

MAGPIE'S FALL

Allison Pang

IRONHEART CHRONICLES II - MAGPIE'S FALL
Copyright © 2022 Allison Pang. All rights reserved.

Published by Outland Entertainment LLC
3119 Gillham Road
Kansas City, MO 64109

Founder/Creative Director: Jeremy D. Mohler
Editor-in-Chief: Alana Joli Abbott

Paperback ISBN: 978-1-954255-31-9
Ebook ISBN: 978-1-954255-32-6
Worldwide Rights
Created in the United States of America

Editor: Danielle Poiesz and Double Vision Editorial
Cover Illustration: germancreative
Cover Design: germancreative
Interior Layout: Mikael Brodu

The characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious or fictitious recreations of actual historical persons. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the authors unless otherwise specified. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the publisher except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Printed and bound in the United States of America.

Visit outlandentertainment.com to see more, or follow us on our Facebook Page facebook.com/outlandentertainment/

— A WORD FROM THE CRITICS —

“Pang delivers a fascinating storyline, strong character development, and plenty of plot twists which will draw readers into the first book of the IronHeart Chronicles and leave them eagerly anticipating the next tale in the series. Maggy is a plucky and loyal character that will fascinate readers but what makes this novel so enthralling is the relatable and carefully drawn characters coupled with vivid imagery throughout every scene.”

—4 Stars – *RT Book Reviews*

“Allison Pang’s *Magpie’s Song* is exactly the sort of thing I love to read most. Beautiful prose, interesting characters that I want to know better, a carefully crafted world of that is both mysterious and almost inevitable. It’s rare that a book surprises me on so many levels. Powerful stuff with enough surprises to make me smile and enough twists to keep me on my toes. I can’t recommend it enough!”

—James A. Moore,
author of the *Seven Forges* series and the *Tides of War* trilogy

“Vivid, thrilling, clever, and imaginative, *Magpie’s Song* is a genre-bending gem built around a kickass heroine and a compelling, beautifully-wrought SF/fantasy world you’ll want to explore further. Allison Pang’s talent is on every page. Fans of Pierce Brown and Wesley Chu will love *Magpie’s Song*.”

—Christopher Golden,
New York Times bestselling author of *Ararat*

“Pang has crafted a beautiful world with a ticking mechanical heart and a story that flies with fast-paced action. Utterly enchanting!”

—Laura Bickle, critically acclaimed author of *Nine of Stars*

“Maggy is an unlikely heroine, but Pang makes it easy to root for the foulmouthed scavenger.... [U]nique worldbuilding and impressive character work.... Readers will be eager to know what comes next.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“The world-building is a true delight, having a feel of Sanderson’s old *Mistborn*, a touch of hardcore steampunk, but most of all: pure and distilled fantasy dystopia.”

—Bradley, *Goodreads*

“Finally, a book that has left me speechless.”

—Melissa Souza, *Goodreads*

“From the very first pages I fell in love with this story.”

—A Book Shrew, *Goodreads*

“Every once in a great while I come across a story that knocks my socks off. This is one of them... This world that Allison has created is stunning. The characters are people that I want to know and go “rooftop dancing” with. Clockwork hearts, a mechanical Dragon that can sit on my shoulder, and eat pieces of coal? Yes, please. The entropic city below, and the floating, shiny city above? Yes, yes, yes. Even this plague? Again, yes! I can’t wait to visit this world again. Highly recommended!”

—Lisa Noell, *Goodreads*

“Love, love, loved this book. Can’t wait to get my hands on book 2.”

—Seleste deLaney, *Amazon review*

— ALSO BY ALLISON PANG —

Comics, from Outland Entertainment

Fox & Willow: Came a Harper

Fox & Willow: To the Sea

The Abby Sinclair Series

A Brush of Darkness (Book One)

A Sliver of Shadow (Book Two)

A Trace of Moonlight (Book Three)

A Symphony of Starlight (Book Four)

A Duet with Darkness (a prequel short story
in the *Carniepunk* anthology)

The IronHeart Chronicles

Magpie's Song (Book One)

Magpie's Flight (Book Three, forthcoming)

Standalones

"Respawn, Reboot" (a short story in the
Out of Tune, Book 2 anthology)

"The Wind in Her Hair" (a comic in the
Womanthology: Space anthology)

"A Dream Most Ancient and Alone" (a short story in the
Tales From The Lake Vol 5: The Horror Anthology)

"A Certain TeaHouse" (a comic in the *Gothic Tales
of Haunted Futures* anthology)

*When the Mother Clock sings,
The dragon takes wing...*

*Sing a song of sixpence, a penny for your thoughts.
Roll a ball of red thread, to untangle all the knots.
Tie me up and tie me down, the better for which to hang.
Let me dangle without regret, like no song I ever sang.*

— CHAPTER ONE —

I am in the Pits.

This narrow thought fills me until I'm shaking so hard I can hardly stand upright as I stumble along the dark passage. My breath compresses with each numb step, and I hold it in even though my lungs burn. I'll shatter if I let it out.

Part of me aches with the need to turn around, to throw myself at the gates in search of clemency, but that's beyond foolish. Besides, isn't the point of this entire charade to get me down here?

I blink past the tremors, trying not to let the fear sweep me up into a sea of despair. The rest of the Tithe was forced through before me, and I can see no sign of them in the darkness ahead. Behind me, the sound of the gates locking rings through the passage with an utterance of finality that cannot be disputed. I shut it out, the crowd outside becoming a muffled rumble. I take a few more steps, and the bells strapped to my wrist jangle wildly with each movement.

One step. Two. Three.

The floor disappears with a whoosh, and I realize I've stepped off a ledge. My vision grays out in a haze, and I violently dig my fingers into the wall to keep from falling. If only that might

somehow stop me from being swallowed down the gullet of the bitterest of my nightmares...

Only my years of dancing upon the rooftops of BrightStone lends me the instinctive edge to tuck and roll when I hit the ground. Pain racks my shoulders in fire, and my newly flayed skin splits beneath the impact, leaving me whimpering upon the rocky floor.

Breathe, Mags.

I lie there, mechanical heart clicking away in its usual fashion behind the panel on my chest. I take comfort in its familiarity as I take stock of myself, a mental tabulation. I wiggle my toes to ensure they still work.

The last several days are nothing but a blur in my memory: Allowing myself to be captured by Lord Balthazaar and turned over to the Inquestors. My head shaved. The Tithe procession. Whipped as *part* of the Tithe procession. The discovery that the Rot wasn't simply a punishment from the gods, but a plague deliberately spread among the people of BrightStone for reasons unknown. It's a plot I am in the process of unraveling, though to what end I couldn't say yet.

The image of Josephine and the other Moon Children saluting me from the rooftops flashes in my mind. The sharp-tongued leader of the Twisted Tumblers granted me that last bit of respect even as I allowed myself to be sacrificed in a final effort to find out what secrets lie beneath the city of BrightStone—secrets that might grant us access to Meridion and a destiny beyond what we'd become.

And then there's Ghost... Despite the rest of it, one perfect moment is etched in my mind: him fighting to get to me through the crowd, Lucian holding him back for his own good. Whether Ghost will truly come for me as he said he would or not...well, it isn't something I can rely on. There is no one to save me except myself.

For all my brave words and bold proclamations about what I hoped to accomplish down here, the reality is already far grimmer than I expected. That I volunteered for such a thing is my fault, I suppose, but knowing that at least Ghost didn't see me as merely a means to an end is comforting beyond measure. And now here I am.

Wherever *here* is...

I glance up at the spot I fell from. It's at least fifteen feet above me, maybe more. It's hard to tell. Something digs into my side. Bells, I think numbly, realizing the strap broke during my fall. I recoil from their brassy sound, shaking my wrist free as though it's coated in cobwebs.

A soft moaning echoes up the passageway, and I shift until I'm kneeling, though I've got nowhere else to go. The flickering of torchlight in the distance brushes over the edges of my vision, and I stagger toward it, the light drawing me in with a terrible need to *see*.

The passage takes a sharp turn, the sudden illumination of the torches blinding me briefly until my vision adjusts. I've found the source of the moaning in the form of the rest of the Tithe, their white robes bedraggled and torn. At least one of them is stained with blood—they undoubtedly had been caught unawares by the same fall I had been. Their masks are mostly still in place, though, the eerie serenity at odds with the miserable sounds from underneath them.

I let out a half sob. "Keep it together, Mags," I mumble. My survival depends on not losing my head.

A few of the Rotters huddle together, their terror evident in the way they shake. "Moon Child...help us... Where do we go?"

"Only one way *to* go." I struggle to get the words out as I limp past them to take a closer look down the tunnel. I have no answers. Moon Child or not, I've certainly never been here before, and no Moon Child has ever returned from the Pits to tell us

what happens once the Tithe passes through the gates. I have the advantage of having studied a few old maps of the original salt mines that are now the Pits, but my brain is jumbled, the pain of my wounds making it hard to remember.

I strain to see beyond the few torches lining the walls ahead of us. I'm not sure what else I was expecting, but the only sound is the pulse of my blood pounding rabbit-quick in my ears and the panting breaths of the Rotters somehow thunderous.

And still, I see nothing but stretch after stretch of pale rock and a slanting tunnel leading deeper underground. Whatever natural light the gates let in has long since vanished, so these meager torches are all we have to guide us.

Which begs the question, who lit these torches to begin with? It's clear we are at least somewhat expected, but if so, where is this would-be proprietor of ours? And for that matter, why couldn't they have lit up that ledge we all fell down?

The very air presses down upon me, the stone closing in with an awful finality and no answers at all. As someone who has spent most of her life upon the rooftops, I can't help but whimper.

"Hello?" I try to call into the darkness, but my voice is a scratchy shadow of itself, hardly more than a whisper. My tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth, and the stink of fear hangs heavy on my skin.

I attempt to shrug out of the High Inquestor's cloak, but it's stuck. No kindness there. He'd meant to inflict as much pain upon me as possible, and the shiver of agony that rewards me when I give an experimental wriggle indicates I'll most likely black out if I keep trying to rid myself of it. I take a slow, deep breath. The fabric has the acrid stench of salt on it, but it masks the perfumed scent of the Inquestor. I'm grateful for that much, even if the dust sets me to sneezing.

Mayhap it's all a dream and you'll wake up in your bed at Molly's, a fine supper and a warm fireplace waiting.

The memory is near enough to make me weep.

“Moon Child?”

The voice startles me out of my woolgathering. On instinct, I grab the nearest torch, heedless of the way the hot oil leaks from the cloth to slicken my hand.

One of the Rotters moves beside me. “Are you all right?” She pulls her mask off to reveal a face clearly struck by the Rot—light bruising around the young woman’s eyes and lips cracked with sores. She had been pretty once, I can tell, her bone structure delicate and fragile and oddly familiar.

I blink, suddenly recognizing her from the Salt Temple. She is the girl who’d been with the bird-masked Inquestor when Lucian and I went to see Archivist Chaunders. If she remembers me, I cannot tell.

She reaches out to take my arm and then seems to think better of it. “If we can find some water...”

“Why does it matter?” one of the others snaps. “We’re all dead anyway.”

Another moan arises from the group, someone giving voice to a coughing fit that leaves them curled upon the ground.

“That doesn’t mean we should give up,” the girl says. “Surely there must be a way...” She looks at me with a hopeful sort of despair. “Is it true what the fortune-teller said? Are you IronHeart?”

I shake my head, sighing inwardly. Damn Mad Brianna and her dockside prophecies. A river of grief runs through me then, remembering the way her body twitched when the Inquestors killed her, though part of me wonders if that had been the fate she’d wanted. She certainly had made no bones about her hope for Meridion’s downfall.

“Do I seem like a dragon to you? Some ‘Chosen One’ intended to break down Meridion rule? I’m a scapegoat for a herd of sacrificial cows, eating their so-called sins,” I say, shuddering against the fire

licking over my shoulders when the cloak slips slightly, pulling on the wounds from the Inquestor's lashing. They've been oozing something awful, I know it.

My throat, swollen and hoarse, bobs as I struggle to swallow, and my thoughts patter like rain in my head. How do I tell them? *What* do I tell them? That the Rot has nothing more to do with sin than the wind? That the Inquestors have been purposely injecting innocent citizens with a plague so virulent that the city has been forced to quarantine the infected belowground? That the floating city of Meridion may be the source of the plague in the first place?

I've been keeping secrets for so long that I'm not sure it even matters anymore. Dead men tell no tales and all that. Besides, the truth isn't usually kind. The whole reason I am down here is to gather evidence of all those things, and I am in no shape to field questions from the others.

"Who's there?" A new voice sounds from an unseen passage before I can gather enough of my wits to give the girl a real answer. The shadows part to reveal an elderly woman, her pale hair glowing in the torchlight. I frown at her. Moon Children all have white hair—something about our half-breed lineage makes us so. Most of us are Tithed to the Pits before we reach twenty-five, but the Tithes have only been running for about twenty years. Even if one of the original Moon Children had survived down here that long, she still seems far too old for that.

A shabbily dressed man in loose-fitting trousers and a patchwork coat lingers behind her. He's younger than she is—maybe late thirties or so, though it's hard to tell. Dark hair frames a pleasant face and a scruffy chin, and his expression appears compassionate. A bonewitch, perhaps.

That doesn't mean I intend to trust either of them. In my experience, friendly faces often hide something far more sinister.

"Who are you?" I wave the torch in front of me in warning. I push the young Rotter behind me without thinking; I had protected my

clanmate Sparrow for so long in such a way that it's nearly instinct now. The Rotter may not be a Moon Child like Sparrow had been, but there is something about this girl's innocence makes me want to hide her, all the same.

The two strangers squint at the harshness of the light but make no sudden moves other than to turn their heads away. The old woman smiles gently despite the glare. "Be still, child. You're safe now."



I'm lying on my stomach on a musty mattress in an actual room with real walls and a stone floor. A table laden with medical supplies stands beside the bed, topped with rolls of bandages and a tray of an odd blue liquid. The old woman kneels nearby, her head bowed.

In the distance, the moans of the Rotters have quieted some—the bonewitch had seen to them before me, but they're in another room. Not that it matters. I've got bigger things to worry about.

"Bite down on this." The bonewitch shoves a piece of rope into my mouth. I jerk away when it brushes my lips, the memories of being gagged still a little too fresh, but he sits there calmly until I relax.

I give him a nod, bracing myself for what comes next.

His movements are gentle as he dampens the wool with warm water, but it burns despite the careful treatment. He begins to remove the cloak from my back, and my shriek whistles past the rope.

"Easy now," he says. "It's stuck in the wounds. Stay still."

I have no choice but to do what he says, and I pretend not to hear the wet sounds of my skin pulling apart. I grind my teeth into the rope, my entire body shivering violently as I grip the table with trembling fingers. My guts churn, and I briefly wish he'd rip the

whole thing off in one go, just to get it over with. But even I know that's foolish if I hope to make it out of this with any skin at all.

The old lady hasn't moved this entire time, and I attempt to distract myself by studying her with unabashed curiosity. I still can't tell her age, but her face is a maze of dark, craggy skin and crow's feet, and her pale hair hangs in myriad braids fastened by...seashells? They gleam in the lamplight, their spiral beauty drawing my attention.

"There now." The bonewitch lays the bloody cloak on the ground beside me. I fight the urge to spit on it. "That's an Inquestor garment," he observes, removing the rope. There's a slight tone of censure in his voice.

"Well it's obviously not my wedding gown, aye?" I mutter, unable to keep the anger from bubbling out.

"I meant no offense." He dips a series of bandages into the blue liquid before laying them upon my wounds. A soothing tingle spreads over my skin, and I exhale one long, shaky puff of air as the tension slips out of me.

My mind whirls with relief. "Well, you have to forgive me, then. I was a bit ill-used before I arrived here. My manners aren't what they ought to be." It's all I can think of to say, though I know it's not the right thing. "How long will it last? The numbing stuff, I mean." The sudden absence of pain is nearly mind-boggling in its sweetness, and I almost forget where I am.

Almost.

"Several hours, at least. Long enough to get you fed and settled." He shifts beside me. "A moment—I need to clean this up, and then I'll see about getting you something to drink."

"I did not expect the Pits to be so...hospitable," I admit wryly. Though *hospitable* might not be the right word. Regardless, it will do me no good to cross swords with my hosts, at least not until I get my bearings.

I narrow my gaze at him as he stands up and begins collecting his supplies. "Settled where?" With the pain receding, my wits have begun to return, reminding me exactly what situation I'm in. My stomach pipes up, too, growling to be noticed. Food would be a welcome distraction, but... "And where is everyone? The other Moon Children? The Rotters? Who are you people?"

The old woman lifts her head finally, a shadow crossing her proud features. "Perhaps it would be easier if we simply showed you," she says, her tone surprisingly soothing. "Whatever falsehoods you were raised to believe must be unlearned. Rest assured, everyone is properly seen to down here."

The bonewitch pats my shoulder. "Lie down awhile first... Do you have a name, lass?"

I pause, unsure which name to give him. If there are other Moon Children about, my Banshee clan name would make the most sense. I've earned more than my fair share of notoriety as "Raggy Maggy"—supposedly having been killed by Inquestors several months ago didn't help—but I'm edging toward caution over honesty now. The events of the last few weeks have left me a little gun-shy, and rightfully so. Besides, I'd been kicked out of the Banshee clan, and Moon Child clan grudges are nothing to sneer at. I'd rather not be shanked for my trouble before I even get a chance to figure out what's what. I'm not sure I want to give my real name, either, though.

"More than I care to list," I say. "Call me Magpie." I decide on the nickname only a few would know me by.

"Well, Miss Magpie, let these strips sit awhile. When the bleeding stops, you'll be able to move around some. You were lucky; most of the wounds aren't too deep. You should heal up right quick." He sits back down in his chair, wiping his hands on a damp rag. "You can call me Georges, if you like."

“Georges,” I repeat. The name is familiar, but I can’t place it. I turn toward the old lady to mask my frustration at my lack of memory. “And you?”

“Tanith.” She gets to her feet with a gentle grace that belies her age, the seashells tinkling in her hair, and pours me a mug of water from a nearby pitcher. She sets it on the table beside the bed. “Rest. I’ll get you some new clothes.”

The two of them duck behind a thin curtain drawn in front of the room’s entrance. I shift carefully on the mattress, relieved when the pain is minimal. Whatever that blue stuff is, it certainly works well.

The room I’m in appears to be a makeshift infirmary, judging by the additional empty cots. Bottles of concoctions line the shelves, which are built into the stone walls, and a surgical table claims the center of the space. A tray of scalpels and a bucket of plaster sit beside it. It’s clean in here, too, and smells faintly of lavender, which is strange considering where we are. The bonewitch must be kept busy with the Rotters, yet somehow the odor of blood and other less pleasant things is nearly nonexistent.

Which begs the question... If only Moon Children and Meridians are immune to the Rot, how are Georges and Tanith surviving it? The salt priests always insisted that only the sinful could catch it, and while my time with Lucian and Ghost had taught me that none of that was true, I’d never dreamed that people were somehow *surviving* down here. Perhaps miracles did exist. If so, my task to discover the actual source of the Rot—whether the Meridians are spreading the plague themselves or it’s being done through some other mechanism—would be that much simpler. Surely, I would find answers...

I reach for the mug of water next to me, and I sip it slowly, ignoring the bitter aftertaste. None of this is how it should be. Lucian, Ghost, and I were betrayed by our fellow conspirator, Molly Bell. My clockwork dragon disappeared. I split the skull of

an Inquestor to protect Lucian and Ghost. I was whipped in front of the entire town of BrightStone for my crimes.

And Lucian just stood there at the gates and let me be taken. But what right do I have to be angry about that? After all, how many times have *I* stood by and watched one of my fellow Moon Children be subjected to the Tithe? There is nothing he could have done to stop it anyway.

It stings nonetheless. For Lucian, maybe it really is all about protecting his brother.

Oh, Ghost...

I sigh. *I* started this chain of events: finding the dragon, Sparrow's death, leading the Inquestors to the Archivist, letting Ghost get captured. And then everything had fallen by the wayside in my decidedly rash impulse to let Lord Balthazaar capture me, forcing me to be Tithed. In the end, I've no one to blame but myself.

A gleam at the foot of my bed catches my eye, and I shift so I can get a better look at the marks etched into the wooden footboard.

I run a finger over the lines, sounding out the letters. "Suck-tit." I trace the letters again and am struck by a cold certainty. Penny has been here. Of course she has. I watched my former clanmate be Tithed weeks ago, taking my place when the clan thought I'd been killed. But where is she now?

As much as I want to bolt from the room and demand answers, I soon find myself dozing off into a fitful sleep. I've been thrust into the underworld like the hero from one of those tales Mad Brianna used to tell me, Sparrow, and rest of the orphans she had taken under her wing. I will need to rest and regain my strength if I'm to have any chance of finding the other Moon Children and learning the secrets of the Pits.

In the end, you do what you do best. Hide in plain sight, and hope they do not discover you, Mags.

I have no magic sword or shining armor, but I do have a quest. And that will have to do.



The curtain flutters and Tanith reappears, holding a set of clothing similar to her own—clean trousers and a linen shirt. She eases the shirt over my head so I don't have to strain the skin on my back by stretching, and belts it at my hips. It hangs loose off my shoulders, but I get the feeling it's less about modesty and more about comfort. Without any friction, my wounds won't stick to the cloth.

She nudges my feet. "You'll have to make do with your shoes. Or go barefoot, if you prefer, but I don't recommend it."

My thoughts turn to Ghost and the toughened soles of his feet. He might not have a problem down here, but I don't need to lose a toe in some sharp-edged crevasse. I lace up my old boots, their once fine shine now quite dull.

Tanith helps me stand. "I'll take you down to meet the others. We'll be in time for supper."

"Others?" My mind races with the thought of seeing Penny and the rest of the Moon Children. Or did Tanith mean the Rotters? Or both? The casual way she speaks of mundane things such as supper makes my head hurt. But Penny was my clanmate. She's smarter than the rest of us. She can read and write, and if there was any chance of her finding a way out of this place, I don't believe she would have passed it up, supper or no.

"I'll show you. Come along." Tanith waves at me to follow her through the curtain.

She leads me down a maze of dimly lit passages lined with glowing lanterns. There's a bluish hue to them, and I resist the urge to run my fingers over the glass. Unlike the earlier tunnels made of rock above, these are clearly the well-used remnants of the salt mines from earlier days. The walls are flat and smooth and white, the turns following an obvious route. Side passages scatter into the darkness toward some distant destination.

It's all so *empty*.

"Where is everyone else?" The question seems to hang in the air, with no breeze to move it along.

"Below. Most of us don't care for the light up here. It's too bright. Gives us headaches."

I frown. "I can barely see past the shadows."

"Not yet. But you will." She pats me on the shoulder. I'm sure she means to be reassuring, but I'm more confused than ever.

"What about Georges? Where did he go?"

"He's a Rotter himself. He led the rest of the infected to a separate living facility. Everyone who isn't a Moon Child or a Meridian carries the disease, and their needs are different as a result. Not all are fully affected by it right away."

My mouth goes dry. "He's a Rotter? But I thought the Rotters...I don't know...just decayed away down here. Isn't that why Moon Children are Tithed? To help them die?"

Amusement flickers on her face. "You all think that when you first get here. But I'm a Meridian myself; the last thing I want to do is let these poor people die. Come along—let me show you."

I don't understand any of this. Everything I've ever been told is a lie—an incredibly intricate one. Apparently not even Lucian, with all his learned doctor's ways, has any idea how things are here.

I have no time to ask another question before the passage opens wide, a silvery glow illuminating what appears to be a village.

The light is gentle, whatever its source, not as glaring as the torches lining the walls up in the upper tunnels. Everything is bathed in a soft haze. If I wasn't so terribly awake I'd think I was dreaming my way into a fairy tale.

But fairy tales are peculiar. All the ones Mad Brianna used to tell me and Sparrow ended with beautiful monsters eating the children, so fair warning.

And this village is nothing if not beautiful. Excessively so. Hundreds of softly lit domes have been arranged in clusters far

below with spiral pathways looping throughout. Small groups of people slowly walk along the paths as they go about their business in a seemingly casual fashion. I catch the chatter of laughter and low conversation.

Normalcy. Or whatever passes for that here. It's like a utopia built in the darkest part of the underground, somehow only serving to draw attention to how drab and awful everything else is.

I glance up, though certainly there is nothing to see except the ceiling of the cave we're in. But the village has the same ambiance as the floating city of Meridion that hovers mockingly above BrightStone, a beacon of everything I've ever wanted and would never have.

Tanith hasn't said it in so many words, but I have no doubt this village was built by Meridians. That she herself doesn't glow like they are known to do doesn't mean much. Ghost once told me the electrical current that seems to flow beneath a Meridian's skin fades away if they are away from their city for too long.

So how long has she been down here?

The trail to the village is made up of a series of steep switchbacks, the stairs carved directly into the rock, but Tanith leads us to an enormous basket attached to a roped pulley system. A small door is latched shut on its side, and she opens it with a quick pull. "Normally, we would walk down, but my old bones prefer a little less impact." Ushering me through the door, she pats my hand and then gets in after me.

The basket creaks as we are slowly lowered into the canyon. "There used to be mechanical lifts many years ago," Tanith says. "But they fell into disrepair, so we are forced to use more primitive measures these days."

Fell into disrepair? Or were destroyed?

I don't voice the words aloud, but Ghost and I had researched the Pits as much as we were able and the working theory was that the

Meridians had blown up a portion of the mines, for some reason only known to them.

And soon, perhaps to me, as well.

A man and a woman in hooded blue robes meet us at the bottom, bowing respectfully to Tanith.

“Ah, Tanith. You’ve arrived.” The younger one, a man who appears to be in his forties, gives me a nod. He pushes his hood down, and his dark hair falls in a loose queue to his shoulders. His features are sharp and handsome, brows artfully arched and eyes half-lidded and languid as they flick over me, taking my measure the way a rat sizes up a piece of cheese.

But this man is different from the others. Like the dead architect I found who’d fallen directly from the floating city, his skin ripples as though myriad stars are trapped beneath it, beaming softly. I stumble, and his teeth flash as he grins, clearly aware of the effect he has on people. But more importantly, the fact that he still has that glow at all must mean he’s been on Meridion recently. And if he’s not using the gates to the Pits to get there, then there must be another way...

I file this piece of information away for later. No sense in tipping my hand too quickly.

Caught up in my thoughts, I startle as Tanith puts her arm around my shoulders. The sensation is oddly intimate, and I want to shake her away. “Prepare a dwelling for Magpie. There is an empty one in the third quad that will suit.”

“As you say.” He bows again and retreats swiftly, leaving the three of us beside the basket. Tanith gestures in his direction. “That’s Buceph. He runs security here.”

“And I’m Rinna.” The woman removes her hood, revealing a mop of curly brown tresses, decorated with the same sort of seashells as those in Tanith’s hair. “I see to most of the scheduling and the day-to-day tasks. Once you’ve recovered from your wounds, you’ll get a rotation on the roster.”

I blink at her. "Roster? For what? Last time I was on a roster it was to be sent down here," I say, my tone perhaps too blunt.

"Ah...yes," she says carefully. "Well, we all work to survive down here. If you have any particular trade skills, let me know your preference and I'll make sure you get that."

"Not unless you count murder," I say sourly. In truth, I've only killed one person, and Inquestor Caskers had deserved it, but still, honest work intrigues me. The concept, however, is almost beyond my comprehension. Their easy acceptance of me into their ranks seems a tad suspicious, but I'm not some innocent Moon Child anymore. And if the work allows me access to their records or a chance to snoop around without notice, I'll take it.

Rinna smiles weakly. "Don't worry, Magpie. We understand. Most of the lost ones who find their way here require a few lessons in civilization before they fit in."

I bristle, but Tanith squeezes my shoulder. "Very good, Rinna. That will be all."

"As you will, mistress." Rinna bows and heads up the path, her hair flowing behind her in soft ringlets. I cannot help but run a finger over my baldness with a twinge of envy. I've spent my entire life hiding my hair beneath a cap, and it's ironic that I might wear it so freely here when I have no hair at all.

Tanith's wrinkled hand reaches out to run over the stubble upon my scalp, something like pity in her expression. "Tsk. It will grow back, little one."

I snort, brimming with impatience. "I'm sure it will. It's only hair."

"Indeed." The two of us follow the path the others took, albeit more slowly. Tanith's pace is deliberate, with a hint of stiffness that suggests joint issues. It's noticeably pronounced on her left side in particular.

I study the others walking around us, looking for something or someone familiar. A Moon Child's hair is a peculiar shade of

white—almost silver—and with all the soft light illuminating the space around us, Moon Children would stand out like beacons. But I do not see a single one.

From this distance, I can't tell exactly what the dwellings are made of—some sort of metal, perhaps—but they reflect the bluish light captured in the small glass lanterns hanging from nearby lampposts. Most of the houses are single stories with round windows. They are clearly meant for one or two people, with barely enough room for a bed and not much else, so village or not, it doesn't seem like there are any families here. No children that I've seen, at any rate.

"So, I don't understand," I say finally. "If there's a whole settlement down here, why does Georges have a surgery above? Where are the other Rotters? Where are the Moon Children?" Once it's freed, my tongue unleashes a torrent of questions with my need to understand why I've been betrayed and lied to for most of my life.

Tanith sighs. "It wasn't always this way. In the beginning, we stayed in the upper chambers simply because we were afraid to venture any farther. But when the plague didn't respond to our early attempts at a cure, we expanded our operations down here where we had more room. That said, all newcomers are checked out in the upper chambers to assess possible threats, as well as to see to injuries."

I raise a brow. "Why would you come down to the Pits at all?"

She shakes her head, and the shells jingle. "When the plague first erupted in BrightStone, a group of Meridian scientists, including myself, was tasked with finding a solution. We originally worked out of a facility in BrightStone—close to the Salt Temple, in fact." She curls her upper lip. "But before the Inquestors were able to quell the riots and fear in BrightStone, fires began to break out regularly, and we lost a number of labs that way. Frankly, we made people nervous, and it was decided it would be best to send

everyone down below—both infected and our Meridian science team—to keep the other citizens safe.”

The timeline Archivist Chaunders showed me and Ghost flashes into my memory. “So you’ve been down here for *twenty years?*”

“Nearly seventeen, actually. And we’re still not much closer to a cure than when we started.”

I nod. It makes sense, but I can’t help wondering how easily everything is explained away. It hasn’t escaped me that she didn’t answer my question about the Moon Children, either.

“It’s a lot to take in,” she murmurs. “When you’ve had a chance to eat, rest, and become accustomed to how things work down here, you’ll be more comfortable. Can you read, Magpie?”

Tanith asks it kindly, and I answer without thinking. “A bit here and there, but nothing too hard?”

She’s clearly surprised at my answer, but maybe feigning ignorance is better. I decide to keep my thoughts to myself for a while longer. Besides, the spiral paths are diverging; one leads to a cluster of dwelling pods and one to a...

“A greenhouse?” I ask, incredulous. It’s squat, with one wall made of thick glass panes, and a purplish glow emanates from within.

Tanith makes an approving sound as we approach it. “Yes. A small miracle—one of many, in fact.”

“But without the sun, how do you grow anything?” Not that I’m an expert on greenhouses. But the ones I’d seen on Lord Balthazaar’s estate were completely made of glass to let the light in. Down here, though...

“Would you like a quick tour? Here.” She taps on the glass, and someone moves inside to open a small door on the far side. A skinny beanpole of a man emerges and stands aside as Tanith ushers me in. His wiry frame reminds me somewhat of Ghost. His hair is bound beneath a cap, and he wears a discolored apron.

“This is Joseph, one of our expert underground farmers,” she says.

There’s something sad about Joseph, his gaze resting upon my shaved head with a slightly furrowed brow. But then I’m inside the greenhouse proper and any thoughts about him fade away as I’m embraced by the purplish lights and the scents of dirt and growing things.

I’m half-starved for color already, even in this short amount of time. Beneath the purple light, the green leaves don’t seem quite right, but there’s a certain brilliance to the way they shine. Not that I can recognize one from the other, but there are pictures in front of several plants that indicate various vegetables or herbs.

“Using different shades of blue or red light allows us to determine levels of growth so we can maximize the space we use and ensure the best harvest,” Tanith drones from behind me.

I leave her and walk down the rows, unable to restrain my fingers from drifting through the soil in one of the trays. In the far corner of the greenhouse is a small table covered with potted flowers. It’s hard to tell exactly what color they are beneath the purple illumination, but it doesn’t really matter. Flowers are hard to come by even in BrightStone. Only those who lived in the Upper Tier would have the money for something so frivolous.

Living underground for as long as they have, perhaps these Meridians are just as hungry for things other than food.

“The others find me foolish for this particular hobby,” Joseph says, walking toward me.

“Sometimes foolishness is all that’s left.” I bend over to sniff one of the flowers, sighing at the sweetness.

“Too true.” He reaches over and plucks a flower from a pot. “Here. Have a daisy.” He hands it to me and then bows his head, heading for one of the other tables. I touch the flower bemusedly, my fingers slightly trembling. I’d never actually held a flower before. Not one from a hothouse.

Deathflower weeds are common enough in the BrightStone Warrens, where my clan makes its home, but they are ragged plants, tough and built for survival. The only purpose for something like this is beauty. What does one do with a such a thing? In the end, I tuck it carefully into one of the pockets of my trousers and head to where Tanith waits by the door.

Her mouth quirks in amusement as we leave the greenhouse. “Meridian technology is a wondrous thing, isn’t it?”

I chew on it, sure whatever’s showing on my face is not particularly pleasant. After all, such technology has been dangled in front of me for the entirety of my life. Luckily, I don’t have to respond aloud, though, because the other villagers are emerging from their dwellings.

I’m greeted with open curiosity and friendly waves, and yet, I recognize none of them. Not that I have ever been particularly close to anyone but Sparrow, but shouldn’t there be Moon Children here? What of Penny? She was sent here only weeks ago.

Watch your step, Mags. A society that eats its children is not interested in protecting the young.

My gut twists, uneasy. I catch a hint of pipe music nearby, but it’s nearly drowned out in the excited chatter.

Tanith claps her hands, silencing the others. “Prepare the table for our guest. Tonight we shall feast and welcome our sister, Magpie. Bid her good and gentle welcome, but be careful, for she is weary and her wounds are many.”

I’d nearly forgotten the lashes upon my back, but thinking about them now, I feel exhausted beyond measure and my stomach rumbles at the mere thought of food. It’s stranger still to feel like I’m welcome at a banquet like a person and not some piece of street trash.

Tanith points out the various buildings as we continue walking the main path through the village. They are all squat with slight domed shapes at the tops. Some have symbols carved into the

domes, noting what they are. There is a baker and a butcher, a blacksmith and a tallower, and other signs I don't recognize at all. An herbalist, perhaps, and a metalsmith.

My mind reels as doubt continues to creep into my mind. Things were starting to look too good to be true. And yet...

Where does the meat come from, Mags? What are they eating down here in the depths?

With the lack of Moon Children about, the thought chills me, squelching much of my appetite. I don't *really* think they're eating Moon Children, but I will withhold judgment until I know for sure. And perhaps I'll stick to less carnivorous fare until then.

Before long, we pass a dome larger than any other we've seen so far. "The main hall," Tanith points out. A glance through its pillared entrance shows several long tables and benches. "Wait here and rest while everything is prepared."

There is a bench outside the entrance, and I gratefully sag into it.

"Welcome home, Magpie." Tanith gives my shoulder one last squeeze before retreating into the great hall.

"Aye," I breathe, but dread sweeps over me all the same. Where are the other Moon Children?