THE RISE OF NINE

BOOK THREE OF THE LORIEN LEGACIES

PITTACUS LORE

HARPER
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The Rise of Nine

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CHAPTER ONE

6A. SERIOUSLY? I LOOK AT THE BOARDING PASS IN my hand, its large type announcing my seat assignment, and wonder if Crayton chose this seat on purpose. It could be a coincidence, but the way things have gone recently, I am not a big believer in coincidences. I wouldn't be surprised if Marina sat down behind me in row seven, and Ella made her way back to row ten. But, no, the two girls drop down beside me without saying a word, and join me in studying each person boarding the plane. Being hunted, you are constantly on guard. Who knows when the Mogadorians might appear.

Crayton will board last, after he's watched to see who else gets on the plane, and only once he feels the flight is absolutely secure.

I raise the window shade and watch the ground crew hustle back and forth under the plane. The city of Barcelona is a faint outline in the distance.

Marina's knee bounces furiously up and down next to mine. The battle against an army of Mogadorians yesterday at the lake, the death of her Cêpan, finding her Chest—and now, it's the first time in almost eleven years that she's left the town where she spent her childhood. She's nervous.

"Everything okay?" I ask. My newly blond hair falls into my face and startles me. I forgot I dyed it this morning. It's just one of many changes in the last forty-eight hours.

"Everyone looks normal," Marina whispers, keeping her eyes on the crowded aisle. "We're safe, as far as I can tell."

"Good, but that's not what I meant." I gently set my foot on hers and she stops bouncing her knee. She offers me a quick apologetic smile before returning to her close watch of each boarding passenger. A few seconds later, her knee starts bouncing again. I just shake my head.

I feel sorry for Marina. She was locked up in an isolated orphanage with a Cêpan who refused to train her. Her Cêpan had lost sight of why we are here on Earth in the first place. I'm doing my best to help her, to fill in the gaps. I can train her to learn how to control her strength and when to use her developing Legacies. But first I'm trying to show her that it's okay to trust me.

The Mogadorians will pay for what they've done. For taking so many who we've loved, here on Earth and on Lorien. It's my personal mission to destroy every last one

of them, and I'll be sure Marina gets her revenge too. Not only did she just lose her best friend, Héctor, back at the lake, but, like me, her Cêpan was killed right in front of her. We will both carry that with us forever.

"How is it down there, Six?" Ella asks, leaning over Marina.

I turn back towards the window. The men below the plane begin to clear away their equipment, conducting a few last-minute checks. "So far, so good."

My seat is directly over the wing, which is comforting to me. On more than one occasion I've had to use my Legacies to help a pilot out of a jam. Once, over southern Mexico, I used my telekinesis to push the plane a dozen degrees to the right, only seconds before crashing into the side of a mountain. Last year I got 124 passengers safely through a vicious thunderstorm over Kansas by surrounding the plane with an impervious cloud of cool air. We shot through the storm like a bullet through a balloon.

When the ground crew moves on to the next plane, I follow Ella's gaze towards the front of the aisle. We're both impatient for Crayton to board. That will mean everything is okay, at least for now. Every seat is full but the one behind Ella. Where is he? I glance out at the wing again, scanning the area for anything out of the ordinary.

I lean down and shove my backpack under my seat. It's practically empty, so it folds down easily. Crayton bought it for me at the airport. The three of us need to look like

normal teenagers, he says, like high school students on a field trip. That's why there's a biology textbook on Ella's lap.

"Six?" Marina asks. I hear her buckle and unbuckle her seat belt nervously.

"Yeah?" I respond.

"You've flown before, right?"

Marina is only a year older than I am. But with her solemn, thoughtful eyes and her new, sophisticated haircut that falls just below her shoulders, she can easily pass for an adult. Right now, however, she bites her nails and pulls her knees up to her chest like a scared child.

"Yes," I say. "It's not so bad. In fact, once you relax, it's kind of awesome."

Sitting there on the plane, my thoughts turn in the direction of my own Cêpan, Katarina. Not that I ever flew with her. But when I was nine years old, we had a close call in a Cleveland alley with a Mogadorian that left us both shaken and covered in a thick layer of ash. Katarina moved us to Southern California after that. Our crumbling, two-story bungalow was near the beach, practically in the shadow of Los Angeles International Airport. A hundred planes roared overhead every hour, always interrupting Katarina's teaching as well as the little free time I had to spend with my only friend, a skinny girl next door named Ashley.

I lived under those airplanes for seven months. They

were my alarm clock in the morning, screaming directly over my bed as the sun rose. At night they were ominous ghosts telling me to stay awake, to be prepared to rip off my sheets and jump in the car in a matter of seconds. Since Katarina didn't let me stray far from the house, the airplanes were also the sound track of my afternoons.

On one of those afternoons, as the vibrations from an enormous plane overhead shook the lemonade in our plastic cups, Ashley said, "Me and my mom are going to visit my grandparents next month. I can't wait! Have you ever been on a plane?" Ashley was always talking about all the places she went and things she did with her family. She knew Katarina and I stayed close to home and she liked to brag.

"Not really," I said.

"What do you mean, 'Not really'? You've either been on a plane, or you haven't. Just admit it. You haven't."

I remember feeling my face burn with embarrassment. Her challenge hit its mark. I finally said, "No, I've never been on an airplane." I wanted to tell her I've been on something much bigger, something much more impressive than a little airplane. I wanted her to know I came to Earth on a ship from another planet called Lorien and the trip had covered more than one hundred million miles. I didn't, though, because I knew I had to keep Lorien secret.

Ashley laughed at me. Without saying good-bye, she left to wait for her dad to come home from work.

"Why haven't we ever been on a plane?" I asked Katarina

that night as she peered out the blinds of my bedroom window.

"Six," she said, turning to me before correcting herself. "I mean, Veronica. It's too dangerous for us to travel by plane. We'd be trapped up there. You know what could happen if we were thousands of miles in the air and *then* found out Mogs had followed us on board?"

I knew exactly what could happen. I could picture the chaos, the other passengers screaming and ducking under their seats as a couple of huge alien soldiers barreled down the aisle with swords. But that didn't stop me from wanting to do something so normal, so human, as to fly on a plane from one city to the next. I'd spent all my time on Earth unable to do the things other kids my age took for granted. We rarely stayed in one place long enough for me to meet other kids, let alone make friends—Ashley was the first girl Katarina had ever allowed over to our house. Sometimes, like in California, I didn't even attend school, if Katarina thought it was safer.

I knew why all this was necessary, of course. Usually, I didn't let it bother me. But Katarina could tell that Ashley's superior attitude had gotten under my skin. My silence the following days must have cut through her, because to my surprise she bought us two round-trip airline tickets to Denver. The destination didn't matter—she knew I just wanted the experience.

I couldn't wait to tell Ashley.

But on the day of the trip, standing outside the airport, Katarina hesitated. She seemed nervous. She ran her hand through her short black hair. She had dyed and cut it the night before, just before making herself a new ID. A family of five walked around us on the curb, dragging heavy luggage, and to my left a tearful mother said good-bye to her two young daughters. I wanted nothing more than to join in, to be a part of this everyday scene. Katarina watched everyone around us while I fidgeted impatiently by her side.

"No," Katarina finally said. "We're not going. I'm sorry, Veronica, but it's not worth it."

We drove home in silence, letting the screaming engines of the planes passing overhead speak for us. When we got out of the car on our street, I saw Ashley sitting on her front steps. She looked at me walking towards our house and mouthed the word *liar*. The humiliation was almost too much to bear.

But, really, I *was* a liar. It's ironic. Lying was all I had done since I'd arrived on Earth. My name, where I was from, where my father was, why I couldn't stay the night at another girl's house—lying was all I knew and it was what kept me alive. But when Ashley called me a liar the *one* time I was telling someone the truth, I was unspeakably angry. I stormed up to my room, slammed the door, and punched the wall.

To my surprise, my fist went straight through.

Katarina slammed my door open, wielding a kitchen knife and ready to strike. She thought the noise she'd heard must be Mogs. When she saw what I had done to the wall, she realized that something had changed with me. She lowered the blade and smiled. "Today's not the day you get on a plane, but it is the day you're going to start your training."

Seven years later, sitting on this plane with Marina and Ella, I hear Katarina's voice in my head. "We'd be trapped up there." But I'm ready for that possibility now, in ways that Katarina and I weren't before.

I've since flown dozens of times, and everything has gone fine. However, this *is* the first time I've done it without using my invisibility Legacy to sneak on board. I know I'm much stronger now. And I'm getting stronger by the day. If a couple of Mog soldiers charged at me from the front of the plane, they wouldn't be dealing with a meek young girl. I know what I'm capable of; I am a soldier now, a warrior. I am someone to fear, not hunt.

Marina lets go of her knees and sits up straight, releasing a long breath. In a barely audible voice, she says, "I'm scared. I just want to get in the air."

"You'll be fine," I say.

She smiles, and I smile back at her. Marina proved herself to be a strong ally with amazing Legacies on the battlefield yesterday. She can breathe underwater, see in the dark and heal the sick and wounded. Like all Garde,

she also has telekinesis. And because we're so close in order—I'm Number Six and she's Number Seven—our bond is special. When the charm still held and we had to be killed in order, the Mogadorians would have had to get through me before they could get to her. And they never would have gotten through me.

Ella sits silently on the other side of Marina. As we continue to wait for Crayton, she opens the biology book on her lap and stares at the pages. Our charade does not demand this level of concentration and I'm about to lean over and tell her, but then I see she isn't reading at all. She is trying to turn the page with her mind, trying to use telekinesis, but nothing's happening.

Ella is what Crayton calls an Aeternus, someone born with the ability to move back and forth between ages. But she's still young and her other powers have not yet developed. They will come in their own time, no matter how impatiently she wills them to develop now.

Ella came to Earth on another ship, one I didn't know existed until John Smith, Number Four, told me he saw it in his visions. She was just a baby, which means she's almost twelve now. Crayton says he is her unofficial Cêpan, since there wasn't time for him to be officially appointed to her. He, like all of our Cêpans, has a duty to help Ella develop her Legacies. He told us that there was also a small herd of Chimæra on their ship, Loric animals capable of shifting forms and battling alongside us.

I'm happy she's here. After Numbers One, Two, and Three died, only six of us remained. With Ella, we number seven. Lucky number seven, if you believe in luck. I don't, though. I believe in strength.

Finally, Crayton squeezes down the aisle, carrying a black briefcase. He's wearing eyeglasses and a brown suit that looks too big for him. Under his strong chin is a blue bow tie. He's supposed to be our teacher.

"Hello, girls," he says, stopping next to us.

"Hi, Mr. Collins," Ella responds.

"It's a full flight," Marina says. That's code for everyone on board looks okay. To tell him everything on the ground appears normal, I say, "I'm going to try to sleep."

He nods and takes his seat directly behind Ella. Leaning forward between Marina and Ella, he says, "Use your time on the plane wisely, please. Study hard."

That means, don't let your guard down.

I didn't know what to think of Crayton when we first met. He's stern and quick tempered, but his heart seems to be in the right place and his knowledge of the world and current events is incredible. Official or not, he has taken his Cêpan role seriously. He says he would die for any one of us. He will do anything to defeat the Mogadorians; anything to exact our revenge. I believe him on all counts.

However, it's with reluctance that I'm on this plane headed to India at all. I wanted to get back to the United States as soon as possible, to get back to John and Sam.

But yesterday, standing on top of the dam overlooking the carnage at the lake, Crayton told us that Setrákus Ra, the powerful Mogadorian leader, would be on Earth soon, if he wasn't here already. That Setrákus Ra's arrival was a sign that the Mogadorians understood we were a threat, and we should expect them to step up their campaign to kill us. Setrákus Ra is more or less invincible. Only Pittacus Lore, the most powerful of all the Lorien Elders, would have been able to defeat him. We were horrified. What did that mean for the rest of us then, if he was invincible? When Marina asked this, asked how any of us could possibly stand a chance of defeating him, Crayton told us even more shocking news, knowledge that all the Cêpans had been entrusted with. One of the Garde—one of us—was supposed to hold the same powers as Pittacus. One of us was supposed to grow as strong as he had been, and would be able to beat Setrákus Ra. We just had to hope that that Garde wasn't One, Two, or Three, that it was one of the ones still alive. If so, we had a chance. We just had to wait and see who it was, and hope that these powers showed themselves soon.

Crayton thinks he's found him—the Garde who holds Pittacus's powers.

"I've read about a boy who seems to have extraordinary powers in India," he told us then. "He lives high up in the Himalayas. Some believe him to be the Hindu god Vishnu reincarnated; others believe the boy is an alien

imposter with the power to physically alter his form."

"Like me, Papa?" Ella had asked. Their father-daughter relationship took me by surprise. I couldn't help but feel a touch of jealousy—jealousy that she still had her Cêpan, someone to turn to for guidance.

"He's not changing ages, Ella. He's changing into beasts and other beings. The more I read about him, the more I believe he is a member of the Garde, and the more I believe he may be the one to possess all of the Legacies, the one who can fight and kill Setrákus Ra. We need to find him as soon as possible."

I don't want to be on a wild goose chase for another member of the Garde right now. I know where John is, or where he is supposed to be. I can hear Katarina's voice, urging me to follow my instincts, which are telling me we should connect with John first before anything else. It's the least risky move. Certainly less risky than flying around the world based on Crayton's hunch and rumors on the internet.

"It could be a trap," I said. "What if those stories were planted for us to find so we would do exactly this?"

"I understand your concern, Six, but trust me, I'm the master of planting stories on the internet. This is no plant. There are far too many sources pointing to this boy in India. He hasn't been running. He hasn't been hiding. He's just *being*, and he appears to be very powerful. If he *is* one of you, then we must get to him before the Mogadorians

do. We'll go to America to meet up with Number Four as soon as this trip is over," Crayton said.

Marina looked at me. She wanted to find John almost as much as I did—she'd been following the news of his exploits online and she'd had a similar feeling in her gut that he was one of us, a feeling I had confirmed for her. "Promise?" she asked Crayton. He nodded.

The captain's voice breaks through my reverie. We're about to take off. I want so badly to redirect the plane to point it towards West Virginia. Towards John and Sam. I hope they're okay. Images of John being held in a prison cell keep entering my mind. I never should have told him about the Mog base in the mountain, but John wanted to get his Chest back and there was no way I could convince him to leave it behind.

The plane taxis down the runway and Marina grabs my wrist. "I really wish Héctor was here. He'd have something smart to say right now to make me feel better."

"It's okay," Ella says, holding Marina's other hand. "You have us."

"And I'll work on something smart to say," I offer.

"Thanks," Marina says, though it sounds like something between a hiccup and a gulp. I let her nails dig into my wrist. I give her a supportive smile, and a minute later we're airborne.

CHAPTER TWO

I'VE BEEN IN AND OUT OF CONSCIOUSNESS FOR THE past two days, rolling back and forth in a hallucinating sickness. The effects from the blue force field outside the Mogadorians' mountain have lingered far longer than Nine told me they would, both mentally and physically. Every few minutes, my muscles seize and sear with pain.

I try to distract myself from the agony by looking around the tiny bedroom of this decaying, abandoned house. Nine couldn't have picked a more disgusting place for us to hide. I can't trust my eyes. I watch the pattern on the yellow wallpaper come to life, the design marching like ants over patches of mold. The cracked ceiling appears to breathe, rising and falling at frightening speeds. There's a large jagged hole in the wall that separates the bedroom and living room, as if someone tossed a sledgehammer through it. Smashed beer cans

are strewn around the room, and the baseboards have been torn to shreds by animals. I've been hearing things rustling in the trees outside the house, but I'm too weak to be alarmed. Last night I woke to find a cockroach on my cheek. I barely had the energy to swat it off.

"Hey, Four?" I hear through the hole in the wall. "You awake or what? It's time for lunch and your food's getting cold."

I heave myself to my feet. My head spins as I stumble through the doorway into what used to be the living room, and I collapse on the dingy gray carpet. I know Nine's in here, but I can't keep my eyes open long enough to find him. All I want is to lay my head in Sarah's lap. Or in Six's. Either one. I can't think straight.

Something warm hits my shoulder. I roll over to see Nine sitting on the ceiling above me, his long black hair hanging down into the room. He's gnawing on something and his hands are greasy.

"Where are we again?" I ask. The sunlight coming through the windows is too much and I close my eyes. I need more sleep. I need something, anything, to clear my head and regain my strength. My fingers fumble over my blue pendant, hoping to somehow gather energy through it, but it remains cold against my chest.

"The northern part of West Virginia," Nine says between bites. "Ran out of gas, remember?"

"Barely," I whisper. "Where's Bernie Kosar?"

"Outside. That one is *always* on patrol. He is one cool animal. Tell me, Four, how did *you* of all the Garde end up with him?"

I crawl into the corner of the room and push my back up against a wall. "BK was with me on Lorien. His name was Hadley back then. I guess Henri thought it would be good to bring him along for the trip."

Nine throws a tiny bone across the ceiling. "I had a couple of Chimæras as a kid too. Don't remember their names, but I can still see them running around our house tearing stuff up. They died in the war, protecting my family." Nine is silent for a moment, clenching his jaw. This is the first time I've seen him act anything other than tough. It's nice to see, even if it's short lived. "At least, that's what my Cêpan told me."

I stare at my bare feet. "What was your Cêpan's name?"

"Sandor," he says, standing up on the ceiling. He's wearing my shoes. "It's weird. I literally can't remember the last time I said his name out loud. Some days, I can barely picture his face." Nine's voice hardens, and he closes his eyes. "But that's how it goes, I guess. Whatever. They're the expendable ones."

His last sentence sends shockwaves through me. "Henri was not expendable, and neither was Sandor! No Loric was ever expendable. And give me back my shoes!"

Nine kicks my shoes into the middle of the floor, then takes his time walking first along the ceiling and then down the back wall. "All right, all right. I know he wasn't expendable, man. Sometimes it's just easier to think of him that way, you know? Truth is, Sandor was an amazing Cêpan." Nine reaches the floor and towers over me. I forgot how tall he is. Intimidating. He shoves a handful of what he's been eating in my face. "You want some of this or not? Because I'm about to finish it off."

The sight of it makes my stomach churn. "What is it?"

"Barbecued rabbit. Nature's finest."

I don't dare open my mouth to respond, afraid that I might get sick. Instead, I stumble back towards the bedroom, ignoring the laughter that follows me. The bedroom door is so warped it's nearly impossible to close, but I wedge it into the doorframe as tightly as I can. I lie down on the floor, using my sweatshirt as a pillow, and think about how I ended up here, ended up like this. Without Henri. Without Sam. Sam is my best friend, and I can't believe we left him behind. As thoughtful and loyal and supportive as Sam is—traveling and fighting alongside me for the last several months—Nine is so very not. He's reckless, arrogant, selfish and just flat-out rude. I picture Sam, back in the Mog cave, a gun rocking against his shoulder as

a dozen Mogadorian soldiers swarmed him. I couldn't get to him. I couldn't save him. I should have fought harder, run faster. I should have ignored Nine and gone back to Sam. He would have done that for me. The immense amount of guilt I feel paralyzes me, until I finally fall asleep.

It's dark. I'm no longer in a house in the mountains with Nine. I no longer feel the painful effects of the blue force field. My head is finally clear, although I don't know where I am, or how I got here. When I shout for help, I can't hear my voice even though I feel my lips moving. I shuffle ahead, hands out in front of me. My palms suddenly start to glow with my Lumen. The light is dim at first but quickly grows into two powerful beams.

"John." A hoarse whisper says my name.

I whip my hands around to see where I am, but the light reveals only empty darkness. I'm entering a vision. I angle my palms towards the ground so my Lumen will light my way, and start towards the voice. The hoarse whisper keeps repeating my name over and over. It sounds young and full of fear. Then comes another voice, gruff and staccato, barking orders.

The voices become clearer. It's Sam, my lost friend, and Setrákus Ra, my worst enemy. I can tell I'm nearing the Mogadorian base. I can see the blue force field,

the source of so much pain. For some reason, I know it won't hurt me now, and I don't hesitate to pass through it. When I do, it's not my screams I hear, but Sam's. His tortured voice fills my head as I enter the mountain and move through its mazelike tunnels. I see the charred remains of our recent battle, from when I tossed a ball of green lava at the gas tanks at the mountain's bottom, sending a sea of fire raging upwards. I move through the main cavernous hall and its spiraling ledges. I step onto the arched stone bridge Sam and I so recently crossed under the cloak of invisibility. I keep going, passing through tributaries and corridors, all while being forced to listen to my best friend's crippling howls.

I know where I'm going before I get there. The steady incline of the floor lands me in the wide room lined with prison cells.

There they are. Setrákus Ra is standing in the middle of the room. He is *huge* and truly revolting looking. And there's Sam. He's suspended inside a small spherical cage next to Setrákus Ra. His own private torture bubble. Sam's arms are stretched high above his head and his legs are splayed, held in place with chains. A series of pipes are dripping steaming liquid onto various parts of Sam's body. Blood has pooled and dried under the cage.

I stop ten feet away from them. Setrákus Ra senses

my presence and turns around, the three Loric pendants from other Garde children he has killed dangling from his massive neck. The scar circling his throat pulses with a dark energy.

"We missed each other," Setrákus Ra growls.

I open my mouth but nothing comes out. Sam's blue eyes turn in my direction, but I can't tell if he sees me.

More hot liquid drips from the pipes, hitting Sam in the wrists, chest, knees and feet. A thick stream flows onto his cheek and rolls down his neck. Seeing Sam tortured finally gives me a voice.

"Let him go!" I shout.

Setrákus Ra's eyes harden. The pendants around his neck glow and mine responds, lighting up as well. The blue Loralite gem is hot against my skin, and then it suddenly bursts into flames, my Legacy taking over. I allow the fire to crawl along my shoulders.

"I'll let him go," he says, "if you come back to the mountain and fight me."

I glance quickly over at Sam and see that he has lost his battle with the pain and has blacked out, chin resting on his chest.

Setrákus Ra points to Sam's withered body and says, "You must decide. If you don't come, I'll kill him and then I'll kill the rest of them. If you do, I'll let them all live."

I hear a voice yelling my name, telling me I have to

move. Nine. I sit up with a gasp and my eyes snap open. I'm covered in a thin layer of sweat. I stare through the jagged hole of broken drywall and it takes me a few seconds to get my bearings.

"Dude! Get up!" Nine yells from the other side of the door. "There's a ton of stuff we need to do!"

I get to my knees and fumble around my neck for my pendant. I squeeze it as hard as I can, trying to get Sam's screams out of my head. The bedroom door swings open. Nine stands in the doorway, wiping his face with the back of his hand. "Seriously, bro. Get your shit together. We need to get out of here."

CHAPTER THREE

THE AIR IS THICK AND HEAVY AS WE LEAVE THE airport in New Delhi. We walk along the curb, Marina's Chest under Crayton's arm. Cars inch past on the congested roadways, horns blaring. The four of us are on the alert for signs of trouble, even the slightest indication we're being followed. We reach an intersection and are jostled on all sides. Women shove by with tall baskets balanced on their heads; men with buckets of water draped over their dark shoulders shout for us to get out of the way. The smells, the noise, the physical proximity of the busy world around us could overwhelm us. We stay vigilant.

There's a bustling market on the other side of the street that looks like it stretches for miles. Children crowd us with trinkets for sale, and we politely turn down their wood carvings and ivory jewelry. I'm amazed by the organized chaos of it all, happy to see life moving along in what seems to be routine, happy for this moment away from our war.

"Where do we go now?" Marina asks, raising her voice to be heard above the noise.

Crayton scans the crowd crossing the street. "Now that we're away from the airports and its cameras, I suppose we can find a—" A taxi skids to a stop in front of us, a cloud of dirt billowing from its tires, and the driver pushes the passenger door open. "Taxi," Crayton finishes.

"Please. Where can I take you?" the driver asks. He's young and looks nervous, like this is his first day on the job. Marina must either relate to his mood or be desperate to get away from the crowds, because she jumps right into the back of the car and scoots all the way over.

Crayton gives the driver an address as he folds himself into the front seat. Ella and I pile into the back, next to Marina.

The driver nods, and then promptly slams his foot down on the accelerator, throwing us all back against the cracked plastic seat. New Delhi becomes a blur of bright colors and fleeting sounds. We zip past cars and rickshaws, goats and cows. We take corners so fast I'm surprised it isn't on two wheels. We miss clipping pedestrians by a hair's breadth so many times I lose count. Then I decide it's probably best if I don't look so closely. We're tossed back and forth against each other. The only way we keep ourselves from falling onto the car's dirty floor is by clinging to one another and anything else we can grab.

The taxi jumps a curb at one point, shooting down a

stretch of narrow sidewalk to avoid stalled traffic. It's totally crazy and I admit I love every second of it. Years of running, hiding and fighting have turned me into a total adrenaline junkie. Marina plants her hands on the headrest in front of her, refusing to look out the windows while Ella leans over her, trying to take it all in.

With no warning, the driver jerks the taxi violently down a road that runs behind a long row of warehouse buildings. The street is flanked by dozens of men with AK-47s. Our driver nods at them as we fly past. Crayton looks over his shoulder at me. His concerned face makes the knot in my stomach grow larger. The road is suddenly and noticeably absent of traffic.

"Where are you taking us?" Crayton demands of the driver. "We need to go south and you're headed north." Marina's head jerks up and she and Ella look over at me questioningly.

All of a sudden the car screeches to a halt and the driver dives out the door, rolling away from the taxi. A dozen vans and covered trucks surround the car. Each vehicle has a similar smudge of red paint on the doors, but I can't quite make out what it is. Men in street clothes jump out of the vans, machine guns ready.

Now the adrenaline really starts to flow. It always kicks in before a fight. I look over at Marina and see the terrified look on her face, but I know she will take her cues from me. I keep myself calm. "You guys ready?

Marina? Ella?" They nod.

Crayton puts his hand up. "Wait! Look at the trucks, Six. Look at their doors!"

"What?" Ella asks. "What's on their doors?"

The men come closer, their shouts growing urgent. I'm too focused on the imminent danger to consider what Crayton is talking about. When people with guns threaten me, or the ones I love, I'll make sure they regret it.

Marina looks out the window. "Six, look! Are those number—"

I finally see what they're all staring at just as the door next to Marina is whipped open. The red smudges on the truck doors are all eights.

"Out!" the man yells.

"Do as he says," Crayton says under his breath, voice calm. "For now, we do what they want."

We carefully get out of the taxi, our hands up, all four of us transfixed by the red numbers painted on the truck doors. We must be moving too slowly because one of the men leans forward and impatiently yanks Ella forward. She loses her balance and falls down. I can't help myself. I don't care if they're with Number Eight or not, you don't knock an eleven-year-old girl to the ground. I heave the man into the air with my mind, tossing him onto the roof of a warehouse across the street. The other men panic, whipping their guns around and screaming to one another.

Crayton grabs my arm. "Let's find out why they're here

and if they know where Number Eight is. If we need to, we'll strike with full force then." Still furious, I shake off his hand but I nod. He's right—we don't know what they want with us. Better to find out before they're unable to explain.

A tall bearded man wearing a red beret steps out of one of the covered trucks and slowly walks towards us. His smile is confident, but his eyes are wary. A small pistol sticks out of his shoulder holster.

"Good afternoon and welcome," he says in thickly accented English. "I am Commander Grahish Sharma of the rebel group Vishnu Nationalist Eight. We come in peace."

"Then what are the guns for?" Crayton asks.

"The guns were to convince you to come with us. We know who you are and would never engage in a battle with you. We know we'd lose. Vishnu told us you are all powerful like him."

"How did you find us?" Crayton demands. "And who is Vishnu?"

"Vishnu is the all-pervading essence of all beings, the master of the past, present and future, the Supreme God, and Preserver of the Universe. He told us you would be four in total, three young girls and one man. He asked me to convey a message to you."

"What's the message?" I say.

Commander Sharma clears his throat and smiles. "'His message is: 'I am Number Eight. Welcome to India. Please come and see me as soon as you can.'"

CHAPTER FOUR

THE SKY IS GRAY AND HEAVY. THE WOODS ARE DARK and cold. Most of the leaves have fallen from the trees and lie dead on the ground. Nine walks ahead of me, scanning the landscape for game. "You know, that rabbit was better than I thought it would be." He produces a short piece of vine from his pocket and pulls his shaggy black hair into a ponytail. "I'll make it again tonight if you're interested."

"I think I'll figure something else out."

He looks surprised at my squeamishness. "Scared of fresh kill? You have to eat if you want to get your strength up. I don't know why, but our healing stones don't do jack shit for your pain. And, you know, this sickness thing of yours is a real drag. Time's a-wasting, dude. We need to get you better and we've got to get out of here."

I know how weak my body is by how tired I feel as

we walk. We're only a couple hundred yards from our ramshackle house and I'm exhausted already. I want so badly to be back there, sleeping. But I know I won't feel normal again if I don't get off my butt and move.

"Hey Nine, let me tell you about this dream I just had," I say.

He snorts. "A dream? No thanks, man. Well, unless it was about girls. *That* you can tell me *all* about; in detail."

"I saw Setrákus Ra. I talked to him." Nine pauses, then keeps walking. "He offered me a deal."

"Oh, yeah? What kind of deal?"

"If I go back to him and face him, he said he'll let everyone else live, including Sam."

Nine snorts. "That's a load of crap. Mogadorians don't make deals. At least, they don't make deals with any intention of keeping up their end of the bargain. And they don't show mercy."

"I figure, why not just pretend I'm taking him up on it? I have to go back to the cave anyway to get Sam out."

Nine turns to me, his face a mask of disinterest. "Hate to break it to you, dude, but Sam's probably dead. The Mogs don't care about us, and they don't care about humans. I think you had a bad dream, and I'm sorry you got all scared and felt the need to bore me with it. But even if you did channel Setrákus Ra, that kind of offer is obviously a trap and you'll die

walking into it. In fact, you'll die going within ten miles of that place. I guarantee it." He spins around and walks away from me.

"Sam's not dead!" I say, anger welling up inside of me, giving me a strength I haven't felt in days. "And the dream *was* real. Setrákus Ra was torturing him! I watched his skin sizzle from boiling liquid dropping onto it! I'm not going to just sit around here and let it continue to happen."

He laughs again, but this time it isn't with a sneer. Not exactly reassuring, but definitely more gentle. "Listen, Four. You're too weak to even run in place, never mind fight the most powerful being in the galaxy. I know it sounds heartless, dude, but Sam is *human*. There's no way you can save them all, so stop wasting your time and energy. It's not like you have an unlimited supply of either."

The Lumen in my palms starts to light up. I'm in control of it now, a definite improvement. I'm hoping the glow is a sign the effects of the blue force field are wearing off. "Look. Sam is my best friend, Nine. You need to get that and keep your opinions about my *energy* to yourself, okay?"

"No, you look," says Nine. His voice sounds flat. "This isn't playtime. We're at war, dude—*war*. And you can't make this about your feelings for Sam, if it makes everyone else less safe. I will not let you abandon the

rest of us to face Setrákus Ra, just for Sam. We're going to wait until you feel better, whenever the hell that is, and then we're going to meet up with the others and train until we're ready. If you don't like it, then you'll have to fight me to get out of here. And I'm *so* ready for a fight, so, really, bring it on. I could use the practice."

He lifts his hand and aims it at something through the trees. A second later I hear a quick yelp.

"Got it." Nine smiles, clearly proud of his telekinetic hunting skills. I follow him, refusing to give up.

"Isn't there anyone you would die for? Anyone you'd risk your life to help?"

"I'm risking my life to help Lorien," Nine says, fixing me with a stare that makes me listen. "I'll die for Lorien and anyone who's Loric. And if I die, and that's a big 'if,' I plan on doing it with two Mog heads smashed between my palms and another one under my foot. I'm not looking forward to feeling your symbol burned into my leg just yet, so grow up, stop being so naïve and think about more than yourself already."

His words hit me hard. I know that Henri would agree with him, but I will not turn my back on Sam again. I don't know if it's Nine's arrogance or the urgency of the vision I just had or the fresh air and the walking, but my mind seems to be clear and strong for the first time in days.

"Sam saved my ass more than once, and his dad was

there to meet our ship when we landed on Earth. His dad may have even died for us, for Lorien. You owe it to both of them to go back to the cave with me. Today."

"Not a chance."

I step towards him and Nine doesn't hesitate. He grabs me and throws me against a tree. I pull myself to my feet and I'm about to swing at him when we hear twigs cracking behind us. Nine turns towards the noise. I flatten myself against the tree, dimly lighting my palms to be ready to blind whoever it is with my Lumen. I hope I haven't overestimated how much of my strength is truly back.

Nine looks over at me, and whispers, "Sorry about you and the tree. Let's go find whoever's tracking us and kill them before they kill us."

I nod, and we step forward. The noise came from a patch of pines, thick with needles and offering excellent cover. If it were up to me we'd wait and see who or what we're facing, but not Nine. He's wearing a strange little smile as we move towards the pines, ready to destroy whatever emerges. The pines rustle again, and one of the lower branches moves. But what we see isn't a Mogadorian cannon or gleaming sword. Instead, the small black nose of a brown and white beagle emerges.

"Bernie Kosar," I say, relieved. "Good to see you, buddy."

He trots over and I bend down to pet his head. He's

the one creature who has been with me since the beginning. Bernie Kosar tells me he's happy to see me back on my feet.

"He took long enough, right?" Nine says. I'd forgotten Nine had also developed the Legacy to communicate with animals. I know it's immature, but it bothers me to share that power with him. He's already the biggest and strongest Garde I've ever seen, has the ability to transfer powers to humans, an antigravity Legacy, super speed and hearing, telekinesis, and whatever else he hasn't told me yet. My Lumen sets me apart from the rest, but unless I find a source of fire to combine it with, it's practically useless. My ability to talk to animals was something I was looking forward to developing further, but now I'm sure Nine will find a better use for it before me.

Bernie Kosar must see the disappointment on my face because he asks if I want to go for a walk with him. Alone.

Nine hears him and says, "Go for it. You're all BK talks about anyway. Whenever he wasn't patrolling the perimeter, he was in the bedroom looking after you."

I keep petting his head. "That was you, huh?"

Bernie Kosar licks my hand.

"My other best friend," I say. "I'd die for you too, BK."

Nine groans at the display of emotion. I know we're supposed to have each other's back in this massive

intergalactic war, but sometimes I wish it *were* just BK and me. And Sam. And Sarah. And Six. And Henri. Really, I'd take anyone but Nine.

"I'm going to find whatever it was I killed out there, make sure we have some food for tonight," Nine says as he walks away. "You guys go have your special walk. When you get back, we need to talk about finding the rest of the Garde. Now that you're functioning."

"And how exactly are we going to find them? The address Six gave us for a meeting point was in Sam's pocket. For all we know, the Mogs have it and are waiting for Six to show up. That sounds like even more reason to find Sam, if you ask me," I say pointedly.

Bernie Kosar agrees. It sounds like he wants to look for Sam almost as much as I do.

"We'll talk about it over dinner. I'm thinking possum, maybe a muskrat," he says, already heading into the woods to find his prey.

Bernie Kosar tells me to follow him and he leads me through the trees and down a tall grassy hill. The land levels out for a few feet before rising again. We move quickly and the exercise feels amazing now that my strength is returning. Two huge trees lean into each other up ahead. I focus and push them apart with my mind. As soon as there's a space between them, BK jumps through and I chase after him, remembering our early-morning runs to school back in Paradise. Life

was so much easier then, when my days were spent training with Henri and my free time was spent with Sarah. It was exciting, finding out what I was capable of, how my powers would help me do what needed to be done. Even when I was frustrated or scared, there was so much *possibility* and I could just focus on that. I had no idea how good I had it.

My back is sticky with sweat by the time we reach a small peak. I'm better, but still not one hundred percent. The view is spectacular, a panoramic scene of the Appalachian Mountains wrapped in fir trees, bathed in the late afternoon light. I can see for miles.

"I gotta say, buddy, this is pretty awesome. Is this what you wanted me to see?" I ask.

Off in the distance, down on the left, he says. *Do you see it?*

I scan the landscape. "In that deep valley?"

Beyond it, he says. *Do you see that glow?*

Squinting, I look past the valley. There's a cluster of thick trees and the faint outline of a rocky riverbed. Then I see it. Through the bottom of the trees on the far left is a glowing sliver of blue light. It's the force field at the bottom of the Mog's headquarters.

It can't be more than two miles away. Bernie Kosar says we can go back right now if I want. He'll join me inside this time, now that Sam and I disabled the system that sent a gas deadly to animals through the mountain.

A shiver runs down my body as I stare at the blue light. Sam is in there. And Setrákus Ra. "What about Nine?"

Bernie Kosar circles my legs twice before sitting at my feet. *It's up to you,* he says. *Nine is strong and fast, but he's also unpredictable.*

"Have you taken him up here?" I ask. "Does he know how close we are?"

Bernie Kosar cocks his head as if to say, *Yes*. I can't believe he knew and didn't tell me. That's enough. I'm done with Nine.

"I'm going back to the house. I'll give Nine the option of coming with us, but whatever he says, it's time for me to face Setrákus Ra."

CHAPTER FIVE

WE BOUNCE ALONG A POTHOLE-RIDDLED ROAD IN A military transport truck. We're on the outskirts of the city and I look around. I see a massive mountain range looming in the distance, but that doesn't tell me much. Vehicles full of soldiers are in front of us and behind us. My Chest is at my feet and Six is sitting next to me. That makes me breathe a little easier. After the battle in Spain, the only time I feel even slightly safe is when Six is near.

I didn't think I would ever miss the Sisters of Santa Teresa, but right now, I'd give anything to be back at the convent. For years, all I thought about was escaping their rules and punishments, but now that I have escaped, all I want is something familiar, even if it comes in the form of religious discipline. My Cêpan, Adelina, is dead, murdered by Mogadorians. My best and only friend, Héctor Ricardo, is also dead. The town and convent are both gone, obliterated by the Mogs. The deaths weigh heavily on me; I was

the one Adelina and Héctor were fighting to protect. God, I hope I'm not a curse. I hate the idea that my inexperience and lack of training might hurt anyone else. I don't want to put this mission in India in jeopardy just by my presence.

Finally Commander Sharma turns around to give us the lay of the land. "This trip will last a few hours. Please, get comfortable. Help yourself to water in the cooler behind you. Don't draw attention to yourselves; don't engage with anyone. Not even to smile and nod. We're wanted."

Crayton nods.

"So what do you think about all this?" Six asks Crayton. "You think he's really up there?"

"I do. It makes sense."

"Why's that?" I ask.

"The mountains are the ideal place for a Garde member to hide. For years, people have been scared to go near the glaciers north of China. Stories of alien sightings are enough to frighten the locals, and the Chinese military has been unable to investigate the reports because a mysterious lake appeared in the valley and blocked their access. Who knows what's true, and what's a rumor, but either way it's an excellent place to hide."

"Do you think there are other aliens up there beside Number Eight?" says Ella. "You know, like, Mogadorians?"

I was wondering the same thing.

"I don't know who else is up there, if anyone, but we'll find out soon enough," says Crayton. He wipes sweat from

his brow and touches my Chest with the tip of his finger. "In the meantime, we should start learning how to use what's in here to help prepare us, if Marina is kind enough to share."

"Sure," I say quietly, lowering my eyes to the Chest. I'm not opposed to sharing my Inheritance, but I'm embarrassed by how little I understand what I have. My Chest was supposed to be shared between me and Adelina. It was her job to explain how to use everything, how it could save my life. But that never happened. After a beat, I say, "I don't know what any of it does, though."

Crayton reaches forward and touches my hand. I meet his solemn yet encouraging eyes. "It's okay that you don't know. I'll show you whatever I can," Crayton says. "I'm not just Ella's Cêpan now; I'm all of yours. As long as I'm alive, Marina, you can count on me."

I nod and place my palm against the lock. Now that Adelina is dead, I can open my Chest on my own and it's a bittersweet power. Six watches me, and I know she understands exactly how I'm feeling, having also lost her Cêpan. The cold metal lock shakes against my skin. With a click, it falls to the floor of the truck. The dirt road we're driving on is covered with potholes and debris, constantly jostling me and making it hard for me to steady my hand as I reach inside the Chest. I'm careful not to touch the glowing red crystal in the corner that caused me so much trouble in the orphanage's belfry, the one I worried was a Loric grenade, or worse. I reach for a pair of dark glasses.

"Do you know what these are for?" I ask Crayton. He examines them for a second but hands them back to me, shaking his head.

"I don't know for sure, but they may give you the power to see through things, like X-ray vision. Or they could be thermal detectors, good for seeing at night. There's only one way to find out, you know."

I place the glasses on my face and look out the window. Aside from dulling the brightness of the sun, nothing else seems to happen. I check my hands but they're just as solid as before, and when I look up at Crayton's face, there aren't any thermal hot spots.

"So?" asks Six. "What do they do?"

"I don't know," I say, checking the barren landscape out the window again. "Maybe they're just ordinary sunglasses."

"I doubt it," Crayton says. "They have a use that you will discover, just like everything else in there."

"Can I see them?" Ella asks. I hand them over.

She slides the glasses up her nose, then twists around and looks out the back window.

I turn back to my Chest.

"Wait—everything looks a little different somehow but I can't figure out why. It's almost like seeing everything a little delayed . . . or maybe sped up . . . I can't decide." Suddenly Ella gasps, then shouts, "Rocket! Rocket!"

We follow her line of vision, but I don't see anything but crystal-blue sky.

"Where?" Crayton yells. Ella points up at the sky. "Get out of the truck! We have to get out right now!"

"There's nothing there." Six squints into the horizon. "Ella, I think those glasses are messing with you, because I don't see anything."

Ella doesn't listen. She scrambles over me with the glasses still on and opens the door. The shoulder of the road is lined with sharp rocks and dead shrubs. "Jump! Now!"

Finally we hear it, a faint whistling in the air, and a black speck suddenly comes into view, right where Ella was pointing.

"Get out!" Crayton yells.

I grab my open Chest and jump. My feet hit the hard dirt road and sweep underneath me, and the world instantly becomes a swirl of browns and blues and sharp pains. The back tire of our truck grazes my arm, and I barely change direction in time to roll out of the way of the next speeding truck. My head hits a sharp stone and I flip over one last time, landing on my Chest. The impact knocks the wind out of me, and the contents of my Chest have scattered in the dirt. I hear Ella and Six coughing somewhere nearby, but I can't see them in the haze of dust that surrounds us. A second later the rocket smashes into the ground just behind the speeding truck we dove from. The explosion is deafening, and with Commander Sharma still inside, the truck flips forward onto its roof in a cloud of smoke. The careening jeep behind it is unable to swerve. It hits the edge of the

chasm caused by the rocket, and dives right into the tremendous hole. Two more rockets hit the convoy. The air is so thick with dust that we cannot see the helicopters overhead, but we can hear them.

I blindly grope the area around me, trying to gather everything that spilled out of my Chest. I know I'm probably collecting just as many stones and twigs as pieces of my Inheritance, but I can sort through it later.

I've just grabbed the red crystal when I hear the sound of gunfire tear through the air. "Six! You okay?" I shout. Then I hear Ella scream.