

MAGPIE'S SONG

Allison Pang

IRONHEART CHRONICLES I - MAGPIE'S SONG
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— 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!”

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“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*

— ALSO BY ALLISON PANG —

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To Lucy, Moon Child of my heart.

*'Ware IronHeart's breath and IronHeart's claws
For when IronHeart roars, Meridion falls.*

*They calls me Raggy Maggy
But I have no song to sing.
I've a ghost for a shadow
And a sparrow on the wing.*

— CHAPTER ONE —

Well, it's certainly not from *here*." I smirk, eyeing the tiny dragon with a raised brow.

Beside me, my clanmate Sparrow snorts and pushes a lock of pale hair from her face. "Obviously. You can tell because there's no rust on it."

And there isn't. The dragon is about the size of a robin and perches on a nearby barrel, its metallic body gleaming beneath the sodium light with the golden glitter of an oil-coated pearl. Tiny cogs whir and click in miniature perfection, nestled inside a shiny glass belly full of steam and smoke. A red-hot ember flares in a rhythmic pulse in the chambered center of its chest.

In the entirety of my nineteen years, I've never seen anything like it. Its exquisite appearance is at odds with the severity of our surroundings, making the BrightStone junkyard seem even more haggard than it is. And that's saying something.

"So where do you think it came from? The Upper Tier...or the *upper tier*?" Sparrow points up to the sky with an exaggerated flourish and rolls her eyes. For all that she's five years younger than I am, she has enough cynicism for the both of us. Living on the streets as we do, a sense of humor is a necessity. Sometimes it's the only thing we have.

I gaze upward to search through the hazy fog of the slag heaps, straining to see the emerald glass of the shining towers of Meridion in the distance. The floating city looms above BrightStone as it always does, its secrets dense and seemingly without end.

It's all bones here below, a graveyard of corrosion and twisted metal, the castoffs of Meridion sprawled in haphazard fashion like the burial grounds of elephants I once saw in a picture book. The junkyard sits outside the crumbling ruins of BrightStone's lower quadrant, which is now nothing more than a maze of cobblestone streets and empty buildings. It probably had a name once, a proper one, but these days we just call it the Warrens.

I move closer to where the dragon sits until I'm only a few feet away, and I glance back at Sparrow with a shrug. "Too finely made, even for the BrightStone jewelers in the Upper Tier. No, some spoiled Meridian brat probably lost her precious toy out the window of a wind balloon. Or down the garbage chute."

"Still pretty, though." A hint of longing threads its way through Sparrow's voice, her dark eyes suddenly pensive. She's a tiny thing, but there's a boldness that belies her small stature, a subtle cheeky disposition that's part humor and part defense mechanism wrapped in BrightStone's drab hand-me-down rags.

"Aye," I say softly, studying the delicate webbing of the dragon's wings, the golden membranes overlapping like the mocking sweep of an exotic bird's feathers.

A Meridian would call it beautiful, no doubt. A wonder of engineering. But all I can see is night upon night of hot meals and the promise of a real bed with blankets, a roof, and maybe a bath in something that doesn't resemble pig swill. Maybe even a shiny hammer and a new wool coat.

Toy or not, this dragon could be sold. Melted down. Ripped apart.

It turns toward me, catching my gaze with its jeweled eyes.

I wonder for a moment if it will startle, but I shake away the absurd thought. After all, it's merely a toy. And yet, there's an odd sensation of recognition I don't understand as it maintains eye contact. My heartbeat clatters in my chest, as though reminding me why I'm here.

Sparrow and I have a certain weight of scrap we need to collect—anything that could be sold or traded. For those of us living in the Warrens it's the only legal way of making enough jingle to survive. But whatever our individual supplementary means of subsistence might be, every member of the clan is required turn in their scrap at the end of each day or earn their keep in some other fashion.

Sliding my hammer from my belt with a careful hand, I nod at Sparrow. "I'm short my quota. Halvsies and such?"

"Aye." Her coat flaps in the breeze, and she shifts. The dragon snakes toward her, its steaming breath hissing like an angry teakettle.

I see my chance and close the distance with a scuff of boots. I carefully press down on the back of its neck until it touches the lid of the barrel. The dragon squirms, nearly sliding through my oiled fingers, and I turn my battered hammer so that the clawed fork traps its triangular head.

"Oy, look at it wriggle," Sparrow says, eyes wide.

"Help me put it in the bag." My knuckles strain as the dragon lets out a shriek. "Mine's mostly empty." Sparrow struggles with the drawstring, forcing me to adjust my stance to allow her better access. "Quit moving, beastie, or I'll take the hammer to you," I warn.

A disdainful sniff puffs from its intricately carved nostrils, but I don't hesitate to take a firmer grasp behind its head and thrust it into the bag once Sparrow has it opened. The dragon lets out an indignant rumble, but Sparrow's already tightly tying the bag shut.

She hands it to me with a shrug. "So now what? Not exactly like we're going to be able to fob it off at the scrap-trader's." She purses her mouth. "Be a shame to destroy it, though."

A sigh escapes me. I know she's right. Not about destroying it so much as having it traced back to us or our clan. Something this fine... People would take note.

"We'll have to be careful about it," I admit.

"We could turn it over to Rory..."

The thought makes my stomach twist. "No. Not that. We'd never see a penny." Rory acts like a liaison between our clan and the rest of BrightStone. Our *leader* might be what he calls himself, but he's nothing more than a bully with a slight edge over the rest of us.

"That leaves us with smelting it, then," she says.

"Maybe. But I bet Archivist Chaunders could tell us how much it's worth. Then we can take it to Molly Bell over at the Conundrum. She might not give us full price, but at least the profits would be ours."

It's a risky venture at best. Molly Bell deals in black market goods and information and has an extensive clientele of BrightStone elites and underworld lackeys alike. Approaching her is a bit like swimming with a shark: sooner or later, she always takes her pound of flesh.

Sparrow cocks her head at me. "Oh, aye. That's brilliant. You really think Rory will let it slide if we start dealing with Molly Bell behind his back?" She scoffs. "I don't trust her any farther than I can see her. And not even then, Mags."

"Well it's not like we can just walk into Spriggan territory to try to sell it ourselves, now can we? Besides, what Rory doesn't know won't kill him."

The words sound hollow even in my own ears. As excuses go, it's paper-thin. But what of it? I've never found anything of real value before. Rory won't hesitate to dole out punishment for coming up short, but the temptation is so strong I can taste it.

“Might kill *us*, though,” Sparrow mutters.

A shadow passes overhead, the darkening pall of an Inquestor air patrol, its sails spread wide on either side of its narrow hull. It’s one of their scout ships, drifting upon invisible currents of fog and steam. From below it looks like a silver hummingbird, darting in and out between the buildings.

I throw the bag over my shoulder and slide my hammer into my belt. The ship’s sudden appearance only serves to make me uneasy. Inquestors tend to stay out of the Warrens, abandoned as they are. A patrol out at this time of day would be looking for somewhat.

Or someone.

I don’t want to be either.

Sparrow and I have been on the receiving end of their searches before. Last time I’d been stopped, they took nearly a full day’s worth of scrap for no reason except that they could. Rory had beaten me senseless when he found out, the arrogant bastard.

Still...

Short my quota or no, the dragon in my sack troubles me. The longer we hold on to it, the more likely we’ll be discovered. And the more likely we’ll give up any chance of a profit. I shift the strap of my bag so it’s sitting more securely on my shoulder. “Let’s just head toward the Conundrum now. The sooner we dump this, the better off we’ll be. Maybe I can make up for my missing scrap tomorrow.”

Sparrow lets out a disbelieving grunt. “Come on, then. I’ll split my takings with you, and we’ll say the patrols chased us out of the junkyard. Wouldn’t be the first time.”

I cast a wary eye at the shadow, but the air patrol is heading toward the lights of BrightStone’s Upper Tier and away from us.

“And good riddance.” Sparrow sighs with relief.

We slink our way to the borders of the junkyard, pausing when we discover the remains of an ancient carburetor, its innards

slowly leaking out in inky streaks. I pick off the bolts, but they jangle miserably in Sparrow's sack with every step she takes.

At the outskirts of the Warrens the fog thickens around us in a cloak woven of soot and ancient rust. The coverage is deceptive, making it seem as though the lower bowels of the city are cleaner than their wont. But like a diseased whore, all it takes is a stiff breeze from the fetid bay to remove the illusion, its skirts lifted to reveal the rotting core beneath.

Oily puddles stinking of fish guts and damp shit cover the cobblestones in layers of filth that make it hard to walk. You get used to the smell the way you get used to never being warm or having a belly that never stops biting.

In the distance, the dull clang of the Mother Clock thumps out the hour, the sound burrowing its way through the crevices of shutters and chimney tops, crumbling brick and slick-packed cement. Something crunches beneath my foot, and I wave away the fog, blinking in surprise when I see a metallic hue.

More scrap?

I kneel, my fingers digging through the muck without hesitation.

"Mags?" Sparrow's voice is a whisper from the gloaming.

"Hush. There's somewhat here." I feel hard metal. Oil, slick... and warm? I pull a lightstick from the inner pocket of my coat and tap it softly. It blazes to life, illuminating the alleyway in a putrid piss color. Enough to get a better idea of what I'd stumbled over, at least.

Sparrow mumbles a swear above me.

"Hells." The metal glints beneath my foot, and I realize it's another dragon, just like the one in my sack, but its wings are a shattered mess of coils and springs and no ember beats within its broken glass chest. An uneasy feeling churns in my gut.

But really, it isn't the metal so much as the blood pooling in a large depression in the cobblestones. And it's not from the dragon.

I trace the sluggish crimson rivulets to the source—a body sprawled in a haphazardly ungraceful position. Death being the great equalizer, it clearly has no time to stop for dignity.

The man's head is cracked; something spongy leaks from his ears, and his jaw hangs open like a door knocked off its hinges. Death isn't a new thing for us by any stretch, but that's not what makes me pause. I glance at Sparrow, nestled deep in her coat, and she swallows.

"His face..." she says, barely a whisper.

"I know." I carefully prod his cheek. Even beneath the yellow luminescence of my lightstick, his skin seems to shimmer.

He's a Meridian. A real, gods-be-damned Meridian.

I've never seen one before, and as far as I know, neither has Sparrow. These days they keep to themselves in their floating city, using the specialized techniques of their red-robed Inquestor squads to keep the rest of us in line—BrightStone citizens and half-breed Moon Children alike.

Moon Children like me and Sparrow.

"I always thought the glowing-skin thing was bullshit." Sparrow tugs at a lock of her hair. "Too bad we don't glow. It'd be a lot handier in the dark."

"Or make us easy targets," I retort. "At least now we know what that air patrol was looking for." I touch his face again, marveling at the way it glitters, almost like a hint of frost upon a windowpane.

"We should get out of here," she says. "This is bad news."

"In a minute." I look up at the Meridian towers. Had he jumped or been pushed?

I shuffle forward, patting down the ruins of his fine wool coat until I discover a credit chit. I nearly toss it. The chits are Meridian currency, but they find their way to BrightStone from time to time. The shops here only take credit chits from Inquestors and BrightStone citizens of the Upper Tier—noble gentry who

wouldn't deign to rub shoulders with gutter rats like us if their lives depended upon it.

Still, the thought of leaving money behind rankles. I pocket the chit on the off chance I can trade it for something later.

"Mags," Sparrow hisses at me again. I frown at her. Scavenging is first come, first serve. If I don't do it, then someone else will five minutes from now.

"Nearly done." I snag a few loose odds and ends that can be melted down if I can't sell them, and oh...a parcel of dried tobacco worth more than everything I have on me put together.

Sparrow leaves me to clamber up the brickwork of the nearest building, her fingers expertly digging into the rotting cement. "There's a ground patrol coming. I think they're looking for him." She melts into the shadows of the rooftops only to reappear a moment later. "Half a block. They're being quieter than usual."

"They're a tad late, don't you think?"

Something about the raggedness of his coat nags at me, and I run my hands along the lapel as I lower my lightstick. I feel the wound before I see it. Holes upon holes and shattered bones and cooling viscera. "He didn't just fall," I say. "Poor bastard's been gutted right under the ribs."

She exhales slowly. "Come on. They're nearly at the corner."

Now that she's pointed it out, I can hear the telltale thudding of heavy boots from somewhere behind us. "Time to go."

I pocket whatever is left of the second dragon's body and narrowly avoid the less than pleasant bodily fluids leaking from the soft parts of the man's flesh. No sense in leaving a trail.

I reach the far end of the alley, Sparrow silently flanking me up above. She whistles sharply twice, and I freeze.

Not one patrol but two.

And I've run smack into one of them.

It's a contingent of at least ten by the quick count I make, all dark-crimson trench coats and oiled mustaches, white gloves and

brass buttons. Definitely not the normal caliber of the BrightStone watch.

No, these are Inquestors.

Shit.

It's said that Inquestors were Meridians once, before they came to BrightStone, but I don't know if it's true. They certainly don't shimmer from what I've seen. The leader of this particular patrol glares at me in disgusted recognition. Inquestor Caskers is a beanpole of a man wrapped in sallow skin and bristling black hair, his squared jaw set like that of a bulldog. The brass star on his breast indicates his rank of lieutenant, and his mustache is freshly waxed.

He cuffs me when I don't move out of his way. My cap falls off into the dust, and my white hair tumbles past my shoulders in the guttering lamplight, the mere presence of which earns me another stinging slap.

"Oy. A Moon Child. Raggy Maggy, is it?"

I taste blood on my lips, but I keep my face down and my hands in my pockets. "Yessir."

He pushes my hair out of the way to check the brand on the nape of my neck, letting him know which of the three Moon Child clans I belong to. My clan, the Banshees, resides within the Warrens while the Spriggans have taken what's left of the merchant districts and the Twisted Tumblers have the run of the Theatre Quarter. The rest of BrightStone is a no-man's-land of uneasy truce and feigned ignorance, but it gives us the semblance of having power over ourselves. Getting caught outside your territory by an opposing clan, though, is usually grounds for a beating, often of the more fatal sort.

I swallow, unable to keep from peeking up at him. If I'd run when I first saw them I might have managed to elude them long enough for them to decide I wasn't worth the trouble of chasing

down. But there's no point in making a fuss now. He's got real evidence of who I am and that I was here.

Inquestor Caskers's dark eyes rake over me with a familiar bent, narrowing when they see my sack. I let my mouth go wide and scared, making myself appear as harmless and uninteresting as possible.

He grunts, fixing me with a hard gaze before tugging on the bag at my shoulders. "Seen anything worth reporting this evening? Anything untoward we should know about?"

It's asked in the mildest of tones, but the threat lingers all the same. It takes everything I have to simply stand there instead of jerking away. In the end, I simply shake my head. "Nothing," I mumble.

Caskers stares at me a moment longer and lets go of the sack. "Indeed. I don't have time for you now. Get out of my sight before I change my mind."

I dart low to retrieve my cap as they shove past me. I still have a few moments before they discover the body and decide I'm involved somehow. Which they will. And I'm not going to stick around to see what happens when they do.

I don't dare glance up at where Sparrow might be hiding, but I start to hurry down the alleyway.

"Hold up, Lieutenant!" one of the Inquestors shouts. "We've a man down here..."

"That's that," I mutter, wincing as their shouts of alarm echo off the bricks.

"Oy! Stop her!" Caskers orders.

My sack bobs against my back as I run, the hard weight of the dragon slamming into my hip. A hand snatches at my arm, fingers curving like iron around my elbow.

Bastards left a guard at the end of the alley.

I snarl at my captor—this one slightly bowlegged with a face of jowled blubber. "Not so fast, girl." A lightstick hangs from his

belt, and he frowns when he sees my hand. "You've blood on your sleeve."

My heart sinks. *Stupid, stupid, Mags.* I reach into my pocket in desperation and fling the broken dragon parts at his face, escaping as he covers his eyes.

I whistle shrilly as I pelt away, and Sparrow answers me with a whistle of her own. As coded messages go, it's a rudimentary thing but it gets the job done. Easy to hear, hard for outsiders to understand, and for Moon Children, sometimes that's the difference between life and death.

I whistle again, looking for the best route. *Which way?*

Two short blasts followed by a long hold in response. *Two up, one over.*

I yank the hammer from my belt as I sprint the next two blocks, the heavy steps of the Inquestors pounding in pursuit. I leap upward, snagging a low-slung metal beam hanging across the street. It gives beneath my weight; the rusted edges wail as I whip forward so it hurtles from the brickwork, landing behind me with a clunk. A bang and a sharp curse follow suit, indicating my venture to trip my pursuers was successful, albeit only temporarily.

The end of the street materializes in front of me, the brassy-gold shine of the lanterns reflecting off a drainpipe.

Almost there.

Heavy breath follows me, but it's winded. If I can get to the rooftops, they won't dare come after me. My fingers clutch the drainpipe, and I dig my boots into the mortar to shimmy up and up.

My teeth slam shut hard, the vibration ringing in my ears, as I'm yanked sharply down. One hand on my boot and another on my bag, pulling it from my shoulder.

Not the dragon!

I kick out, making contact with something soft as I wriggle out of the shoulder strap.

Without bothering to aim, I swing the bag by the strap, hurling it up into the darkness to land on some distant rooftop. I catch the dull clank of metal against stone. Good enough. With any luck I'll find it later, once I get out of this mess.

Another pull and I drop farther down the pipe. I spare a glance below only to see Caskers emerge from the shadows, his face sputtering with fury as he commands my obedience. "You *will* attend me, Moon Child."

I should. Every instinct I have tells me I should turn myself over to them, but something inside me snaps. I spit at him and swing wildly at my captor with my hammer. My first attempt merely blemishes the side of the wall, but my second...

A wet gurgle and a groan come from the Inquestor as she holds on to my ankle. I scramble away, the hammer slipping from my grasp. Above me, Sparrow holds out her hand. I grab it, and she hauls me to the first bit of landing.

"Had to drop my fucking hammer," I grunt.

Sparrow's dark eyes are wide pools of fear. "We've got bigger issues, Mags. Come on." She dashes away, her feet slapping on the rooftop. I swear as I stare down at the scene below.

The unfortunate Inquestor I just hit sprawls on the cobblestones, a red stain pooling around her head. Her legs twitch like a pipe beetle after it's been lanced on a stick, but she's got her hands clamped over an eye. Her lips are pulled back in agony, and I realize I've impaled her.

Click.

Now the pistols are drawn, aimed in my direction. My gaze meets that of Caskers, and somehow my hand rises to salute him. His brows knit in single-minded concentration, the report of the gun snapping off the walls of the alley, cement shattering right above where I'm standing.

My ears ring as I flee. From behind me comes the rattle of the drainpipe, but I keep going. I skip over the tops of the buildings,

my knees bent for balance. My lightstick is long gone, and it's safer to take my chances in the fog without it anyway. I pause to get my bearings, and Sparrow's form materializes beside me.

"We should split up. Less chance of them tracking us," she says.

Another bullet whizzes by, and I duck beneath the buzz of it, fire blooming over the right side of my scalp. It only grazed me, but there's a dark dampness on my fingers when I gingerly test the spot.

"Go!" I give her a shove as the dull rumble of an air patrol roars to life above us, the engine fans thrumming like a half-mad metronome. Not a mere scout ship this time but an actual Interceptor. Sparrow lets out a squeak and tears across the rooftops. I take off in the opposite direction, away from the Warrens.

I skid down a rough embankment made of half a toppled chimney, and I head for the old industrial quarter. My ears are pricked for the sounds of an alarm until the textile mill looms out of the mist, its familiar broken windows peering at me jaggedly.

Inside, there are squatters, but it doesn't surprise me in the least. Most of the BrightStone citizens living in the Warrens are outcasts adrift in their own private hells. Some unfortunate animal roasts on a spit, and the scent of greasy meat roils my stomach.

My hair is already becoming matted with blood, and I lean against the arc of a broken pipe, ignoring the dull throb of pain. If the flap of skin on my head is any clue, I'm going to need stitches.

Out of habit, I run my fingers over my breastbone to the copper panel resting between the curves of my nearly nonexistent breasts. I let out a sigh of relief. My heart continues beating the way it always has, a comforting *tick-thump, tick-thump* vibrating softly below my touch. But I'm not totally in the clear yet. Most patrols give up after a few minutes, but the last look Caskers gave me had been intensely personal, my eventual demise reflected in the depth of his beady rat eyes.

“You’re a marked woman, Mags,” I whisper to myself. Rory might very well Tithe me for this...and that hardly bears thinking about.

My thoughts churn, but I have to trust Sparrow has found her way home by now, or at least a good place to hide. My only consolation is that she wasn’t involved. Even if the Inquestors catch her, they have no reason to think she has anything to do with the dead Meridian.

A cockroach scuttles over my face. I flick it off and crush it beneath my thumb. Hunching forward, I tuck my scarf in around my neck to soften the sudden chill creeping through my patched overcoat. My scalp burns as blood drips down my cheek. I need a bonewitch to stitch it before I do anything else. My ears strain in the darkness, but there’s no sound of a patrol, no gunshots in the distance.

All clear for now. With a sigh, I uncoil from my perch to creep along a narrow ledge and then downward, my fingers digging into the ancient brickwork for purchase.

“Piss on me, piss on you. Piss on all the Meridians, too.” I singsong the familiar children’s rhyme, letting the words drift into the fog as I head for Surgeon’s Row, my bloodstained hands shoved deep in my pockets.