

THE TRUTH WILL END THEM ALL



SEEKER

ARWEN ELYS DAYTON

CHAPTER SAMPLER

# SEEKER

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ARWEN ELYS DAYTON

DELACORTE PRESS

SEEK THE TRUTH  
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KEEP READING FOR A SNEAK PEEK . . .

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*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*  
Dayton, Arwen.

Seeker / Arwen Elys Dayton. — First edition.

pages cm

Summary: After years of brutal training for what she thinks is the noble purpose of becoming a Seeker, Quin Kincaid, fifteen, learns that she will be using the ancient artifacts and sacred knowledge as an assassin.

ISBN 978-0-385-74407-2 (hc) — ISBN 978-0-375-99148-6 (glb) —

ISBN 978-0-385-37857-4 (ebook)

[1. Assassins—Fiction. 2. Adventure and adventurers—Fiction. 3. Antiquities—Fiction.

4. Science fiction.] I. Title.

PZ7.D338474See 2015

[Fic]—dc23

2013042886

The text of this book is set in 12-point Requiem.

Book design by Stephanie Moss

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

First Edition

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# PART ONE

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SCOTLAND

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# QUIN

*It would be nice to make it through alive,* Quin thought. She ducked to the right as her opponent's sword came whistling past the left side of her body, nearly slicing off her arm. Quin's own whipsword was coiled in her hand in its whip form. With a crack, she flicked it out, and it solidified into a long sword. *It'd be a shame if he split my head open now. I'm so close to success.* The enormous man she was fighting looked delighted at the thought of killing her.

The sunlight was in Quin's eyes, but on reflex she raised her weapon over her head and stopped her opponent's next strike before it cut her skull in two. The force of his blow against her sword was like a tree trunk falling upon her, and her legs buckled.

"Got you, haven't I?" her adversary roared. Alistair MacBain was the biggest man she knew. He stood over her, his red hair glowing like an evil Scottish halo in the dusty sunbeams coming through the skylight. He was also her uncle, but that didn't mean anything at the moment.

Quin scuttled backward. Alistair's huge arm swung his oversized

weapon as if it were no more than a conductor's baton. *He really intends to kill me*, she realized.

Her eyes swept the room. John and Shinobu were staring at her from where they sat on the barn floor, both clutching their whipswords like life preservers but neither able to help. This was her fight.

"Useless, aren't they?" her uncle commented.

Quin got a knee beneath herself and saw Alistair's wrist flick, changing his enormous whipsword from the long, slender form he'd been using to a thick and deadly claymore—the preferred sword for a Scotsman about to strike a death blow. The dark material of his weapon slid back upon itself like oil, then solidified. He raised it above his head and drove it straight down at her skull. Quin wondered how many of her ancestors had been turned to mincemeat by swords shaped like this one.

*I am thinking, and it's going to get me killed*, she told herself.

Seekers did not *think* when they fought. And unless Quin stopped her mental chatter, Alistair was going to spill her brains all over the clean straw on the barn floor. *Which I just swept*, she thought. And then: *For God's sake, Quin, stop it!*

Just as she would tense the muscles of her hand to form a fist, Quin focused her mind. At once, things became quiet.

Alistair's claymore was hurtling through the air toward her head. His eyes looked down on her as his arms swung the sword, his feet slightly apart, one in front of the other. Quin saw a tiny shake in his left leg, as if he were off balance just a bit. It was enough. He was vulnerable.

In the moment before Alistair's sword should have crashed through her forehead, Quin ducked, pivoted toward him. Her wrist was already twisting, commanding her whipsword into a new shape. It melted into itself, becoming an oily black liquid for a split second, then solidified into a thick dagger. Her uncle's claymore missed her

and made a heavy impact with the barn floor behind her. At the same moment, Quin launched forward, burying her weapon in Alistair's left calf.

"Ahh!" the big man screamed. "You've got me!"

"I have, Uncle, haven't I?" She felt a smile of satisfaction pulling at her lips.

Instead of cutting flesh from bone, Quin's whipsword puddled into itself as it touched Alistair's flesh—it, like Alistair's sword, was set for a training session and would not actually harm its opponent. But if this had been a real fight—and it had certainly felt real—Alistair would have been disabled.

"Match!" Quin's father, Briac Kincaid, called from across the room, signaling the end of the fight.

She heard cheers from John and Shinobu. Quin pulled her weapon away from Alistair's leg, and it re-formed into its dagger shape. Alistair's own blade was stuck six inches into the hard-packed barn floor. He flicked his wrist, collapsing the whipsword, which snaked out of the ground and back into a coil in his hand.

They'd been fighting in the center of the huge training barn, whose old stone walls rose around the dirt floor with its covering of straw. Sunlight streamed through four large skylights in the stone roof, and a breeze came in the open barn doors, through which a wide meadow was visible.

Quin's father, their primary instructor, stepped to the center of the floor, and Quin realized her fight with Alistair had been only a warm-up. The whipsword Briac was carrying in his right hand was a child's toy compared to the weapon he wore strapped across his chest. It was called a *disruptor*. Forged of an iridescent metal, it resembled the barrel of an enormous gun, almost like a small cannon. Quin kept her gaze locked upon it, watching the metal flash as Briac moved through a patch of sunlight.

She glanced at Shinobu and John. They seemed to understand what she was thinking: *Brace yourselves. I have no idea what's happening now.*

"It is time," her uncle Alistair said, addressing the three apprentices. "You're old enough. Some of you"—here he looked at John—"are older than you should be."

John was sixteen, a year older than Quin and Shinobu. He should have taken his oath already, by the normal schedule, but he had started his training late—he'd been twelve, while Quin and Shinobu had started at eight. This was a source of ongoing frustration to him, and his cheeks reddened at Alistair's comment, an effect quite noticeable on his fair skin. John was handsome, with a finely carved face, blue eyes, and brown hair with the faintest tint of gold. He was strong and quick, and Quin had been in love with him for some time. He flicked his gaze to her and mouthed silently: *Are you all right?* She nodded.

"Today you must prove yourselves," Alistair continued. "Are you Seekers? Or are you poxy lumps of horse dung we'll have to shovel up off the floor?"

Shinobu raised his hand, and Quin suspected he was going to say, *It happens I am a poxy lump of horse dung, sir . . .*

"This is no joke, Son," Alistair said, cutting Shinobu off before his quips could begin.

Shinobu was Quin's cousin, the son of the giant red-haired man who had just attempted to decapitate her. Shinobu's mother had been Japanese, and his face had taken the best features from the East and the West and combined them into something nearly perfect. He had straight, dark red hair and a wiry body that was already taller than that of the average Japanese male. He turned his eyes to the floor, as if to apologize for making light of the moment.

"For you and Quin, this may be your final practice fight," Alistair

explained to Shinobu. “And for you, John, your chance to prove you still belong here. Do you understand?”

They all nodded. John’s eyes, however, were fixed on the disruptor strapped across Briac’s upper body. Quin knew what he was thinking: *Unfair*. And it was unfair. John was the best fighter of the three of them . . . except when there was a disruptor involved.

“Does this bother you, John?” Briac asked, slapping the strange weapon on his chest. “Does it hurt your focus? It’s not even on yet. What will happen when it is?”

John wisely did not answer.

“Take your weapons out of practice mode,” Alistair ordered.

Quin looked down at the grip of her whipsword. At the end of the hilt was a tiny slot. Reaching into a pocket in the old leather of her right boot, she drew out a small object like a flattened cylinder, made of the same oily black material as her sword. She slid this into the slot on the handgrip, her fingers automatically adjusting the tiny dials on the attachment. As the last dial moved into place, the whipsword in her hand gave off a delicate vibration, and immediately it felt different, as if it were ready to do what it was made to do.

She grabbed the tip with her left hand and watched it melt and puddle around her skin. Even “live” it would not harm her flesh. But everyone else’s flesh was now fair game.

Quin’s heartbeat was speeding up as she watched her father and Alistair taking their own whipswords out of practice mode. A “live” fight was no easy task. But if she did well, she was minutes away from her father’s approval, from joining her ancestors in the noble duties of a Seeker. Since early childhood, she’d been listening to Alistair’s stories of Seekers using their skill to alter the world for the better. And since the age of eight, she’d been training to develop those skills. If she succeeded now, she would finally be one of them.

John and Shinobu had finished adjusting their own whipswords,

and the barn was now filled with a different sort of energy, a sense of deadly anticipation. Quin's eyes met John's, and she gave him a look that said, *We can do this*. He nodded subtly back to her. *Be ready, John*, she thought. *We'll do this together, and we'll be together . . .*

A high-pitched noise cut through the barn, so piercing that Quin wondered for a moment if it was only in her head. The look on John's face was enough to tell her different. The strange cannon-like gun her father wore, the disruptor, had come to life. The base of it covered her father's whole chest and had to be held in place with straps over his shoulders and around his back. The barrel was ten inches wide, and instead of a single hole, there were hundreds of tiny openings in the iridescent metal. These openings were randomly placed and of different sizes, and somehow this made it look worse. As the disruptor came fully alive, the high-pitched whine faded, replaced by a crackle of electricity in the air around the weapon.

Shinobu shook his head like he was trying to get the sound out of his ears. "Isn't that toy a bit dangerous with so many of us fighting?" he asked.

"If you fail in this fight, you are very likely to be injured," Alistair said, "or even . . . *disrupted*. Anything is fair today. Take a moment to understand this."

The three apprentices had seen the disruptor fired before, had even practiced avoiding it in one-on-one drill sessions, but they had never seen it used in a live fight. The disruptor was made to instill fear, and it was working. *Our purpose is worthy*, Quin repeated to herself. *I will not be afraid. Our purpose is worthy; I will not be afraid . . .*

With his whipsword, Alistair hooked something floating in a metal trough at one side of the barn. The object was a heavy iron circle, about six inches across, covered in thick canvas and soaked in pitch. He sent it flying up into the air.

As the iron circle arced high above him, Alistair lit a match. The disc fell toward him, and he caught it again with his whipsword. He touched the match to it, and the three apprentices watched as it burst into flames. Alistair twirled the disc around his sword, an evil glint in his eye.

“Five minutes,” he said, looking up at the clock high on the wall. “Let no flames spread, keep yourselves alive and sane, have the disc in your possession at the end.”

The apprentices glanced around the barn. There were bales of straw against the walls, loose straw across the floor, racks of old wood holding fighting equipment, climbing ropes hanging down from the ceiling, not to mention the barn itself, with its wooden beams and rafters supporting the stone walls. In short, they would be tossing around the burning disc in a room full of kindling.

“No flames!” Shinobu muttered. “We’ll be lucky if we don’t burn the place to the ground.”

“We can do it,” Quin and John both whispered at the same time. A quick smile passed between them, and she could feel John’s arm pressing against her own, warm and strong.

Alistair tossed the disc high up into the rafters.

“Prove yourselves!” Briac roared, cracking out his own whipsword. Then he and Alistair ran toward the apprentices with their weapons raised.

“I’ve got it!” yelled Shinobu, leaping out of Alistair’s way and running for the center of the barn, where the disc was now spinning down toward the straw covering the floor.

Quin saw Briac heading straight for John. Flicking his whipsword into the shape of a scimitar, Briac swung it in a wide arc aimed to slice John in half. She watched John’s whipsword flash out to block, and then Alistair was upon her.

“I have it!” yelled Shinobu as he landed the burning disc on his whipsword. It slid down toward his hand, the flames burning his fingers, and he had to spin it back up to the tip of his sword.

Alistair slashed at Quin, and she moved to one side, changing her sword into a shorter blade and striking at his back. He was already pivoting to meet her attack, turning her weapon aside.

“Not fast enough, lass,” he said. “You hesitate when you strike. Why? You’ll have the most precious artifact in the history of mankind in your hands, won’t you? You can’t hesitate. And when you’re *There*, when you step *between*, hesitation will be fatal.” This was Alistair’s mantra, which he’d been drumming into their heads for years.

John and Briac were exchanging blows. Briac looked like he had every intention of killing John as soon as he got the chance. Yet John was keeping up with him—he was a superb fighter when he focused. But a glance told Quin that John was fighting angry, and he was terrified of the disruptor. Sometimes you could direct anger and fear into useful energy. But usually, emotion was a disadvantage. It scattered your mind, made you spend energy unwisely.

Suddenly Quin realized that Alistair had backed her right into John, and now he was fighting them both. Briac was freed to turn toward Shinobu. The hum of the disruptor intensified to an unbearable volume.

“I’m tossing the ring!” Shinobu shouted. In the same moment, the disruptor on Briac’s chest fired. Shinobu threw the disc high up toward the rafters above Quin and John as the barrel of the disruptor released a thousand angry sparks of electricity. These sparks rushed through the air toward Shinobu, buzzing like a swarm of bees.

Shinobu hurled himself down beneath the volley and rolled away. With no human target to strike, the sparks collided against the back wall of the gym in bursts of rainbow-colored light.

“Got it,” John yelled, leaping away from the fight with Alistair

and hooking the falling disc onto his own sword. A glob of pitch oozed off the metal ring and onto a bale of hay, immediately setting it on fire. John stamped out the flames as the disc fell down upon his hand, burning him.

“Shinobu!” he called, flinging the ring back toward the rafters. He jumped in front of Quin, taking her place under Alistair’s punishing blows, as Shinobu caught the disc across the room.

Quin tried to rest her sword arm for a moment, but Briac was coming with the disruptor. Sparks launched toward her, crackling and buzzing.

If she let those sparks reach her, she would never be free of them. They would not kill, but they would be the end of her. *A disruptor field is worse than dying*— Quin stopped her thoughts. She was going to be a Seeker, a finder of hidden ways. There was only the fight; consequences did not exist.

She jumped to the side, grabbing a climbing rope and swinging out of reach. The sparks from the disruptor passed by and danced along the wall behind her, dispersing harmlessly.

She landed behind her father. He was already turning, flicking his sword out into a slender, evil blade. Before she’d regained her footing, he struck, his weapon slicing through her shirt at her forearm and cutting into the skin underneath.

Blood began trickling down her arm, and there might have been pain, but she had no time to think about it. The high whine of the disruptor was building again.

Shinobu was fighting Alistair now. John had the disc again, and he was spinning it around his whipsword to keep it from burning his hand as he stamped out another fire on a bale of hay.

Briac turned, fired the disruptor again, this time at John.

“John!” yelled Quin.

He tossed the ring blindly as he saw the sparks racing toward him.

Quin expected him to leap out of the way, but instead he was frozen, staring at those sparks, suddenly lost.

“John!” she yelled again.

At the last moment, Shinobu leapt away from his fight with Alistair and tackled John. The two apprentices sprawled safely out of the disruptor’s path. The sparks struck the wall where John’s head had been, disappearing in flashes of light.

Quin had forgotten the disc in her concern for John, and the fiery circle was bouncing across the floor, setting the straw in its path alight.

The disruptor was at its full whine once more. Quin saw the enjoyment on her father’s face as he fired it at John again.

John turned, transfixed. He was staring at the sparks coming at him, hypnotized by their awful beauty. Permanent—that’s what the disruptor was. If the sparks reached you, they took your mind and didn’t leave. And John was waiting to be hit.

She saw Shinobu kick John to the side, sending him out of the disruptor’s path a second time.

John fell to the floor, and this time he stayed down.

Quin retrieved the burning disc and stamped out the flames it had left along the floor. For the first time in the fight, she was angry. Her father was specifically targeting John. It was unfair.

She tossed the disc to Shinobu, ran across the barn, and slammed her body into Briac, knocking him and the disruptor to the ground. Sparks shot up toward the ceiling and bounced among the rafters in a chaotic pattern.

Quin brought her sword down at her father’s face as hard as she could.

“Match!” Briac yelled, before she could strike him. Instantly Quin obeyed his order and collapsed her whipsword.

Shinobu caught the flaming disc for the last time. Quin looked

at the clock, astonished to find that only five minutes had passed. It had felt like a year. John slowly stood up from the floor. Everyone was breathing hard.

Briac got to his feet. He and Alistair seemed to share a silent assessment of the fight. Alistair smiled. Then Briac turned and walked toward the equipment room, limping slightly.

“Quin and Shinobu, midnight,” he called, without turning around. “We meet at the standing stone. You will have a busy night.” He paused in the doorway of the equipment room. “John, you have bested the others and even me many times, but I saw no evidence of that skill here. You will meet me in the commons at dinnertime. We will speak frankly.”

With that, he shut the door firmly behind him.

Quin and Shinobu looked at each other. Quin’s anger had disappeared. Half of her wanted to scream in delight. She’d never fought like that before. Tonight she would take her oath. The life she had been anticipating since childhood would finally begin. But the other half of her was with John, who stood in the center of the barn, staring at the floor.

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# JOHN

The sun was getting low in the sky over the Scottish estate as John walked away from the training barn. He and Quin had left the barn separately, as they always did, but he knew she would be waiting for him.

A thousand years ago, there had been a castle on the estate, which had belonged to some distant branch of Quin's family. The castle was in ruins now, its crumbling towers perched above the wide river that encircled the land. As he walked, he could see the very highest point of the ruins in the distance.

Now the estate was made up of ancient cottages, most built over the centuries from stones carried off from the castle. The cottages were dotted around the edge of a huge meadow, called the commons. It was spring now, and the commons was full of wildflowers. Beyond the meadow, the woods began, a tall forest of oak and elm that crept right up to overshadow the houses and marched away to the ruins and beyond.

Barns lay at one end of the meadow. Some had animals in them,

but others, like the enormous training barn, were where the apprentices practiced the skills they would need as Seekers.

John walked through the shadows at the edge of the woods, then headed deeper into the trees. Even with his tremendous failure on the practice floor hanging over him, he felt his pulse quickening. He was entering another world, when he was in the woods with Quin, away from the parts of his life that usually overshadowed everything. He hadn't been alone with her in days, and finding her seemed more important than anything else at this moment.

She never chose the same spot to wait, but he must be getting close now. He was in their favorite part of the woods, where the canopies of the great trees touched overhead, blocking the sun and leaving the forest floor dark and quiet. A moment later, he felt hands encircling his waist and a chin sliding onto his shoulder.

"Hello," she whispered into his ear.

"Hello," he whispered back, smiling.

"Look what I found . . ."

She slipped her hand into his. Quin had dark hair cut chin length and a lovely face with ivory skin and large, dark eyes. Those eyes flashed at him mischievously as he followed. She led him to a stand of oaks that had grown in such a way as to create a tiny, secluded space in their center. She stepped through an opening between two of the trees and pulled John after her.

In a moment they were standing together inside the thicket. "It's not exactly the finest room at the village inn," she murmured.

"It's better," he said. "At an inn, you might be standing farther away."

There wasn't really enough room for both of them, and John was forced to pull her up against him, which was all right with him. He leaned down to kiss her, but Quin stopped him, putting her hands on either side of his face.

“I’m worried,” she whispered.

He could tell. He could feel it coming off her in waves, like heat off asphalt in the summer. She was right to be worried, of course. The knowledge they were being taught was ancient, and highly protected. And in John’s case, only perfection in his assigned tasks would win him the privilege of learning it. He was hardly a favorite of Briac’s. His failure in today’s fight was surely the excuse Briac had been looking for.

“I’ve never heard my father say anything quite so . . . final to you,” she said quietly. “What if he means to kick you out?”

The anticipation of meeting her in the forest had pushed aside John’s dread for a few minutes, but now it came back in full force. He was the strongest fighter of the three, yet he’d failed in the fight. He’d failed at the moment when he’d most needed to succeed.

He let his head fall back against a tree trunk. For a moment, he fought the sensation of a large stone pulling him to the bottom of the ocean. *No*, he thought, *I can’t fail. I won’t.*

His whole life was wrapped up in taking this oath. He was John Hart. He would get back what was taken and be at no one’s mercy again. He had promised, and he would keep the promise.

“Briac has to take this seriously,” he told Quin, working hard to sound reassuring, both to her and to himself. He must pull himself up from despair. “I was . . . horrible in that fight, wasn’t I? He’s got to be strict. He’s the ‘protector of hidden ways’ and all that. But he’s spent years training me. I’m almost there. It would be wrong to kick me out now.”

“Of course it would be wrong. It would be completely wrong. But he’s saying—”

“Your father’s an honorable man, isn’t he? He’s going to do what’s right. I’m not worried. And you shouldn’t be either.”

Quin nodded, but her dark eyes were full of doubt. He couldn't blame her. John didn't believe the things he was saying about Briac either. He knew very well the kind of man Quin's father was, but he clung to the hope that Briac would keep his promises. There had been witnesses to those promises, and Briac must honor his commitments. If he didn't . . .

He forced the thought away. Life had been good here on the estate with Quin—as good as his life had ever been, much better than he'd dared to hope for—and he didn't want that to change.

Quin had made friends with John on the day he arrived. They'd been kids then—John only twelve—but even so, his first thought had been of how pretty she was.

In that first year, she and Shinobu both came to visit John in his own cottage frequently, but it was Quin's visits alone he liked the most. She was fascinated with his descriptions of London, and eager to show him all of the estate.

When John's mother had been alive, she'd warned him to keep up his guard around everyone, and he did. But he liked to hear about Quin's family, about the lore of the estate. And Quin seemed to enjoy his company—not because he was wealthy or because his family was important but because she liked him. Just him. He'd never experienced that before. Even at twelve, John refused to let this move him—her interest might have been a trick, a way to get past his defenses and learn his secrets. Still, he spent time with her. With Shinobu he would practice fighting. With Quin he would take walks.

And she began to get . . . curves. He hadn't realized how distracting curves could be. He knew he was in trouble when he was fourteen, sitting in their languages class, and he found himself examining the way Quin's slender waist twisted into her hips. They were being asked to read aloud in Dutch, but he was imagining his hand tracing

the line of her body. He tried to keep her from his mind, to stay as clear and calculating as his mother would have wanted him to be, but he couldn't believe that Quin's friendliness was false.

Then, when she was nearly fifteen, they were paired in an especially difficult practice match in the training barn. Alistair was sending them against each other again and again, demanding that they fight at the extreme limits of their strength.

"Come on, John. Strike her!" Alistair yelled, apparently thinking John was taking it easy on Quin.

Maybe he *was* taking it easy on her. It was winter, and her cheeks were flushed, her dark eyes bright with the exertion of the fight as she moved nimbly with her sword.

She struck him hard and he fell. Perhaps he'd let her hit him, because he didn't mind falling. He imagined tumbling onto the floor with her . . . Then the fight was over and they were both breathing hard, staring at each other across the practice area.

Alistair dismissed them, and John found himself walking outside the training barn in a daze, trying to carry himself as far away from her as he could. He could not see where he was going. He could only see Quin. The desire to be with her was overwhelming.

He stopped around the back of the barn, hiding himself behind the trunks of the barren winter trees. There he leaned against the stone wall, his breath filling the air with steam.

He didn't want to feel what he was feeling. His mother had warned him against love so many times. *When you love, you open yourself to a dagger*, she had told him all those years ago. *When you love deeply, you have thrust the dagger into your own heart*. Love did not fit into any of his plans. But how could you plan for this? It wasn't just her beauty he wanted. It was all of her: the girl who talked to him, the girl who would bite her bottom lip when she was concentrating intensely, the girl who smiled when they walked through the woods together.

He pressed his cheek against the cold stone of the barn, feeling his heart beating wildly, trying to rid himself of the image of her.

Then Quin was there, walking past the end of the barn, only a few feet from him. She was staring ahead, into the woods, also dazed. Their eyes met, and suddenly he knew—he knew she had come looking for him.

John reached out his hand and grabbed the sleeve of her coat, pulling her toward him. And then her arms were around him. Neither of them had ever kissed anyone before, but all at once, he was kissing her. She was warm and soft, and she was kissing him back.

“I was hoping you would do that,” she whispered.

He’d meant to say something romantic and controlled, like *You’re very beautiful*, but instead the deeper truth came tumbling out of him. “I need you,” he whispered to her. “I don’t want to be alone . . . I love you, Quin . . .”

Then they were kissing again.

There were heavy footsteps approaching, twigs breaking. It was Alistair; they could recognize his tread anywhere.

Suddenly they were apart, pushing away from each other. And by the time Alistair reached the end of the barn, Quin had disappeared around the other side, with a final glance at John.

That began their forest meetings. Quin was quite sure her parents wouldn’t approve, so they kept their feelings for each other secret. But eventually it was obvious that everyone on the estate knew of their changed relationship—after a while, John sensed something colder in Briac’s stare, and a subtle irritation in Shinobu’s attitude.

John had tried to justify his feelings. Perhaps it *was* love he felt, but couldn’t love also be an advantage? Wouldn’t Briac have to care more about him when he understood how much he and Quin cared for each other? If he could eventually convince Briac to let her marry him, it would create an alliance, wouldn’t it? An alliance with Briac

wouldn't be pleasant, but it might be a way to fulfill his own promise, at least for a time.

Surely a feeling that made John so happy could not be bad.

Now, between the trees with his arms around Quin, he marveled at how right it felt. When they were alone, he could imagine that she would be by his side for everything to come. Eventually she would understand, even about her own father . . .

"I don't want you to worry," he told her, making her look into his eyes. "I'll be a Seeker, just like you. Even if it takes me a little while to get there. It's meant to be, the two of us together."

The trouble cleared from Quin's face a little. She almost smiled. "It's meant to be," she agreed. "Of course it is." Her certainty gave him heart. "Look," she went on. "You're stronger than Shinobu. You're a lot stronger than I am. You might be smarter than either of us. There are just some things you don't do quite as well."

"If you mean the disruptor—"

"I do mean the disruptor. We're all scared of it."

"I wasn't just scared," John answered, reliving the moment in his mind. "I couldn't move, Quin. I imagined those sparks covering me—"

"Stop." She said it firmly, and John realized his despair was rising again. He must focus, especially today. "You don't want to end up in agony with your mind turning on itself," she continued. "Of course you don't. But you have to think of the disruptor as a weapon like any other weapon. We use our mental control to avoid it in a fight."

"My mind is a muscle that's always slightly tensed," John responded, quoting Alistair, who was their favorite instructor. "Only—I'm not sure that works for me when there's a disruptor involved."

"Try to concentrate on the higher purpose of our training," she told him gently, "on how lucky we are to have this as our calling. Being a Seeker is bigger than you or me, bigger than personal fears."

Her voice was growing passionate, as it often did on this topic. “We’re part of something . . . *exceptional*. I get just as scared, but that’s how I fight my fear. It’s not just about disruptors, you know. You need the mental control when you go *There*. Or you’ll never come out.”

John realized he was looking at her with pity. She was a girl with stars in her eyes, born into the wrong family, and the wrong century. Yes, they were part of something exceptional, something bigger than themselves, but he would describe it in very different words—words such as “ruthless” and “vicious.” Briac was both of those things. John knew she would be going *There* tonight, and then beyond, when she took her oath. Quin might not yet realize the purpose of doing so, but John did. His mother, at least, had been honest with him, where Quin’s father had not been honest with her.

What would she feel when she discovered the truth? That there may have been noble Seekers once, but nobility was not Briac’s style? That her skills were going to be used for a very different purpose?

Softly he asked her, “What do you think you’ll be doing tonight when you take your oath?”

“Briac said it would be a task that requires all of our skills.” He watched her eyes growing distant. “Whatever it is, I feel like every generation of my family for a thousand years is waiting for me to join them,” she said. “My whole life has led up to today.”

John too felt the generations stretching behind him, waiting for him to take his oath. He had promised—*Get it back and repay them for what they’ve done. Our house will rise.*

“And what about the athame?” he asked quietly, pronouncing the word “ATH-uh-may.”

Quin was surprised, as he had expected her to be, for John was not yet privy to all of the secret knowledge that had been given to Quin and Shinobu. He watched her studying him, wondering where he’d learned the word.

“If you know about that,” she said, “then you’re already halfway to knowing everything.”

“I know it’s what Briac’s talking about when he mentions ‘the most valuable artifact in the history of mankind.’ And I know it’s a stone dagger.”

“Even I have only seen it, John. A couple of times. I’ve never used it.”

“Until tonight,” he pointed out.

“Until tonight,” she agreed. She was smiling now, her excitement at the upcoming events returning.

In the distance, they heard loud, happy shouts. Quin ducked down and leaned through the opening between the trees, and John crouched next to her. From this angle, just barely, they had a glimpse across the commons. The shouts were coming from the cottages on the far side of the meadow. It was Shinobu with his father, both yelling about how well Shinobu had done in the fight. Alistair might be gruff and brutal on the practice floor, but with his son, in his free time, he was a teddy bear of a man.

It had always seemed to John that Shinobu was in love with Quin, but since they were cousins of some sort, there was never a question of Quin feeling anything romantic toward Shinobu. And eventually, once he’d had Quin to himself, he’d been able to treat Shinobu with more friendliness.

“They’re celebrating,” John whispered. “We should celebrate.”

“What did you have in mind?” she asked softly.

John slowly pulled her toward him and kissed her. This time she didn’t turn away.

They had always stopped themselves from doing anything more. Quin was waiting. She had her oath to take and at least a year more under her parents’ guidance before they would consider her an adult. But she and John had daydreamed about camping trips across the

river, or rooms in an inn somewhere, someday, when they would finally be able to give themselves to each other.

Now, however, something was different. Maybe it was her anticipation of the evening to come, or the glow of her triumph in the fight, but John felt something more in the way she was kissing him. *She loves me, he thought, and I love her. I want her to be with me, even when she knows everything.* The forest floor was covered with years of fallen leaves, and John pulled her down onto that soft ground. He whispered, “Let’s go to my cottage—”

“Shh,” she said, putting a hand to his lips. “Look.”

From where they lay, they could see a figure emerging from deeper in the woods, heading toward them. John pulled Quin up, hiding them from view behind the branches. They watched as the figure got close enough to identify. It was the Young Dread, with a string of dead rabbits slung over her shoulder.

From the look of her face, they had figured her age at about fourteen, though of course, with the Dreads, age was a tricky thing. The Young Dread had arrived on the estate a few months ago, along with the other Dread, the one they called the Big Dread—a burly, dangerous-looking man who appeared to be in his thirties.

Briac had been vague in describing the Dreads’ purpose for being there, but they were, apparently, to oversee the taking of oaths. Briac, who showed deference to almost no one, seemed strangely respectful toward the Big Dread. The apprentices had decided a Dread was a kind of judge of Seeker training, with a history at which they were forced to guess, since their instructors gave no more than hints.

If the Young Dread was indeed fourteen, she was short for her age. Her body was slender to the point of looking underfed, but her muscles told a different story. They were like delicate ropes of steel holding together her small frame. She had hair of an unremarkable dishwater brown, but it was thick and hung almost to her waist. It

looked as though it had never been cut and had rarely been brushed, as though she'd received all her grooming advice from the Big Dread, who obviously knew nothing about raising girls.

She walked toward them with the strange gait shared by both Dreads. Her movements seemed slow, almost stately, like a ballet dancer during a particularly sad or serious part of the performance. And then, without warning, she would move at an entirely different speed. As they watched, there was a bird call from the meadow, and the Young Dread's head whipped around, almost too fast for their eyes to follow the motion. When she had identified the source of the noise, she continued on her way, as steady and fluid as a marble sculpture brought to life.

"Watch this," Quin whispered, so softly that John could barely hear her, though his head was still only inches from hers. Silently, she pulled her knife from her waistband. She waited until the Dread had walked into a patch of sunlight that would make her momentarily blind to motion in the shadows. Then Quin drew back her arm and threw the knife at the Young Dread as hard as she could.

The blade arced through the shadows expertly, aimed just ahead of where the Dread was walking, so she would carry herself straight into its path and it would impale the side of her head.

Yet that was not what happened.

The Young Dread continued her steady approach until the weapon was almost upon her. Then her whole body exploded into action. Her right arm whipped forward and caught the knife out of the air. She spun around so quickly, she almost appeared to blur against the forest backdrop, and she released the blade back toward them much like a thundercloud releases a bolt of lightning. It was propelled at such high speed that they could hear it whistling through the air, and both John and Quin ducked.

It made a perfect arc from the Dread, around the edge of the

cluster of trees, and buried itself to the hilt just inches from where Quin's hand still rested against the tree trunk. The vibration of its impact traveled all the way down the tree, and John could feel it in his feet.

"Nice shot," Quin called, waving at the girl. "Maybe you'll teach me how to do that sometime."

The Dread's eyes traveled slowly over their hiding spot, almost as if she were examining them minutely, even from that distance. Something about her gaze made them uncomfortable, and instinctively Quin and John moved a step away from each other, as though their intimacy could not survive her fierce stare. The Young Dread looked as if she might say something, but she never got the chance.

There was a new noise above the forest. The Dread and Quin and John looked up to see an aircar, throwing off a low vibration, circling to land in the commons. An aircar was such a rare sight on the estate that even the Dread stared at the vehicle for several seconds before turning away and resuming her steady walk.

John and Quin hurried to the edge of the meadow in time to see a man get out of the car and head toward Briac's cottage on the far side of the commons. When John caught sight of the man, he began to run, sticking to the trees but moving quickly, trying to get a better view.

Quin caught up with him. "What is it?"

The visitor turned for a moment, looking around the estate. John stopped running. Was he imagining things? The man's face looked familiar. But sometimes, when he was on the estate for months at a time, far from London and crowds, he found that every new face looked familiar.

"I don't know," he said. "Do you think you can find out who he is?"

"I'm sure Briac will tell us if it's important."

“I’m not,” John said quietly. He glanced at Quin and said mischievously, “But if eavesdropping makes you nervous . . .”

“Nervous?” She pushed him indignantly, and he was pleased to notice her now studying the visitor with more interest. John wanted as few surprises as possible when it came to Briac. “Hmm,” she said. “I’ll come find you if I learn anything.” She kissed John lightly on the lips. “I know Briac will do right by you tonight. He’ll say something harsh, but he’s not going to stop your training. Of course not.”

With that, she ran ahead of him, toward the cottages. John could already feel himself bracing for the coming confrontation with Briac. He watched Quin go, her dark hair swinging, her body graceful—but not the slow grace of the Young Dread. Quin was full of life.

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# SHINOBU

The village of Corrickmore was quiet that evening, except for a few wandering fishermen too drunk to go home and too loud to stay in the pub. Their voices echoed off the houses facing the waterfront, and they were answered by residents throwing open windows and yelling for them to shut up before the police were called.

Shinobu and Alistair walked down the opposite side of the street, directly along the water. Their bellies were full of mutton-and-onion pie from the Friar's Goat, the pub at the north end of town, and they were sharing a bottle of beer large enough for four or five ordinary men, and nearly large enough for Alistair.

"Mind you, not too much of the drink," Alistair said as Shinobu tipped the bottle up. "We've got a full night ahead of us." He clapped his son on the shoulder, causing Shinobu to spit a huge mouthful of beer all over his own shoes.

"Ah, take a wee bit more than that, Son," his father told him, tilting the bottle up to Shinobu's lips again. "And a bit more still."

Shinobu shook his head and handed the bottle back. He wasn't interested in beer, and he didn't fancy getting his shoes any stickier

than they already were. He danced up to his father like a boxer in a ring and pounded the older man's stomach with his fists. This was very much like hitting Michelangelo's statue of David; Alistair towered above him, and Shinobu was in more danger of hurting his fists than he was of hurting his father. Alistair only chuckled as he took a long swig of the beer.

"Tell me what we're doing tonight, Da." Shinobu was moving all around the big man now, landing a punch wherever possible.

"Cannae do that."

They watched the fishermen, who had reached the corner and were getting louder as the final verse of their drinking song dissolved into chaos. Then one stumbled off home, leaving those remaining to argue their way through the first verse of something new.

"Don't look unhappy, do they?" his father asked, running a hand through his red hair.

"Who, the fishermen?" Shinobu asked. "They're drunk off their faces."

"And we're not?"

"*I'm* not. I've got work to do tonight."

"Ye think work cannae be done drunk? Sometimes being drunk improves it," Alistair said.

Shinobu smashed a fist playfully into his father's gut. "Come on. Hit me back!" Alistair took a lazy swing at him, which Shinobu ducked easily. "Your son's taking his oath tonight! You can do better than that."

"Yon drunkards don't look unhappy," Alistair said thoughtfully as he took another swing at Shinobu.

Shinobu bobbed away from his father's fist and looked at the three remaining fishermen, one of whom was now throwing up noisily into a public rubbish bin.

"They don't know the secrets of the universe, maybe," Alistair

went on. “They’re not part of our special . . . club. Still, they have a good time.”

“Dad, one’s wiping his vomit on the other one’s shirt.” He punched his father’s shoulder with enough force to fell a lesser man.

“Oomph,” Alistair said, absorbing the shock. They both studied the fishermen more closely as another one retched onto the sidewalk. “Aye, maybe they’re a bit disgusting,” Alistair admitted.

He crossed the street and led Shinobu away from the waterfront, up a smaller road with rows of tidy brick houses.

“Mind you,” his father continued, making another attempt at whatever point he was trying to make, “those eejits are not the best example. But these houses here, they’re full of people. All sorts of people.”

“Dad, I’ve been here before, you know.”

“Aye, that I do know,” his father said with a smile. He tapped the side of his nose with one finger as though sharing a secret. “More than you let on.”

Corrickmore was the closest town to the estate, thirty miles away. And it was true, Shinobu had visited it on more occasions than he’d mentioned to his father. There were girls in the village. And girls, Shinobu had discovered early on, were quite happy with the way Shinobu looked (“like an Asian film star”), with the way he moved (“like a tiger”), with the way he spoke (“such a gentleman!”)—with everything about him, really.

“At any rate,” Alistair continued, taking another long drink of the beer, “a lot are happy. Even without all the special things you’ve been taught.”

Shinobu finally stopped dancing around his father and came to rest in front of him. He shoved hard on Alistair’s chest. It was like halting a locomotive, and Shinobu was pushed back a few paces before Alistair came to a stop.

“You think I’d be happier without the things I’ve learned?”

His father looked down at him, then away. “I’m not saying that. Not exactly.”

He stepped around Shinobu and continued walking. The town was quiet here, lit by a few streetlamps and the occasional glow of a television inside a house. The only noise was the water lapping against the pier a few blocks away. Alistair turned again, choosing another street.

“What I’m saying,” he continued, “is I’ve raised you on the estate, filled yer head with my world.” Alistair was not much of a talker. Shinobu could tell he was straining to pick the right words. “It’s natural you want to do what you’ve been taught, but . . . you have a choice, Son. Did I never tell you that?”

“I don’t need a choice, Da. I love it. The fighting, the way I use my mind. All the old stories.” He punched his father several times in the small of his back to make his point. Alistair hardly seemed to notice.

“It’s not quite like those old stories anymore,” Alistair muttered. He was quiet for a moment, then: “Your mother liked to walk to town. Do you remember? She liked to see the outside world.”

“Of course I remember.”

Surprised at the change in topic, Shinobu stopped hitting his father and looked up to study his face. As a rule, Alistair did not mention Shinobu’s mother, Mariko. She’d been killed in a car accident seven years before. Shinobu’s memories of her were fading, but he clearly recalled certain things, like walking with her in the meadow on the estate while she explained to him what honor was. He remembered her very lovely Japanese face and her small stature—she’d looked like a doll next to his father. Even so, she’d always seemed just as strong as he was. Except near the end, when she was sick, just before the accident.

“Your mother didnae want you to spend yer whole life on the estate,” Alistair said.

“But I *have* spent my whole life on the estate. I’ve spent my whole life training to go *There*, Da. My whole life, and now I’m ready. Tonight we’re going together.”

Alistair stopped walking. He bent his shoulders so his eyes were level with Shinobu’s.

“It’s not *There* you have to worry about,” he said gently. “It’s where we go *after*.”

“Tell me.”

“I cannot. I wish I could, but I can’t.”

Alistair looked pained. He rubbed his face with his hands. They had stopped in front of a row house. The curtains were drawn, but they could see the shapes of a family moving inside, and there were kitchen noises: a kettle whistling, someone yelling that the biscuits were done.

“Do you recognize this place, Son?”

Shinobu surveyed the house, smiled. “A girl I know lives here.” He turned to his father, surprised. “How did you know?”

“I know a few things,” Alistair said. “Is she your girlfriend?”

Shinobu noticed a figure moving in an upstairs bedroom. It was the girl in question. Alice. He could see the top of her head near the window.

“Not sure,” he said, and shrugged. “She seems to like me. She let me kiss her.”

“Did she? Was it nice?”

“It was.” Shinobu smiled again. As if there could be any question that kissing girls was nice.

“Look around the town a moment, Son. Please. Look at the houses, the people, the life they have. Once you become a Seeker, once you take your oath, you won’t see the world in the same way.”

Shinobu glanced around, amused with his father—he had seldom heard the man string this many sentences together at once—but also confused. “Dad, I don’t know what you mean. My whole life, Quin and I have—”

“I know. And I know what you feel for Quin.”

Shinobu felt his face flushing, and he looked away. He could speak freely about any girl . . . except that one.

“She’s my cousin,” he murmured.

“Cousins” was the word they had grown up using, though their blood relationship was not nearly as close as that. Alistair and Fiona were second cousins, which made Quin and Shinobu third cousins. And somewhere, many generations earlier, an ancestor had remarried, which meant they were only half as related as they seemed. Shinobu had made as careful a study of their connection as he could without calling attention to his interest. Nevertheless, Quin always called Alistair her uncle and Shinobu her cousin, which made him unlovable except as a family member. And though she thought he was “beautiful”—her word; he’d heard her use it—his beauty to her was like the beauty in a painting, something you admire but do not want to touch. It was the worst kind of beauty, he thought.

“Aye, she’s your cousin,” Alistair agreed softly, “and more. You’ve trained together since you were small. You won’t want to leave her. But”—he glanced through an opening between the curtains at the people inside the house—“there’s a girl in there who seems to like you. I want you to know, you could stay here if you wanted. You could stay, and I would go. I wouldn’t take it amiss. Briac might take it amiss, but I would deal with that. It’s your choice.”

Alistair’s eyes were pleading. Shinobu had never seen that look on his father’s face before. It made him uneasy, as though the ground beneath his feet were subtly shifting.

“Da, please tell me why you’re saying this.”

“I can’t,” he answered. “I’ve sworn my own oath.” His eyes were locked on Shinobu’s, as if willing his son to read his mind. “But know: if you choose to come back to the estate with me, life will be different. You might love a woman as I love your mother”—Shinobu noticed he used the present tense, and wondered how drunk Alistair was—“but she will never know all of you.”

This evening was supposed to be a celebration, but Shinobu felt his discomfort growing under his father’s searching look. Why couldn’t the big man break the tension with a giant belch or by peeing on someone’s doorstep? But there was no sign of amusement in his father’s face.

Shinobu decided the awkwardness would remain until he took his father seriously. He stepped back from the house, moving to the middle of the street so he could see Alice in her upstairs bedroom more clearly. She was bent over a desk, doing homework, maybe. She was a pretty girl, and nice, and she loved when Shinobu gave her attention. She said she had never met anyone like him, that no “gorgeous boy” had ever wanted to talk to her before.

Alistair was right. The world was full of people, and maybe a lot of them were happy. Certainly a lot of them were girls, and if he wanted, it would be easy to find the funniest, the prettiest, the happiest, and convince her to fall in love with him. But where would that leave him? *Empty*, he thought. There was one girl, the girl he had grown up with. Perhaps she would never love him like that, but already they shared a life, and a purpose. They would be like the Seekers of old, their skills and their good works becoming the stuff of legends. *Tyrants beware*, as the ancient Seekers had said. Shinobu and Quin would protect good people from harm. He could never leave that behind.

He turned and put his hands on Alistair’s arms. “Thank you, Father. I’ve made my choice. I want to go home.”

Shinobu was sure he was seeing a trick of the light, the dim and flickering streetlamp nearest them, because it looked for a moment as though Alistair was about to cry. Then his face cleared, and he nodded very gravely, as if the most important thing in the world had just been decided.

“Well then, my boy, let’s get back home.”

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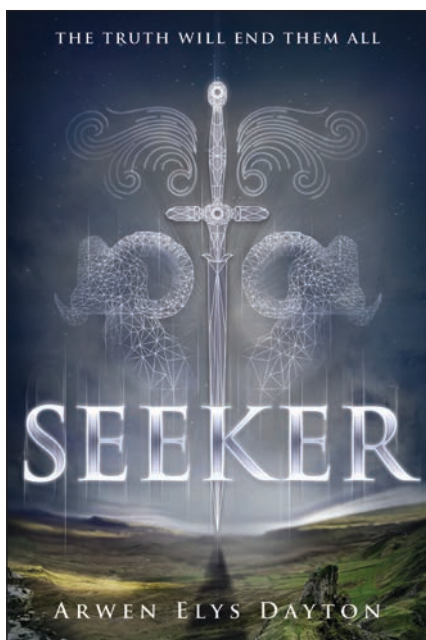
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