

Chapter 2 – *Set the Bar*

Amazing visions raced through Megan’s mind of birds’ eye views of known and unknown planets and stars. She saw breathtaking skies, beautiful lands of brilliant colors, and extraordinary peoples that coaxed her to join them. A feeling of openness and comfort rushed over her, but her anger would not give way. She squeezed her eyes tighter hoping to end the images.

Megan felt herself leave the physical world. Her senses registered nothing. Unencumbered by gravity, sight, sound, smell, or touch, her self awareness grew. Still, she wanted it all to stop. Megan forced herself to focus on her family. “Don’t do this,” she growled hoping the apparition would heed her. She couldn’t hear her own words. Did the celestial being hear them? Frustration and despair boiled inside. Again, she attempted to make her demands known. “STOP THIS!!!”

Megan heard that. She felt solid ground under her hands and knees. There was no smell of fire, only a spurt of air with a faint floral scent passing over her. Its soothing warmth draped her body. She was unwilling to open her eyes—afraid to confirm what she already knew. This was not home. Both fists pounded the mossy ground, and she reared up screaming, “WHY DID YOU DO THIS TO ME?!”

Tears dropped from Megan’s closed eyes. She could feel them run down her face. Unwilling to accept her fate, she whimpered to herself, “Why God?”

“Why do you ask?”

Megan blinked several times before slowly turning her head towards the voice next to her. She looked up to the face of the huge figure. Blurred vision made her rub her eyes, then focus. God was not what she had expected.

The being was a giant of a man—standing a good seven feet—with tanned skin. His large, humanoid body rippled with muscles. He wore loose, off-white pants with a white sash tied around his waist. There was nothing more except for the metal cuffs that covered his forearms. He was younger than she expected, with a face sharp but kind. Short curly, ashen hair topped the head that framed the intensely gray eyes that stared at her.

“I-I wasn’t ready, Lord.” She looked down at his bare feet and added, “I want to go back.”

Chuckling, he replied, “I’m not your Lord, or your God.” He shoved an off-white shirt in front of her. “You may want to borrow this.”

Megan looked up again questioningly. He was smiling, and he motioned her to accept his offer. Slowly, she reached up and took the shirt and bowed her head again. That’s when she noticed she was naked and desperately clung to the garment for cover.

The huge man laughed shamelessly, and then attempted to desensitize the situation, “You will soon find there is nothing to be ashamed of here.”

Embarrassed, Megan quickly pulled the huge shirt over her head.

The towering male offered her an enormous hand up, “My name is John, John Lowe. They call me Titus, here.”

Megan shakily stood up without taking it, “Wh-where is here?”

“Training Grounds.” Titus smiled at her. Now she was beginning to act like the rest of them. “You were chosen like the rest of us...eh, and you would be?”

Megan looked around for whom he spoke of. Not seeing anyone, she returned her eyes to his, “Ma...Megan Scott.”

Titus bowed slightly, “A pleasure to meet you, Megan Scott.”

Without warning, a crude arrow landed in Titus's bicep, causing him to wince. First under his breath, and then in a loud roar he blurted, "Damn it, Pierce! This is supposed TO BE NEUTRAL GROUND!" Titus whirled around to look for his assailant. In shock, Megan remained behind him, but ventured a peek at the guffawing assailant.

The slender fellow with the bow stood atop a knoll forty or fifty feet away. "Ha, not from where I'm standing, wuss!"

Megan's attention was drawn back to Titus. A thin stream of blood was making its way down his arm. "God, you're hurt." Not knowing what else to do, she reached down to tear some material off the bottom of the borrowed shirt.

Titus stopped her with a staying hand. "It's nothing. I'll be all right." Clenching his teeth, he took hold of the arrow to pull it through. The giant's shift in stance caused Megan to get another glimpse of Pierce. He was about to shoot another arrow.

Megan surprised herself and reacted by lunging at Titus to bring him down. The arrow whizzed by.

Titus cried out from falling on the arrow in his arm. Megan's eyes were widened in panic when she scrambled off him.

Pierce called over after he jumped off the knoll, "Well done, Newcomer!" He sprinted across the huge clearing blanketed by clover with bobbers of crimson and white flowers while keeping his eye on the place where the second arrow had landed. He blurted out his afterthought, "You learn fast!"

Titus sat up. Megan was about to kneel down when Pierce came up to them. He had sleek golden-brown hair with bangs tied back from his face. The bowman sported metal studs in his ears, and a thick chain tight around his neck. His outfit was the same color and likeness of

Titus's, only he wore light suede boots, and his bow arm was neatly wrapped to the elbow by what Megan believed was his sash. His bow was now draped over his shoulder.

Pierce was smirking with hands to his hips.

“Well if this isn't a pathetic sight.” Pierce looked down at Titus, “I don't recall you rolling out the red carpet for me--” He grabbed the fist that was hurled at him before it reached his face. The Bowman waved a finger at the newcomer. “Uh-uh, careful woman, this is Neutral Ground.” Megan pulled away, leaving Pierce shaking the sting from his hand. “Wow, that's quite a punch you have.” Without taking his eyes away, he offered a hand up to Titus, “Hey, he-man, care to introduce your new friend?” Titus got up without on his own, placing the bloody arrow in Pierce's hand instead. “Ah shit, Titus. You could have cleaned it off.”

“Megan this is Pierce. Pierce, Megan.”

Megan studied Titus in awe. He was acting like nothing had happened. The wound was still there, but the bleeding had stopped. Her anger and frustration flared. Balling her fists, she screamed at both of them. “Where the hell am I, and who are you people?!”

Pierce answered first, “Well you aren't there...at least I don't think so.” He elbowed Titus's injured arm, causing the giant to cringe. “Maybe you could tell her, big guy. You've been here the longest.”

“Weeell, I have this theory,” hesitated Titus.

“WHAT? You don't really know?!” screeched Megan wide eyed.

Titus looked at her sheepishly, “I know we are in training.”

“Training for what?!”

Pierce tried to help, “Something extremely important.”

“That's it?!” She looked at them threateningly, “What about me?”

The two men looked at each other, then back to Megan, “Reader’s Dream.”

Megan looked at them both dumbfounded. “Huh?”

Titus showed Megan his large palms, “You know the bookstore, you were there, right?”

Images of the shop came back to Megan. She remembered how strange the attendants acted, and that odd sensation she got when the one touched her.

Pierce confirmed, “We’ve all been to Reader’s Dream.”

Titus added, “That makes nine of us...including you.”

Pierce gave Megan a reassuring pat on the shoulder. “Yeah, and judging by your reflexes and strength, I’d say you’re already ahead of the game.”

“Game?!” She shook her fists up at the sky yelling, “God, is what this is?” Not getting an answer, Megan growled at the sky, plopped down on the ground, and held her head. “I don’t want to be here. I want to go home.”

“Stand aside, cretins,” said a voice out of nowhere.

Both men jumped. Pierce went to grab the woman, but only caught air. “Quit sneaking up on me, Witch.”

“You have only to make use of your ears.”

Pierce shook the bloodied arrow at her. “How about I clean yours out with one of these?”

The petite, black haired woman of Asian descent pushed him aside with a light hand.

“You have tried this before without success,” she scoffed.

He hissed in her ear as she walked by, “Don’t think I’ll give up trying.”

Disregarding the two men, she addressed Megan, “My name is Kagemusha. It means shadow warrior.”

Pierce peered over her shoulder and offered, “Just call her Kasha.”

Megan looked up to see the woman bow. Her clothes were also off-white. The shirt had high sleeves that exposed slender, defined arms. A standing collar encircled her neck. The shirt hung smooth over her pants. Kasha wore strange shoes with a gap sown in between the first and second toe. They matched the color of her outfit.

Finding her manners, Megan stood up, brushed her hands off, and extended a hand. “I’m Megan Scott.”

Kasha straightened, but she did not accept it. “We are not here to make friends, Megan. We are the chosen guardians. You must learn to fight and defend.” Megan caught Titus frowning and Pierce rolling his eyes. Her distraction did not go unnoticed. Kasha continued, “You would do well to stay away from these two.”

Titus knew that all this was overwhelming for Megan. “All right Kasha, enough with the reality check.”

Pierce piped in, “Yeah, who made you the expert, Geisha Girl?”

“My ancient ancestors wrote of this place.” The shadow warrior did her best to overlook the men’s vulgarities.

“What are we supposed to defend if we’re dead?” asked Megan.

“You must improve your senses, Megan. Begin with your sight, and rely on your intuition.” Reaching back, Kasha gruffly pulled the giant forward showing his wound, “The dead do not bleed.” Her brow furrowed, and she let go of Titus. “Prepare, Megan. The next time we meet, it will not be to engage in polite conversation.” Bowing, the shadow warrior walked away and headed for a line of tall poplar trees outside of the circle. Their leaves waved green and ivory as if to entice all. The further way the more Kasha’s outline would blend within this moving backdrop.

“She’s such a drip.” Pierce murmured than devilishly turned back to Megan, “Wait until you meet his royal hind-ness.” Looking over at Titus, he elbowed his wounded arm again, “Get it, hind-ness. Hahaha...”

“Yeah I get it.” Titus shoved Pierce. “Now stop hitting my arm!” The bowman had to step back a couple of times before steadying himself.

“I think the others can wait. Come on Megan. Let me show you where the barracks are. There you’ll be able to find some decent clothes.”

Pierce added, “And food if you’re hungry.”

Megan swallowed. She didn’t understand any of this. “Is there someone I can talk to about going back?”

Pierce just shook his head. Titus glared at him in as if in warning, then revealed a warm smile for Megan. “Don’t give up hope. Occasionally we get visitors. They may be able to help.”

Titus guided Megan past the speechless Pierce. Coming to his senses, he sprinted to catch up. He walked along side Titus, and voiced a barely audible, “That’s a hell of a thing to say,” from the corner of his mouth. Titus replied by sending a quick elbow into Pierce’s ribs causing the man eyes to go wide. Stopped, he bit his lip to hold back his cry of pain. With a strained voice he called to the others, “Eh-you go on ahead. I’m going to find my other arrow and- ugh- then I’ll catch up.”

Titus waved, “You do that,” then lightly put his arm across Megan’s shoulder.

Pierce watched them a second before turning back. Something exchanged between the two. Titus had side stepped and raised his hands in truce. The big guy laughed, and then he returned to Megan’s side—this time keeping his arms to himself. Shaking his head, the bowman took two steps backwards, swung around, and nearly ran into Kasha. “Ugh!” He back stepped to

put space between them. “You freaking witch! God, you’re creepy. Why can’t you approach people like a freaking normal person?”

“We are not normal.” Kasha held out the missing arrow.

Pierce grabbed it, and slid it into the quiver of arrows behind him. He chuckled then argued, “What are you talking about, Kasha. What makes you think we’re not normal?” Kasha raised an eyebrow, crossed her arms, and waited for his senseless explanation. “Maybe if we were home, but—we’re not.” Seeing Kasha’s expression of astonishment wash over her face caused Pierce to grin in triumph.

Kasha’s face quickly changed to a frown, “I’m impressed. That blow to the ribs must have forced blood to your brain, cretin. Now, why don’t you take advantage of your brief coherence—tell me what you know of the newcomer?”

“Gee, I don’t know. That wouldn’t be fair to Megan.”

“I could force it out of you,” warned Kasha with narrowing eyes.

Pierce crossed his arms, and tapped his chin as though he was contemplating her threat. His mouth opened as if he were about to say something, but nothing came out. Kasha noticed that he had exchanged the tapping finger for the middle finger which stiffly pointed to the sky. Immediately, she went into a fighting stance. The bowman sighed, “Must I point out where we are?”

Kasha’s eyes shifted, then she straightened and relaxed. “Humph, we should name this place after you, considering you’re the one that frequents it the most, malingerer!”

Pierce didn’t have to know what her high and mighty words meant to make her eat them. “Malignerer, huh? Care to follow me to the killing fields, shadow witch?”

“I await your next move, cretin.”

Pierce nodded once, then charged off in the direction he had come from, removing his bow, and loading it with the bloodied arrow as he ran. The bowman smirked. He could hear Kasha's droning battle cry behind him.

Titus laughed as he headed across the clearing. "I meant no offense, Miss Scott."

"Mrs. Scott."

"Huh? Really?" Titus sent a confused glance at Megan, and she nodded in confirmation.

"Well, that's a first. Hubby still around?"

Megan warned, "Yeeesss."

"Hmm...Children?" asked Titus thoughtfully.

"One, Jessah, our daughter," replied Megan, unsure of her candidness.

"That's interesting." Titus went silent as he mulled over the possible implications of this information. He was curious to know her true age, yet didn't feel comfortable asking. He had made that mistake with one of the others. "How old is your daughter?"

"Seven." Images of Jessah's last birthday party filled Megan's thoughts, and she struggled to push down the anguish that rested within her heart. She looked up at the giant wondering why he seemed so curious about her family. "What about you?"

Titus redirected his attention back to Megan's face, "Hm? What about me?" He liked her green eyes; they went well with her ivory skin.

Megan's eyes narrowed, "Is there someone special in your life?"

"Ah." Dropping his head, Titus stared at the ground as he worked to recall his past life. He had come to realize it was weeks since he had given any thought to it. "No, I can't say there

is anyone...at least nobody that I had committed myself to.” He looked at her and smiled. “To be honest, my life before here has become somewhat of a blur.”

“Oh. Well then, despite what Katemucha—“

“Kagemusha. Just call her Kasha, everyone else does,”

“Ok, what Kasha said about not making friends? Does that include you?”

“Heck no!” Titus stopped and touched Megan’s shoulder. Facing her, he solemnly explained, “The way I see it, all we have right now is each other.” The giant gave her a genuine smile. “No man is an island, you know.” Then he climbed up the low bank that semi-circled the clearing, turned, and offered a helping hand.

Megan attempted to take his hand, but found it difficult to get a good grip because of its size. No matter, Titus gently grasped her tiny one within his own. “Then we can be friends?” she asked.

When Megan straightened, Titus didn’t let go, but changed his clasp and gave her a warm handshake. “Absolutely!”

Megan eyed him suspiciously, “Just friends, now. Nothing else.”

Confused at first, Titus’s mouth dropped open slightly as he studied Megan. Then it came to him. He threw his head back and laughed. “God, Megan. Man, this is rich.” He let go of her and showed her open palms. “Megan, you have nothing to fear.” The giant began to walk again, chuckling as he went. He led them down a wide, cobbled walkway which was surprisingly easy on her bare feet. It went through an open field with young trees scattered about as if to graze the own private patch of soil.

“I’m glad you find me amusing.” Feeling awkward, Megan looked ahead, spotted a defined tree line not far from them, and wondered where this strange man was taking her.

Titus ventured a glance at her again. The lost look on her face was worth recording in his memory. Focusing on the path, he tried to explain, “How shall I put this. We are here to train, that much is certain. We are to become the best we can possibly be-,” He used slight hand gestures to help emphasize. “-physically and mentally. To do this, personal -eh- attachments must be put aside...” a slight grin formed on his face and he added, “Whether we want to or not.” Then Titus’s brow furrowed. He thought the best way to explain was to be as blunt as possible. “Part of that means no emotional baggage. In other words: no sex.”

Megan flashed a disbelieving smile, “Are you telling me, everyone has agreed to keep their hands to themselves?”

The giant studied her face. For some reason, her expressions were worth it. Shaking his head, Titus chuckled. “No, I’m telling you we have no choice.”

“What, are you punished? Do the Sex Police show up to catch you in the act?”

“Haha, good one.” Her quirky humor made him smile again. “No, it means there’s no desire to do so. Our natural instinct to procreate is no longer in the social equation.”

“I don’t get it.”

Stopping again, Titus tried to clarify, “Look Megan. Look at me, do you find me appealing at all?” Hesitantly, Megan shook her head. “You’re sure? Take a real good look. Hey, I don’t like to go on about myself, but by human standards, I’m not half bad. I would even venture to say, I’m pretty damn good looking.” The giant made an Atlas pose and added, “And nobody has ever said I lack the charm.” Megan had to giggle. Titus was acting pretty ridiculous—charmingly so. Frowning, Titus relaxed, and waited until the woman composed herself. “Ok, if not me, what about Pierce, he’s not built like me, but he’s pretty buff. A handsome fellow, isn’t he? Has a warped sense of humor, but a likable guy. What about him?”

Again, Megan shook her head. “Should I take a stab and throw Kasha in as well?” This time, she shook her head with forced emphasis. Titus rested the back of his hands on his hips, and said matter-of-factly, “Funny the thought didn’t even cross your mind.” Megan’s eyes shifted back and forth while she replayed her recent encounters in her head.

Megan murmured, “Not a twinge” while she continued to mentally search for clarification. Even though she always remained true to her husband, the woman was not one to be immune to appreciative sights of the opposite sex.

“Exactly!”

Getting it at last, Megan gasped, and locked her wide eyes onto Titus who was nodding his head in affirmation. “Oh my God! We are all like eunuchs!”

Titus chuckled, “Not exactly, Mrs. Scott. We’re intact, we just lack the need or desire. Simplifies things doesn’t it?” Titus resumed their trek.

Megan remained quietly in shock, doggedly following Titus who turned down a dirt path that trailed off from the main walkway. He spoke over his shoulder, “Listen, I wouldn’t let the others know of your family ties. It could work against you.”

“What does my private life got to do with it?” Megan asked as she watched her step.

Titus stopped and turned to face her again. “Soon enough, you will meet the rest of us. To be kind, I would say the group is quite versatile and innovative. To be blunt, some are ruthless, and will use whatever means necessary to become unsurpassable. To some this is a game, to others it is their destiny.” Resting his hands on her shoulders, “I would hate to see your loved ones used as a weapon.”

Megan went white. Why should she believe all of this? Surely, she would wake any minute from what was becoming the worst nightmare of her life. But the heavy hands that rested

on her shoulders felt real. Then she wondered if she should trust the man in front of her. After all, he grouped himself in with the rest of them. It seemed the giant had read her mind.

A genuine smile appeared on Titus's face, "Not to worry, Megan. I do not believe this to be my destiny." He dropped his arms, and motioned his head in the direction they were traveling, "Come on, I know just the thing to cheer you up." Megan smiled and nodded weakly. Titus started to move again and she followed in silence. He called over his shoulder once more, "And you've got to be getting hungry. I know I am." Titus remained quiet for awhile. He wanted to give Megan the chance to sort herself out.

The empty feeling in the pit of Megan's stomach did not warm to Titus's "cheerful" suggestion. She had many more questions, but her spirits were low. She remained quiet and reserved. She tried to envision what her husband was doing now. He would surely mask her disappearance from their daughter for a while. Jess was a bright girl. She would know something was wrong, but they would have each other. Megan hoped that would be enough until she returned. Determined, she set her mind. Megan would find a way to go home.

The woman began to survey her surroundings...her temporary residence.

The path snaked its way through a vibrant green meadow. Small, white flowers dotted the landscape with an occasional blue cluster of floral here and there. Unknown flecks of white floated through the air, some acting as if they had a life of their own. The sky was overcast. The thick grey clouds were tainted with a whisper of yellow. The only sound was that of trickling water. Titus easily jumped over the once hidden stream, and Megan continued to follow. The high grass and other brush became taller as they pressed on. Soon, Megan's vision was obscured by the towering foliage, and it became uncomfortably quiet...too quiet.

"Er, John?"

“Yep?” Titus smiled but didn’t look back. He figured she was ready to talk more, however, he expected a question not an observation.

“I don’t think we’re alone.” Megan said in a hushed voice.

“Wha? Why to do say that?”

“I don’t know. It’s too quiet.”

Titus broke the stillness with his lighthearted laughter before answering, “Is that all? Nah, it’s always like this. There are no bugs, birds or anything. Haha. For a minute I thought you figured out how to-”

Suddenly, two figures emerged out of the tall grass; one low and one high. Yelling, they tackled Titus. The force was so great, they were airborne, and they disappeared into the bordering thicket. Titus cried out in pain—his wounded arm was at the center of impact.