

# Abditory

By Jenna Sampson

Long after the Fourth World War, amidst a dry and barren wasteland, a great city was born. Built from the rubble of a nation razed by war, Spikes was tall and powerful; but under an oppressive government, those who longed for freedom began to rebel. The Flameward was formed, a power-hungry military unit; and with the help of their mechanical fiends they took hold of the city. The Flameward squashed out the rebel's efforts, and threw those who did not join them into poverty. However, a few of the rebels remained. They banded together to form a secret group of Knights, staying hidden in the shadows and quietly recruiting others who still craved victory over the dictators.

When the sun goes down, our city is a dangerous place. We must be wary of the beasts, their gears rusty and worn by time, but their teeth and nails still sharp and clean from good maintenance and frequent use. Here in Spikes, the Flameward controls us. Even the strongest of Knights among us are no match for the power of the Flame. Not yet. The dragons and their masters are our cruel overlords, and we can either stay hidden and obey... or die fighting.

Ashel

I run through the dark streets, sticking to the middle in hopes of avoiding the murky sludge that pools shallowly in the ditch along the side of the road. I can't risk making any noise. Behind me, the steady

'CREEAAK... THUNK! CREEAAK...THUNK!'

of metallic joints and heavy clawed feet grows increasingly more distant. I grin. *'Not today, cog-head!'* I slow to a jog, sure that I've almost lost the dragon completely.

Just as I think this, the noise stops suddenly, making me stumble.

"Blazes," I spit, ducking into an alleyway as I hear the dull rattling of mechanical wings being opened. "This is what happens when you get cocky, Ashel." I mutter.

I quickly look around for someplace to hide. A large cardboard box, big enough for a fridge, catches my eye, hidden among a cluster of garbage cans. There. On my hands and knees, I lift the flap and crawl inside. Curled up in a ball, I can feel my hands shaking through their worn leather gloves. I hate feeling trapped, but I can't run now. Dragons are slow and jerky on foot, but I would never be able to outrun a flying dragon. The monster's thin metal wings pointlessly thump at the air as the rocket boosters on its hind legs do all the work to propel it forward. I can sense it pause at the entrance of the alleyway, fan whirring in mock breath. Holding my breath, my eyes become fixated on the rubber tip of my shoe, which pokes dangerously close to the bottom of the cardboard flap. I don't dare move. I close my eyes and pray until the beast finally moves on.

Resting my head between my knees, I run my fingers through my hair and slowly breathe out between my teeth. Uncurling as far as I can under the low roof of the box, I notice an apple core, chewed raw, sitting in a corner along with a few other

miscellaneous items: a scrap of cloth here, a water canteen there. I feel a tingling sensation that usually means I'm being watched. When I shift, my arm comes in contact with flesh, making my blood run cold. Surprised, I jerk away. From the end of the box farthest from me, I hear a meagre whimper.

A slight form sits shivering, pressed against the wall. A child. I guess that he's probably no older than seven or eight years old, although his eyes look ancient. They are wide and startlingly pale blue, and shine like glass in the inky darkness of the box, echoing with the pain of a hard and hungry life. He focuses on me with a mix of fear and anticipation. At first I am not sure what to do. I don't have much experience with small children, being one of the youngest Knights within our ranks myself at fourteen.

"Hi," I start, rocking nervously. He keeps staring, like a deer caught in headlights. "You don't have to be afraid. I won't hurt you." Some of the fear leaves his eyes, replaced by suspicion. When he speaks, it's in a harsh and rusty whisper, like he hasn't used his voice in a long time.

"Who are you?" He hisses. "Why are you in my house?"

House? Not exactly. I'm sure he could hear the dragon outside, so it's pretty obvious that I'm hiding. I answer his first question, ignoring the second.

"I'm, uh, I'm Ashel... What's your name?"

His face relaxes, but his muscles are still visibly tensed, ready to spring at any moment.

"Irwin, Irwin Spark." he says softly. "But no one ever calls me that."

I quirk an eyebrow. "What do they call you?"

He smiles wryly, and as he talks, it turns into a sneer, a look that is unnatural on his innocent face.

"Nothing. Nobody calls me anything. They don't care." His face crumples. Tears fill his eyes as they look deep into mine, searching. "Nobody cares about *me* at all." The tears spill over, but he does his best to conceal it, swiping at them before they have a chance to fall. For the first time I notice how thin he is, how pale. He needs help. Help and protection that I can provide.

"Irwin," I say, putting my hand on his bony shoulder. He breathes in sharply, and I notice a dark, bruise-like splotch on his collarbone. My jaw tightens, and I feel a rush of anger at the thought that anyone might hurt this poor child. "*Who did that?*" I hiss. He pulls away, quickly covering the mark with his ragged shirt.

"No one... No one." He mumbles, hugging his knees. I feel a sudden sense of urgency. There could be all sorts of people lurking in the shadows. People who could hurt him even more badly if he stays here. We have to get out of here, and fast.

"Irwin." I say again. "I can help you. I know a place where you can stay. You'll have food, good food," I add, glancing at his brown apple core. "And water and warm clothes, too." His eyes light up at the mention of all three. "Come with me." I plead. I know now that I won't leave without him. His brows crease, his expression becoming guarded.

"How do I know you're telling the truth?" He asks.

I sigh. I should have known he wouldn't come easily. A lifetime of distrust is hard to move away from. I bite my lip. '*Should I tell him?*' I ask myself. I will have to. If he decides to come, he needs to know what he's getting himself into.

"What I'm about to tell you is *top secret* information. You must *never* tell anyone what you are about to hear." I say solemnly. Now he looks worried. "There is going to be a rebellion. I'm a part of it. I don't know when it will happen. I don't know how. But it will happen- the Flameward can be defeated. Join us, and we can protect you when the time comes. And who knows? Maybe you can help us too." He looks uncertain at first, but then nods grimly and takes a deep breath.

"Okay. I'm coming with you. But if it turns out you're lying..." His small hands clench into fists. I smile a little, knowing that even if I was lying, this fragile child could never hurt me.

"I know." I assure him.

Once we are outside I give my coat to Irwin, knowing it will take me a while to find my motorcycle in the dark, and I don't want him to get too cold. Finally I start to recognize my surroundings a bit more, and find the lamp post I left it against.

"Catch!" I call, tossing my helmet at my new friend as I pull out a key and start the engine. It sputters for a moment, and then fades to a gentle purr. I help Irwin get on, and then tighten my goggles around my head. Soon we are speeding through the cool night air. At first Irwin has a death grip around my middle, but soon he relaxes, letting out a whoop. I laugh, and go a little faster, flying over the pavement toward Knight Headquarters, refuge, and home.

Irwin

We arrive at Headquarters just before sunrise. I don't know how Ashel can tell where he's going- everywhere looks the same to me. But as he reaches a part of town that seems to be in even more in disrepair than everywhere else, he begins to slow down. My arms ache from holding on for so long, and the ever-persistent feeling of hollowness in my stomach makes it hard to focus on my surroundings.

Unease settles over me as he stops in front of an old, ramshackle storage garage. He hops off of his motorcycle and turns around to face me, grinning broadly.

"Welcome home." He announces, gesturing broadly at the dismal building as if it is a grand palace. He takes my arm gently to help me down from the bike. I am beginning to doubt my decision to trust this boy when a large man, dressed in all black, like Ashel, appears out of the shadows. He nods in our direction, a reverent look in his eyes.

"Sir Ashel," He says. "Your parents are expecting you."

I raise my eyebrows in surprise and wonder just how important Ashel must be, if he is treated with such respect. The man eyes me suspiciously, but says nothing. I guess he figures a child probably can't do much harm. I smirk. People always underestimate me. My smirk falters as I feel a violent stab of guilt in my stomach. I know I haven't been completely honest with Ashel, even after all of the kindness he has shown me. I can't help it- before I know what's happening, tears begin to burn my eyes. I blink repeatedly to keep them at bay. Although my mind knows better, my body is still that of a young child. I take a shaky breath, and Ashel glances over at me, worried. I smile at him to cover it up, but I can tell that he doesn't believe it. He really wears his heart on his sleeve, which is what made me start to trust him in the first place.

The guard escorts us inside, and to my surprise, the building is little more than an entranceway to a long flight of stairs heading ever downward; bringing new meaning to the term 'underground organization'. I trail behind the man and teenager as they converse on the way down, heavy footsteps echoing against metal. Ashel arranges via radio for a meal, bed, and change of clothes to be prepared for me. The guilt turns into a knife, twisting in my gut. Would he be so kind, if he knew who *-what-* I was?

I don't use my magic often, just enough to live by. I use it for the same reasons my father did, before the Flameward found him. I can make food, water, blankets, pretty much anything appear out of thin air with the right words. I can also defend myself when necessary. I don't know how it is possible, just that it's dangerous and exhausting. I have to be discreet about it because people might start to get suspicious if I don't seem hungry, and if I was ever caught I would be as good as dead.

From what I've gathered, Ashel doesn't know a thing about magic, or he would have known what I was the second he saw my Mark, which all Sorcerers have, according to my father. I'm sure he just thought it was a bruise or something, but it made him angry.

Finally, we reach the bottom of the last flight of stairs, which opens up into a vast alcove, made entirely from metal and steel. Knights dressed in black garments walk in and out of doors and hallways that line three of the four walls. The fourth is covered by a massive computer screen, displaying scenes from all over the city. Below them lies a control panel, where a couple of guards sit, carefully monitoring the pedestrians and -most importantly- the dragons. As I am drawn toward it, I notice that while there are plenty of the mechanical monsters around, none are anywhere near this stronghold. I doubt they even know that it exists. Ashel snaps me out of my trance by calling me over toward him. He runs his hand through his dark hair, looking nervous.

"You'll get to eat soon, I promise." He says quickly. "But there's someone -a couple of people, actually- that you need to meet first. The leaders of this organization." He says. I shrug like it doesn't matter, but my growling stomach gives me away. He guides me over to a shiny silver door and punches in a complicated passcode, complete with a retinal scan.

'*Security here is crazy.*' I think. But then again, it would have to be. I am momentarily shocked when I see my reflection in the door. Is it just the metal, warping me, or am I really that thin, that pale? I look like I'm sick. I frown. I guess this explains Ashel's

concern for my health. The door slides open smoothly, and we step inside of what looks to be an office. The walls are the same steel as everything else, but there are four plush black chairs arranged around a wooden desk, which is painted a glossy black to match. Two of the chairs are already occupied by a man and a woman.

"Welcome back, son." The man says warmly, signaling for us to sit down. I can tell immediately that they must be Ashel's parents; he has his mother's dark, spiky hair and his father's olive skin and kind grey eyes. I shift so that I am partially hidden behind Ashel.

His mother smiles at me and then addresses him. "Who's your friend, Ash? How was the mission?" Ashel smiles tightly and sets his hand on my shoulder. A comforting action that I am grateful for.

"Sir," he responds, nodding at his father. "This is Irwin. The mission failed today, but I am glad it did because I met him while fleeing for my life."

His father chuckles softly.

Ashel continues, becoming more serious. "He's going to stay with us. I won't send him back out there on his own." I smile sadly, looking up at him. He really is too kind.

His mother nods. "Of course. You should go eat now, but we can talk later about your training."

*'Training? What training?'* I wonder as a different guard takes us into a large cafeteria hall. My confusion must have shown on my face because Ashel nudges me, grinning.

"You're one of us now. As long as you stay here, we'll teach you how to fight: how to defend yourself." He leads me over to a series of buffet tables. My mouth waters at the sight of so much good food. It's more than I've ever seen; more than either my father or I was ever powerful enough to conjure. My jaw falls open. Ashel laughs and hands me a large paper plate. I quickly compose myself, realizing how ridiculous I must look. My stomach growls loudly and he gestures at the many dishes arranged on the long steel counters.

"Go crazy," he says, and that is all the encouragement I need.

Ashel

About four or five (I lost count) meat-bread-cake-and-stew-loaded plates later, Irwin begins to slow down. I would normally find it funny for someone so small to eat so much, but it makes me wonder when the last time he ate a good meal was. Not for a long time, probably. I feel guilty for making him wait. Downing one last glass of chocolate milk, he pushes back from the table. He smiles at me sleepily, and I chuckle, surprised that he hasn't put himself into a food coma yet. I get up from my chair, coming around to his side of the table.

"I think it's time for you to go to bed." I grunt, scooping him up like a sack of rocks. I'm pretty sure he didn't weigh this much an hour ago.

I carry Irwin out of the cafeteria, past everyone starting to trickle in for an early breakfast, and down various hallways until I reach the one where the sleeping quarters are located. The digital clock reads seven-thirteen AM. This early in the day, the student bunkers are mostly empty, save for a couple of teens here and there, taking a break between training courses. I set him down on a vacant bunk, a few rows away from mine.

"Who's that?" A voice calls out behind me. I turn to see my cousin Almira, sitting on her bed across the room, on the girl's side. She wears the same tight black suit as everyone else, but with her wild, fiery red hair and a personality to match, she easily stands out in the black-and-silver compound.

"He's from the city. I found him living on his own in a cardboard box, so I brought him back with me." She raises an eyebrow.

"I heard you failed your mission, Ash." she starts, walking over toward me. I run both hands through my already messy hair.

"Don't remind me." I sigh.

She smiles a little. "I'm sure its fine, Ashel. They shouldn't have sent you all on your own, so it was a stupid plan to begin with."

I kick off my shoes and toss my gloves on my bed, heading over to the gym equipment on the far side of the room. She follows me. "That may be," I say, "but I'm still worried they won't give me another mission now. At least it was just scouting -nothing important- but next time I might not be so lucky."

She shrugs. "Maybe, maybe not. When are you going to learn that you can't be perfect all the time? You're already the youngest Knight here, not to mention the leader's kid." I shake my head, pulling myself up to my chin on the highest set of bars I can find.

"That's exactly why I have to work hard. If I'm going to be a leader one day, I need to prove that I can handle the responsibility."

She rolls her eyes, pulling herself up onto a slightly shorter bar next to me and sitting on top of it. "And make up for all the goofing off you did when we were younger?"

I cock an eyebrow. "Maybe."

"What happened, anyway?" She asks, changing the subject.

I groan. "It was bad. Let's just say it ended with me being chased by a dragon."

She laughs. "Any mission that ends in you being chased by a dragon is a good one in my books." I smile in spite of myself, glancing at her, and I let myself hang.

"And I'm not really the youngest Knight, actually." I say. "You're only a month older than me, and now there's Irwin."

She wrinkles her nose at me, confused. "Who?" She asks. I forgot that barely anyone knows him yet. I jerk my head over to where he lies, only the tips of his dirty blond curls visible from underneath the heavy blanket.

"Him. That's his name: Irwin." I explain.

She grunts, hopping down from her bar and heading over to her bunk, where she grabs a towel and a swimsuit.

"I'm going down to the Aquatics level. Join me or don't, I don't really care." She pauses at the doorway, looking over her shoulder at me. "Just do something to relax. It was just a scouting mission. And after all, you did find *him*." She says, nodding at Irwin, and letting the heavy steel door close behind her. I drop down, smiling at my new small friend; thankful for the rare words of wisdom from my cousin.

Irwin

I wake to the sound of a door falling shut. For a moment I am a bit disoriented; I don't remember going to sleep in this strange bed. Ashel walks in, hair dripping and a soggy towel around his neck. I sit up as I watch him cross the threshold, stopping at a cot a few down from mine. He notices that I'm awake and waves. "Where am I?" I ask him, rubbing my eyes. He hangs his towel on the end of his bed. "Student dorm." He replies casually, shaking water from his hair like a dog.

"How are you feeling?" He asks me. I rub my neck, relishing the still-full heaviness of my stomach.

"Really good." I tell him, smiling. He gets a mischievous look in his eye.

"That's great, because your training starts tomorrow." He says. My eyes widen- I had forgotten about that. An anxious knot settles in my gut. He laughs, making some of the sudden tension fade away. "Don't worry, you're so young that I'm sure that Tharos will go easy on you. He's a fair instructor." I nod, sure that I will find out who Tharos is soon enough. He sounds scary.

The next morning, after I have thoroughly bathed in the cold, pounding water of the shower room, (apparently my hair is a much lighter shade of blond than I thought) I return to the dormitory to find a clean set of black clothes set out on my bed. The dormitory is empty, so I change quickly, then sit on my bed and wait, not sure what to do next. I play with my magic, watching as I wiggle my fingers to send sparks flying off of them. I've noticed that the colors tend to change with my mood: right now I am calm, so the bolts of light are a silvery blue- a color I don't see very often.

Suddenly, the door swings open, banging against the wall and making my sparks flare yellow with surprise. My eyes snap towards the door, and I quickly clasp my hands behind my back to hide them. A girl I've never seen before barges in and calls my name.

"Are you Irwin?" she asks, crossing her arms. I nod my head stiffly. She smiles a little. "In that case, come with me." She says, turning on her heel and leaving the room before I have a chance to respond. With a start, I jump up and hurry after her. I find the girl, recognizable by her bright red curls, waiting outside the door and taping her foot impatiently.

"Where are we going?" I ask her. "Where's Ashel?"

She rolls her eyes. "I'm taking you to training," she says it as if it's obvious. "My cousin is already waiting for us there." Huh. I thought Ashel would come get me himself, but it makes sense that he would send someone else if he was busy.

"You're Ashel's cousin?" I clarify.

She nods, raising her eyebrows. "*That was implied,*" she says slowly, as if speaking to a small child, which I guess I sort of am. "I'm Amira, by the way." She continues, leading me down a new hallway.

At last, we reach the training room. It looks similar to the rest of the compound, only the walls are covered in various targets and almost every corner is full of gym equipment. In the center of the room lies a padded sparring mat, where a few students face off. I watch them for a moment, captivated with the violent but graceful movements, which look almost like a dance. Almira drags me toward a table lined with white spheres. Ashel jogs over to meet us, followed by a large, black-clothed man, his dark skin glistening with sweat.

"This," he says, waving at the man, "is Tharos." My brows shoot up. So I was right about him being scary. Ashel reaches out and gingerly takes a sphere off of the table. "This is a stun bomb." He tells me. "In battle, this is the easiest way to disarm a dragon. It will short circuit them long enough for you to go in and cut main wires to completely disable them." He takes aim and throws it at a target, sending an electric current crackling over the red and white face of the bull's-eye. I pick one up to try it out. It takes a few tries, but eventually I am able to hit around the middle of the target. Tharos, despite his intimidating looks, turns out to be quite helpful and encouraging in coaching me in hand-to-hand combat. He tells me that when facing a human enemy, my best strategy would be to use my small size to my advantage by making them chase me to wear them down, and then going in with a weapon. Just as we are about to begin another lesson, a guard barges into the room, carrying a firearm on one hand and a radio in the other. He is frantically gesturing and speaking into the small device. Tharos runs over to him, looking worried. Unease settles over the crowd of students, and everyone stops what they are doing to watch the panicked guard converse with our trainer. Somethings' wrong and we know it. Tharos takes a deep breath, looking grim, and turns to face us all. His deep voice echoes through the spacious room, filling every corner.

"The Flameward has found us! Everyone must proceed to the safe rooms effective immediately. We don't have much time before-" he is cut off by a tremor so strong that it shakes the very walls around us. Calls of alarm and hysteria ring through the building.

Someone yells 'RUN!' And the floodgates open: people all around me gather weapons, supplies, -whatever they can get their hands on. I am caught in a wave of bodies

heading for the doors. Someone trips me, and I fall to my knees hard. Limbs fly all around me and I curl up as small as I can, arms around my head. Feet kick at my ribs, at my back; the floor trembles, and I am dizzy with the vibrations. "Help," I whisper.

A voice calls out, clear and high among the chaos.

"IRWIN!" It shouts. I look up to see a brief flash of red, of black and brown. My vision swims, but I manage to focus on one face, heading toward me: Ashel. The one person who has shown me any kindness since my father was taken. Who has been like a brother although he knows so little about me, and I have given him nothing in return. My eyesight clears, and I see that with him is Almira. She's the one who called my name.

"GET UP!" Ashel yells, and I mentally shake myself, stumbling to my feet.

Almira reaches me first, and she grabs my hand roughly, dragging me alongside her. I hear a heavy and rhythmic pounding at the main doors that could only be mechanical. The Flameward is here. Ashel pulls ahead, leading us not to the main door, but to a side entrance that I had not noticed before. Tharos is already there, motioning for us to hurry as he holds the door, glancing around agitatedly. All four of us bolt through the door, as the main entrance collapses and the beasts of death arrive, hinged jaws open wide to spew flames. We barely make it. Fire at our heels, Tharos slams the iron door shut, bolting it tight. He stares us down, eyes hard and cold.

*"The war has begun."*