that thing you made float,” Arthur said.

“That wasn’t magic,” Kai said. “That was Tech.”

It’s like he’s mad I thought he used magic.

“I don’t understand,” Arthur said. The elevator stopped and the doors opened.

“Of course you don’t,” Kai said. He stepped out of the elevator. “You think we’re learning to be wizards or something, don’t you?”

“You’re not?” Arthur followed Kai.

“Of course not,” Kai said dismissively. “We’re training to be knights.”

He spread his arms dramatically, gesturing in front of him.

Arthur’s jaw dropped.

An enormous room spread in front of him, with a ceiling at least a hundred feet tall. Several dozen kids of all ages were on a field, of what looked like squares of polished obsidian, swinging swords at each other, some wooden and some metal. Giant chandeliers of glass candles hung from the roof, casting the room in a constant flickering light, causing shadows to dance in the corners.

“What is this?” Arthur murmured.

“I told you, this is where people train to be knights.”

“But there aren’t knights anymore.”

“There aren’t?” Kai laughed. “I’d like to see you tell them that.”

“I’ve never heard of modern knights,” Arthur said.

“Of course not. You think we want you regular people knowing our every secret? Expecting us to solve every problem you can’t? No thanks.”

“Regular people?”

“Yeah, regular people,” Kai said with a shrug. “Though I suppose you aren’t one of them anymore.”

“Why not?” Arthur asked defensively.

“Well, you’re here for one thing.” Kai tapped the bracelet on Arthur’s wrist. “And that’s stuck on you for another.”

“So I’m a knight then?” Arthur asked in wonder.

“You? A knight?” Kai roared with laughter. “You aren’t even close, you aren’t even a page yet.”

Arthur blushed. “Well, are you a knight then?”

Kai stopped laughing and looked sheepish. “Actually, I am.”

“The youngest Tech Knight in a century,” said a voice behind them.

They turned and found themselves facing two girls. One was short, only coming up to Arthur’s chest, with sandy blonde hair to match Kai’s. The other was as tall as Arthur and willow thin. Her short strawberry hair framed her face and made her lips seem very red.

“What are you doing here, Kai?” the shorter girl demanded. “Waltzing around without even saying hello?”

“Uh, hello, Melody,” Kai said.

“Too late for that now,” the girl named Melody said. “Did you think that saying hello after I tell you to would get you off the hook?”

“I hoped.” Kai shuffled his feet.

“You hoped wrong,” Melody snapped.

“I’m glad to see you too, Melody,” Kai said, his grin finding its way back on to his face.

Melody sniffed, but a smile twitched the corners of her mouth.

“You never did say why you’re here,” the other girl said in a soft voice.

“I’m here to give Arthur the real tour on his first day here.” Kai jerked a thumb to indicate Arthur.

“You don’t even go here,” Melody exclaimed in exasperation.

“So?” Kai said.

“How could they ask you to give the tour? You know nothing,” Melody said.

“That’s not true,” Kai argued.

Melody stared at him with an arched eyebrow.

Just like the Headmistress.

“He goes to my school, or he did anyway,” Kai said defensively.

“We’ll give him the tour,” the taller girl said.

“What?” Kai said.

“You heard Nora,” Melody said. “Now introduce us so we can start.”

Kai sighed sufferingly.

Arthur stifled a laugh.

“Well, Arthur, this creature is Melody Hunter,” Kai said, indicating the shorter girl with his thumb.”

“That’s not very nice, Kai,” said the girl named Nora.

“And this is Nora Greer,” Kai said. “They’ll be in your classes, I’m sure.”

“Are they pages?” Arthur asked.

“Nope,” Kai said, grinning again. “Ow!”

Melody had a satisfied expression as she set her foot back down.

Kai rubbed his shin gingerly.

“Hello, Arthur, it’s nice to meet you,” Nora said. She ignored Kai and Melody squabbling and stepped around them. “So this is your first time here?”

Arthur nodded.

“A bit overwhelming, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Arthur said.

“I know the feeling.” She smiled warmly. “I didn’t know anything about knights or magic or tech before I came here. I’m still not sure I really do.”

She’s so friendly, Arthur marveled.

“Is it real? I’m not just dreaming?” he asked.

“Oh, it’s real,” Nora said, with a slight laugh.

“Would you like me to pinch you to prove it?” Melody asked. She’d come up on Arthur’s side, bracketing him with Nora. “Are you ready for the grand tour?”

“I think so,” Arthur said.

“Good enough,” Melody said. “Kai, you can stay or follow or whatever.”

“Thanks,” Kai muttered.

He doesn't really seem bothered by her. Like he's used to or likes it. Maybe he does like it.

“Well, we'll start with what you see straight ahead,” Melody said, pointing toward the enormous room ahead of them. “This is the Palatine. This is the place you'll train with swords, bows, and hand-to-hand combat. You'll spend a lot of your after-class time here.”

“Using swords?” Arthur asked incredulously. “I can't use a sword.”

“How else do you think you'll become a knight?” Melody asked.

“It's not as bad as you think,” Nora said. “Once you get the hang of it, it's kind of fun.”

Arthur tried to imagine Nora with a weapon but the image wouldn't form in his head.

“You'll learn more about the Palatine when you have training here. They'll explain all the rules,” Melody said. “Where should we show him, Nora?”

“The Vault or the Forge,” Nora said excitedly.

“The Vault it is,” Melody said. “We spend too much time in the Forge.”

“I like it,” Nora protested.

“I know, I know,” Melody said. She took Arthur's elbow and directed him toward a passageway near the elevator.

“Come on, Kai,” Melody called without looking back. “Keep up.”

Kai muttered and slouched after them. He stepped around two boys, barely old enough to be in middle school, who had stopped to stare at him. The boys whispered excitedly and pointed at Kai.

“So, I assume you don’t know much about our lovely world,” Melody said.

“World?”

“It’s just an expression since we don’t have a better description for it,” Melody said. “It’s like a world within an outside world.”

“It’s like when you have a box within another locked box,” Nora said, moving her hands in flat lines to mime a box. “We’re the box inside and we have the key to the locked box, so only those inside the locked box can let anyone else in.”

“What?” Arthur said.

“We’re like a secret order,” Kai said from behind.

“We are not a secret order,” Melody snapped. “You know the Headmistress hates that term.”

“I don’t know why she should when it’s accurate,” Kai said.

“It makes us sound disreputable,” Melody said.

“Maybe some are,” Kai said.

Melody shot him a dirty look.

“We’re here,” Nora said.

They stood in front of a squat metal door. It was barely as tall as Arthur but it was wider than his arms stretched from end to end. There were no handles or hinges on the outside of the door. The two things that differentiated it from being just a metal wall,

were the double set of sliding tracks coming from beneath its base and across the width of the hall floor, and the small touchscreen in the center of the metal.

Melody touched the screen.

The screen came to life, displaying a weary face. His eyes were bagged and stubble covered his jawline in uneven patches. He yawned.

He doesn't look like a student. He's too old. Twenties?

“What?” said the face on the screen.

“Volly, how long have you been in there? You look terrible,” Melody said.

“Aren't you a charmer, Mel. Now what do you want?”

“We're just showing a new student around, and we wanted to start with the Vault,” Melody said.

The face on the screen squinted. “That him with you? And Kai, too?”

“Yes, his name's Arthur,” Melody said.

“How'd the experiment go, Kai?”

“Bout as well as you'd told me it would. But the Black Water did make the whole thing levitate for a while,” Kai said.

“Really? I wonder how we can use that to . . .”

“Voltaire,” Nora said politely. “Are you going to let us in?”

“I can't unless the new kid's been added to my systems,” Voltaire said. “Or if he has a knight who vouches for him.”

The girls turned and stared at Kai expectantly.

He rolled his eyes. “I'll vouch for him,” Kai said.

“Alright,” Voltaire said. “Just make sure you’re out of the way.”

Melody took hold of Arthur’s elbow again and Nora grabbed his other. They led him to the side of the metal slab. Kai slouched after them.

“What’s inside?” Arthur murmured.

“No need to be nervous,” Nora said.

“I’m not nervous.”

“Arthur, we can feel your pulse.” Melody laughed and squeezed the inside of his elbow. “It’s racing.”

“Don’t tease him, Melody,” Kai said.

Melody stuck her tongue out at Kai.

There was a hiss of released pressure and then a deep clang from the door. The slab of metal slowly slid out from the wall. It ground across the tracks in hall, inexorably slow.

Arthur tensed.

“There’s nothing dangerous in the Vault, Arthur. Not unless you’re careless, everything is carefully contained,” Nora said. She patted his elbow gently.

Her hands are so soft . . . He shook the thought out of his head.

The slab of metal came to rest against the far wall of the hallway, with a dull thud, sealing the corridor into a dead end. A metal door was carved into the side of the slab. A multitude of flat pieces of metal rose from the surface of the door. Each piece was attached to a stem that writhed in uneven patterns. They rang like bells as their edges brushed against each other in their swaying movement.

They were like flower petals on octopus arms, the pieces flexing in synchronized patterns. He stepped closer, stretching out his hand. *I wonder what they feel like.*

Nora's slight fingers tightened on his elbow like a vice.

"Don't touch them if you're not in the system," she said quietly. "Those petals are filled with venom. If you're not in the system they'll shatter into a thousand pieces, like glass, and the venom will get in all of the cuts."

"What?" Arthur recoiled, as one of the petals moved closer to his hand. "You said there was nothing dangerous."

"It's not dangerous if you don't touch it," Melody said. She reached out and put her hand flat against a petal. "Or if you're in the system."

"You'll be in the system soon," Nora said. "Just don't touch anything 'til then." She placed her hand on a petal and smiled at Arthur.

"It's not venom, it's dendrotoxin," Kai muttered. He stepped forward and extended both hands toward the petals. A petal pressed against each of his palms.

A ripple ran through the petals and the one's which hadn't been touched retreated, melting back into the slab of metal. The four which had been pressed swept into the carved door instead. The door creaked open.

"Come on," Melody said, stepping into the newly revealed hallway. "Don't take all day."

Arthur followed her, watching where the petals had disappeared to, nervously.

It's magic, real magic. How can a place like this really exist?

The hallway inside the slab was narrow, only allowing them to follow Melody in single file. Melody reached the door on the far end and pushed it open, grinning.

“Welcome to the Vault.”

CHAPTER TWELVE: THE VAULT

Arthur stepped through the door and into the Vault. A cool breeze struck him in the face and he blinked.

“Wow.” Arthur blinked.

“You like it?” asked a voice to his right.

Arthur looked and saw a man in gray armor holding a massive sword at the ready to swing down on Arthur. *Just like at the museum.* Arthur flinched.

“Didn’t mean to scare you,” the armored man said. He slid his sword into a sheath across his back and as the blade slid inside the entire scabbard and hilt vanished. “It’s just standard procedure.”

“I wasn’t scared,” Arthur lied.

“Of course not,” the man laughed. He stepped toward Arthur, extending his gauntleted hand.

Arthur reached out to shake it but stopped.

As the man neared his armor began to shimmer and then to flow like liquid. The metal liquid slid up from his legs and from his arms toward the center of his chest. As it drew toward the center it began to shrink and diminish. His helmet was the last piece to melt away, sliding down his neck and revealing the smiling face of Voltaire.

Arthur stared at Voltaire's bare hand and then up to Voltaire's chest where the last of the liquid metal was slipping through the fabric of his shirt. Voltaire stood with no sign that he'd ever been armored or carried a sword.

"Where'd it go?" Arthur blurted.

"You haven't told him about Tech yet?" Voltaire looked to Kai, who shook his head. "I guess I shouldn't really expect a new found Talent to understand anyway."

"Talent?" Melody asked.

"He's got an artifact," Voltaire said, pointing to the bracelet on Arthur's wrist.

"How can you tell?" Nora asked. "It just looks like a bracelet."

"Spend enough time in here or the Arsenal and you could tell, too," Voltaire said.

"He's not a Talent," Kai said. "There was just an accident and it got stuck on him."

They act like I'm not here. Everyone's more interested in the bracelet than me.

Kai saw Arthur's expression and changed the subject.

"Show him your armor, Vol," Kai said.

Voltaire snorted. "He just saw mine. Show him your own, you don't outrank me, Kai."

"He asked you first," Kai said.

"Didn't expect you to get petulant," Voltaire laughed.

Voltaire lifted his shirt, exposing an enormous tattoo of a shield that spread from the points of his collarbones to the bottom of his sternum. It was etched into his skin as a

deep grey except for the single red band that ran along the line that would have connected his right shoulder to his left hip.

“A shield?” Arthur asked.

“What’s wrong with a shield?” Voltaire asked defensively. “It’s a good symbol to use for honor.”

“I told you it was too boring and traditional,” Kai said.

“You have no appreciation for history,” Voltaire snapped.

“What does a tattoo have to do with armor?” Arthur asked.

“Watch,” Voltaire said.

The tattoo began to move, as if the ink was draining from Voltaire’s skin. Then drops of ink started to leak out of his skin as if he was sweating. The drops began to harden, looking like grains of sand coalescing. Once his chest was coated in the grains they slid across his torso, coating it and thickening until the plates of his armor bracketed his chest and arms. The liquid slide lower until Voltaire stood in front of Arthur fully armored again.

“Magic,” Arthur breathed.

“It’s not magic,” Voltaire said indignantly. “It’s Tech.”

“He doesn’t know the difference yet,” Nora said.

“You’ve heard about nanites?” Kai asked. “In movies or comics?”

Arthur nodded.

“Well that’s what they are, mostly,” Kai said.

“How does it work?” Arthur asked.

“Well they function with your body heat and . . .” Voltaire trailed off.

“Stored magic,” Kai finished, grinning.

“But you said it wasn’t magic,” Arthur said.

“It’s not magic, not inherent magic like the Talents,” Voltaire said. “It’s stored up and the magic serves as the electricity to make the armor form.”

Melody tapped her foot impatiently. “We’re on a tour, not at a lecture.”

“You’re right,” Voltaire said. “You’re here to see the Vault.”

Voltaire shifted out of his armor again and stood in his rumpled shirtsleeves. He stuck his hand out to Arthur, again.

“Voltaire Howell,” he said warmly.

Arthur clasped his hand.

“Arthur Bellamy,” Arthur said.

“Well, Arthur, this is the Vault.” Voltaire turned and indicated the area behind him with a sweep of his arm.

The Vault was immense. *Like two glass filing cabinets, for giants.* The walls descended several hundred feet before passing into darkness in its depths, so that he could not see its bottom. Each of the side walls was filled with thousands of glass cases of varying sizes. And from where they stood on the raised entrance they glass cases stretched toward the back of the room until they merged into the shadows and lost their count.

Arthur squinted at a nearby glass case where something stirred. A spike covered vine thrashed against the walls of its container. It battered at the glass in constant waves, before stopping for a moment to recoil its red leaves and spikes for another assault.

“Is that normal?” he asked, pointing at the continually thrashing vine.

Voltaire followed the line of Arthur’s finger. He nodded.

“It does that every time it runs into the glass and remembers it’s boxed in,”
Voltaire said.

“You keep living things in here?”

“Yeah, we keep the animals on the lower levels,” Voltaire said.

“Animals? Is this just some secret zoo?”

“It’s not like a vault in a bank,” Nora said softly.

“This is the great Western Magic Repository for the St. John’s Schools,” Voltaire said, his voice swelling with pride. “Everything stored here provides components for the Forge. You want a metal? We’ve got gold and silver, iron and steel, rhenium or palladium. Do you need something from a plant? We’ve got wormwood, lilac, redwoods, dragontrees and anything else. We’ve got Mongolian Deathworms, alive and dried. A Bao a Qu and various areas of its pelts. A trapped Odei. Ogreteeth. Giant’s bones. Amber from Baltia. Waters from Shangri-La.”

“What are they for?” Arthur asked.

“To make Tech,” Melody said.

“How does a Mongolian Deathworm make Tech?” Arthur asked dubiously.

A Mongolian Deathworm? I’m acting like that’s a real thing.

“What is a Mongolian Deathworm?” Arthur asked.

Melody rolled her eyes. “It’s Volly’s favorite creature. He wants to show it to everyone.”

“Do you want to see it?” Voltaire asked.

“Do I want to see something called a Deathworm? Of course. Is it magic?” Arthur asked.

“What’s with you and magic?” Voltaire shook his head.

“Be nice, it’s his first day here,” Nora said.

Arthur gave her a grateful smile.

“You’re right, sorry Arthur,” Voltaire said. “I should have said, what’s with the newbie’s obsession with magic?”

Melody and Nora laughed. Kai just smiled.

“So do you still want to see the Deathworm?” Voltaire asked hopefully.

“Are you sure you’re a knight?” Melody asked, feigning annoyance. “You act like a child.”

“You’re a knight?” Arthur asked.

“Why is everyone questioning that?” Voltaire clutched his chest as if wounded.

“I’d like to see it,” Arthur said. “I mean, how often do I get to see a Deathworm? Especially one from Mongolia.”

“Alright then, follow me,” Voltaire said.

He strode toward the large railing that surrounded the entryway. He took hold of a length of the metal rail and pulled it inward. There was the sound of something clicking

into place, as the rail pulled free from the rest. A platform rose out of the shadows below the entryway dais, a perfect square of glass.

Arthur peered through the glass down into the darkness of the bottomless darkness of the Vault.

“What’s that?” Arthur asked.

“It’s an elevator,” Voltaire said, stepping out onto the square of glass. Nora and Melody quickly followed his lead.

“Is it safe?” Arthur asked. He lifted one foot tentatively to push his shoe against the glass. His grip on the nearby railing tightened until his knuckles whitened.

“It’s much safer than the mine car styles I’ve seen in other places,” Voltaire said.

“It’s fine, Arthur,” Melody said, she jumped straight up.

Arthur held his breath.

She landed easily. “See?”

Arthur stepped onto the glass platform gingerly. Nothing happened, he didn’t fall endlessly to his death so he released his held breath. The platform stayed the way it was, solid.

“Aren’t you coming, Kai?” Melody asked.

Kai stood near the entrance and had made no move to join them.

“Headmistress wants me,” Kai said. “You’ll be okay with them showing you around right, Arthur? They’re good girls, they’ll take care of you.”

Melody snorted. “You’re right, ‘we’ll take care of’ him. We already like him better than we like you. I bet he doesn’t forget our names as quickly as you do.”

Kai sighed. "Alright, Mel. I do appreciate it, you know."

"I know," Melody said. "You just aren't good at asking people for help or being polite about it."

"You don't need to be so harsh, Mel," Nora said. "He's got a lot on his mind."

"It's okay, Nora. She's right. But thanks for showing Arthur around," Kai said. He turned back to Arthur. "When I get back we're going to the Palatine to see how you do with a sword."

He grinned and waved to them, before disappearing out the way they'd come in.

"A sword?" Arthur asked Melody.

"Not a real sword, you'll use a practice sword, of course." Her eyes stared at the entrance as she spoke, then she looked quickly back at Arthur. "Kai's obsessed with swords. They're second only to experiments with him. Such a boy, I'm sure you'll love them too."

"You don't know that," Nora said.

Swords, like the ones at the museum.

"See, he's gone all dreamy-eyed just thinking about swords," Melody chuckled good-naturedly.

"Are we ready to go?" Voltaire asked.

"Lead on," Melody said.

The platform eased away from the entrance dais. Once it was several feet into the open it began to descend at an angle. It began to pick up speed and the glass cases became a blur. Arthur closed his eyes. He heard Melody laugh.

“I thought you said this was an elevator. Not a flying window.”

“You’ll get used to it,” Melody said.

“Stop,” Voltaire said, and the platform slid to a halt. “Left.”

“Did you pre-program it?” Melody asked.

Arthur opened his eyes. There were walls of glass on either side of them and then he looked around at the blackness beneath them and above.

“Nope,” Voltaire said smugly, tapping his temple. “All memory.”

“What is that?” Arthur asked, as they stopped in front of a glass case.

The case was as wide as Arthur’s house and about half as tall. The inside was half-filled with sand and each of the internal walls looked like a cloudless sky instead of the glass that Arthur could see from the outside.

We’re hundreds of feet underground, why does it look like afternoon in there?

“That’s the Deathworm’s habitat,” Voltaire said. “Well, really it’s a facsimile we’ve constructed. It perfectly reflects the weather in Mongolia, down to the closest degree. It’ll even rain and snow in there, if that’s the weather in Mongolia.”

He was about to continue when Melody gave him a sharp look.

“Another lecture?” she asked. “Now, where are they?”

“In the sand, watch for their trails across the top,” Voltaire said pointing to the chest-high sand.

“I don’t see anything,” Arthur said, leaning closer to the glass.

Voltaire took hold of Arthur’s elbow and pulled him back from the edge. “Just keep watching, and watch your feet too.”

“How many are in there now?” Nora asked.

“Seven, unless Ser Kevlin took one out recently,” Voltaire said.

“Ser Kevlin?” Arthur asked.

“He’s the Master of the Vault. Voltaire’s actually just his second in command,” Nora said.

“Don’t let his know-it-all nature fool you,” Nora said. She and Melody laughed.

Voltaire looked offended until Nora gave him a hug.

“But Ser?” Arthur asked.

“Well yeah, that’s the proper way to address a full knight,” Nora said.

“I just, I thought that was just something from the Middle Ages. I didn’t think you’d still do it,” Arthur said.

“It is,” Voltaire agreed. “But it’s a tradition we’ve maintained even after we moved off the grid.”

“So Volly, really is Ser Voltaire Howell,” Melody said.

“And Kai?” Arthur asked.

“Ser Kai Mosby,” Nora said.

Melody snorted but didn’t say anything when Nora raised a questioning eyebrow.

“Look, back right corner,” Voltaire said.

Arthur surveyed the corner. He was about to ask what Voltaire had seen when a ridge crested the top of the sand. It began to slowly slide forward, the displaced sand sliding off its back, before quickly disappearing into the sand.

“Where’d it go?” Arthur asked.

“Just watch,” Voltaire said. “It knows we’re here.”

As suddenly as it had disappeared the sand ridge reformed close to the glass edge of the enclosure. A red body reared from the edge of the ridge and a gaping maw opened. And then it spat something that sizzled through the air.

Arthur jumped back and his heel found the edge of the platform. He began falling back into the empty space.

Voltaire grabbed his arm and yanked him back onto the platform. “I told you to watch your feet.”

“What was that?” Arthur gaped as he watched the worm spit again. The liquid was a pale yellow and slid down the glass with a hiss.

“Acid,” Voltaire said. “It’s a magic corrosive, very good for melting metals down without losing their magical properties.”

“It spits acid?” Arthur asked incredulously.

“They don’t call it a Deathworm for nothing,” Voltaire said, grinning.

The worm disappeared below the sand again. The ridge of the sand across its back slowly merged back to a normal level.

“Can we see the wil’o’ wisps now?” Nora asked.

“Nora . . . “ Melody began.

“We have time before Kai needs us back,” Nora said firmly.

Voltaire looked to Arthur.

Why are you looking at me for the answer? I don’t know what’s going on here.

“What do you want to do, Arthur?” Voltaire asked. “It’s your tour.”

“I want to see as much as possible,” Arthur said. “I’d like to see the wil’o’wisp, if Nora would.”

Nora’s smile was a mix of grateful and excited.

“Wil’o’wisp it is then,” Voltaire said. As the platform slid away from the deathworms he turned back. “Bye, worms.”

“You know they can’t understand you, right?” Melody asked.

Voltaire ignored her and directed the platform deeper into the Vault.

How far does it go? Arthur wondered as they edged further into the darkness.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: SHARP END FORWARD

By the time they got back to the entrance dais, Kai was waiting for them. His arms were folded and he leaned casually against the front wall.

“Where’d you go?” Melody asked him, as she stepped off the platform.

“I told you, to see the Headmistress. She was wrapping things up with Arthur’s mom,” he said, then turned to Arthur. “You’re now officially a student of the St. John’s School.”

“Congratulations,” Voltaire said, slapping Arthur firmly on the back.

Nora and Melody echoed with warm smiles.

“Your mom went home for your things,” Kai said. “You’ll be in your new room by the end of the night.”

So soon? Isn't this all moving pretty fast?

“Don’t look so down,” Nora said. “If your mom forgets anything, she can bring it later. You’re not trapped here.”

I'm not trapped but no one would believe me if I said anything anyway.

“Alright, Arthur, are you ready for some swordplay?” Kai asked

“Yeah, I guess,” Arthur said.

“Only boys would call anything to do with swords playing,” Melody muttered.

“You just don’t like them because you’re not very good with them,” Nora said in her quiet voice.

Melody glared at her best friend and Nora feigned ignorance.

Arthur realized he still stood on the platform next to Voltaire. He looked down into the yawning black beneath the glass.

I could fall forever, like fall up into endless space.

He stepped off the platform quickly.

Voltaire laughed easily. “I thought you’d gotten over your fear.”

“Not likely,” Arthur muttered.

“I wouldn’t laugh too much, Vol. Ser Kevlin came by a little while ago, growling about the entry desk being unmanned. He said something about denting the armor of irresponsible young knights,” Kai said. He kept his face flat and emotionless as he spoke.

Voltaire gulped and paled. “What’d you tell him?”

“I told him it really was a shame,” Kai said. “That we young knights need to learn our responsibilities.”

“I need to get back to work,” Voltaire said hoarsely. His face had gone from pallid white to flame red. He rushed off the platform, stopping briefly beside Arthur.

“You’re name will be in the system after your first class. If you need anything after that you can come back on your own and someone here’ll help you find it,” Voltaire said briskly, glancing over his shoulder to the empty entry desk.

“Thanks,” Arthur said, but Voltaire had already rushed off.

“Shall we go?” Kai asked, opening the door they’d used to enter the Vault.

Melody and Nora went through the door, still giggling.

Arthur turned to look back at the expanse of the Vault.

They have everything here. It's like a dragon's hoard.

“Do they have dragons in here?” Arthur asked Kai, as they left the Vault.

“Dragons? No, we're not crazy,” Kai said with a shudder. “Plus, no one's seen one alive in about three centuries.”

So they were real, Arthur thought, oddly satisfied. He remembered some old maps his father had, where he'd read sections that claimed ‘here be dragons’, and he smiled.

Melody fell in step with Kai and Arthur.

“Did Master Kevlin really come by?” she asked.

“He did,” Kai said, his face cracking into a grin.

“What did you tell him?”

“That Voltaire was showing a new student around and that I was covering for him,” Kai said.

“You are evil,” Nora said, as both girls laughed delightedly.

Kai led them back through the hallway they'd taken to find the Vault and back out to where they'd first met Melody and Nora. He stopped and turned to the girls.

“Thanks for your help Melody, Nora,” he emphasized their names. “I can show Arthur around the Palatine if you have other things to do.”

Melody was about to say something when Nora cut her off.

“Thanks Kai, we've got some homework to finish up,” she said.

Melody groaned.

Nora turned to Arthur. "We'll see you later, Arthur."

Arthur watched Melody and Nora leave.

"You haven't had many girl friends have you?" Kai asked.

"No, my parents won't let me date yet," Arthur said. "I don't know why, I'm almost fifteen."

Kai burst out laughing. "Not girlfriends, friends who are girls."

Arthur's cheeks went hot.

"No, not really," he admitted.

Girls who are friends, of course. Why would I think he meant girlfriends?

Because I'm an idiot.

"Man, this place might be rough on you," Kai said, shaking his head. "At least Melody will be. But next time they leave don't stare after them like a lost puppy."

"I wasn't staring," Arthur protested.

Kai rolled his eyes.

"I wasn't," Arthur protested.

"Okay," Kai said sarcastically. "I'm just saying, for the future, try not to stare so blatantly."

Arthur flushed again.

"Come on, I'll show you the Palatine," Kai said, still grinning.

Kai led them down a set of wide, shallow steps into the large room of the Palatine.

Arthur's shoes crunched and slid when he stopped. He looked down and saw that the floor which he had believed to be obsidian was actually a series of squares filled with pieces that looked like gravel.

But it still looks like smooth stone over there. He studied squares further into the Palatine. *An illusion?* He bent down and picked up the pieces, they gave a little when he squeezed them. *Like rubber.*

"Throw them," Kai said.

"What?"

"I bet you can't throw them past there," Kai said, pointing to a tile three squares away.

"You don't think I can do it? My arm's not that bad," Arthur said.

"I know you can't," Kai said.

Arthur threw the chips as hard as he could. They arced a good distance but then fell straight down to the floor.

Right at the line, Arthur thought in amazement. *Like I threw them against a wall.*

"Magic," Arthur said.

Kai groaned.

"Are you going to say that about everything?" Kai asked in exasperation.

Arthur laughed.

"You said it on purpose didn't you," Kai said. Realization dawned on his face and his grin slid back into place.

"Yeah," Arthur grinned back.

“Alright, I probably deserved that,” Kai admitted.

“It’s Tech then?” Arthur asked.

“You’re starting to get the hang of this,” Kai said. “Now try to throw some at me.”

Arthur picked up a handful of chips and threw them at Kai without hesitating. The chips stopped just short of striking him and fell harmlessly to the ground.

Whoa, he’s got a force field.

“You’re probably thinking I did something, right?” Kai asked.

Arthur nodded.

“But I didn’t. It’s actually in the chips themselves, they won’t go outside a three square radius or strike an opponent. It’s designed to keep the floor even and keep people from cheating in a fight.”

“So you can’t throw them in someone’s face.”

“Right. Now, are you ready for the fun part?” Kai asked.

Arthur stood up. “The swords?”

“Yep, follow me, we’ll pick one out for you,” Kai said.

Kai led Arthur to the side of the room where hundreds of shelves and boxes lined the wall. Each was filled with wooden swords of varying sizes and shapes.

“I didn’t know there were so many different types of swords.” Arthur picked up a short sword and swung it through the air.

“You’re a fan of the Gladius?” Kai asked in surprise.

Arthur cut at the air again.

“Is that what this is?” He set the practice sword back on its shelf. “Are these all the on’s I can choose from?”

“Well, these are all of the wooden practice swords,” Kai said, mistaking Arthur’s intent. “The metal ones are on the other wall. But for now just stick with a wooden one.”

“How do you pick a good one?” Arthur asked.

“Practice,” Kai said with a shrug. “I’m probably not the best to ask since I’ve switched sword types three times so far.”

Arthur picked up a longer sword. It felt heavy in just one hand but felt just about right when he held it with both hands. The hilt was wrapped in soft grey material that conformed itself to his palms. He swung the blade and the weight shifted comfortably in his hands.

“Huh, I wouldn’t have expected you to be an Oakeshott type,” Kai said.

“What’s an Oakeshott?” Arthur asked. He studied the sword in his hand.

I never thought I’d be holding a sword. He switched it between hands and slashed again.

It feels pretty good.

“Well, Oakeshott was a knight about a hundred years ago, though most people don’t know that he really was a knight. He basically named all of the Middle Age swords, mostly the ones that the Talents used,” Kai explained.

“So this is a Talent’s sword?” Arthur asked.

“Yeah, but if it’s comfortable then you should use it.”

“How would I know when a sword is comfortable? It’s good enough, I guess,” Arthur said.

“Alright, come on,” Kai said, heading back toward the center of the Palatine.

“You’re gonna have to explain what’s up with the Talents and Techs soon,” Arthur said, following.

“Alright, I will. But swords first,” Kai said.

“Are we going to fight?” Arthur asked.

“It’s called sparring,” Kai said absently as he surveyed the various students sparring against each other or practicing with dummies. “And no, we aren’t going to spar. I’m looking for a partner for you though.”

“Why not?”

“It wouldn’t be a fair fight,” Kai said, grinning.

He’s probably right, Arthur reminded himself. I haven’t even held a sword before this, how could I fight a full knight?

“Hey, Jonesy, come here,” Kai called.

A smaller boy, with black hair and a mouth full of overly large teeth, jogged over. He carried a sword that was almost as tall as himself slung across his shoulders.

“Hey, Kai. How’s it going?” Jonesy asked.

“Jonesy, this is Arthur,” Kai said. “He’s new as of today. I wanted to see him spar with someone.”

“So you picked me? I see how it is,” Jonesy said, laughing.

“Arthur, this is William Henry Jones III, or Jonesy. He’s one of our best seventh graders. I hear he’s already been selected to be a page this winter,” Kai said.

A seventh grader? He’s having me fight a seventh grader? Arthur bit back his indignation.

“Nice to meet you, Arthur,” Jonesy said, sticking out a hand.

Arthur shook it. The callouses on Jonesy’s hands were rough and his grip was firm.

“Nice to meet you, too,” Arthur said.

“You don’t mind if I pretend you’re King Arthur while we spar, do you?” Jonesy asked.

“What?”

“Just ignore him,” Kai said. “He always pretends to be a knight from the past instead of focusing on what kind of knight he’ll be.”

Jonesy scuffed his shoes through the grey chips.

Did he just say King Arthur was real? That’s not possible, is it?

“King Arthur was just a myth, right?” Arthur asked.

“No way, he was real,” Jonesy said defensively. “And someday, in our greatest need he’ll come back to us.”

“But there’s no proof he’s real,” Arthur said.

“You didn’t have proof magic existed until an hour ago either, maybe there are still things that you don’t know yet,” Kai said.

He’s right. Who am I to say King Arthur didn’t exist?

“Did he?” Arthur asked.

“What?” Kai said.

“Did he exist?”

Jonesy was about to say something but Kai cut him off.

“We’re not here to discuss that. We’re here for you to spar. We only have about an hour ‘til your mom gets back with your things,” Kai said.

“Alright,” Arthur said. “Is there something we need to do before we start? Take seven paces or something?”

“You’re not dueling,” Kai snorted. “Just make sure you’re both ready.”

Jonesy walked a few steps away from Arthur and then took his huge sword off his shoulders. He held it in front of him with both hands, his arms didn’t waver.

He knows what he’s doing. What am I doing? I don’t know how to use a sword.

This is a stupid idea.

“Any advice?” Arthur asked Kai. His palms began to sweat.

“Yeah,” Kai said. “Don’t drop your sword and keep the sharp end forward.”

That’s not helpful.

Arthur raised his sword to imitate the way Jonesy held his. He switched his grip on the hilt, right hand over left, then left over right, then back.

“Ready?” Kai asked.

“Ready,” Jonesy said. The jovial lines of his face had flattened and his too large teeth were hidden behind the determined set of his mouth.

“Uh, sure,” Arthur said.

“Go,” Kai said.

This is a bad idea.

Jonesy took two quick steps forward and Arthur slid back three. Jonesy slashed at Arthur’s ribs with the wooden sword but Arthur jumped back another step.

“Come on, Arthur,” Kai said. “We’re trying to see how good you are with a sword not at dodging.”

“Easy for you to say. He’s not trying to hit you,” Arthur said, backpedalling.

With a lunge, Jonesy closed the distance toward Arthur. He swung toward Arthur’s shoulder in a blur. Arthur moved his sword to block Jonesy’s and at the same time he flinched away. The swords connected and Arthur’s fingers went numb. His sword fell to the floor.

“I told you to hang onto it,” Kai called.

Arthur stumbled away from Jonesy, tripping over his own feet and ending up on his knees.

Why is he still coming at me? Arthur scrambled back through the grey chips in a panic.

Jonesy raised his sword to swing down on Arthur.

He’s going to hit me. Arthur threw up his hands in desperation.

There was a sharp crack and Arthur looked up. The silver gauntlet had reformed around his wrist and Jonesy’s sword had snapped when it’d struck the metal. The younger boy held the bottom half of his sword and gaped at Arthur.

“What is it?” someone asked.

Arthur looked around and saw that many of the other students in the Palatine had stopped their practices. They had formed a rough half circle around the sparring, and their amazed expressions mirrored Jonesy's.

"Looks like a gauntlet," a girl said.

"How does a newbie have that?" asked another.

A figure thrust herself through the crowd and when the others recognized her they shrank away from the fury in her face. Her back was straight as an arrow and her blonde hair swung behind her as she tossed her head.

"You? What idiot brought you here?" she said when she recognized Arthur. Then her eyes widened when she caught sight of the gauntlet.

"No," she whispered under her breath, her face pale.

The girl from the museum, she survived, Arthur recognized.

"You put it on? You idiot," she shouted and stalked forward. She held her hand out to the side and her sword materialized.

This isn't going to go well.

BIOGRAPHY

Jackson Crow-Mickle graduated from Coronado High School, Coronado, CA, in 2007. He received his Bachelor of Arts from Bucknell University in 2011. He was employed as a Technical Writer and Program Analyst for four years and received his Master of Arts in English from George Mason University in 2015.