

A Powerless story



# Powerful

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**LAUREN ROBERTS**



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SIMON & SCHUSTER

*To the girls with softer dreams – your purpose is just as powerful!*



RECORDED ELITES

ABILITIES > 100



**MUNDANES**  
Amplifier - voice projection > 100  
Bluff - lie detection > 200  
Hyper - enhanced senses > 250  
Scholar - intellectual > 100  
Sight - video recording & projection via eyesight > 100

**DEFENSIVE**  
Blink - teleportation anywhere in sight > 100  
Crawler - wall scaling > 225  
Healer - quick healing > 100  
Illusionist - illusion creation > 100  
Shield - purple force field creation > 170  
Shimmer - light manipulation > 125  
Transfer - infuse objects with abilities > 100  
Veil - invisibility > 130

**OFFENSIVE**  
Blazer - flame manipulation > 200  
Bloom - plant manipulation > 130  
Brawny - physical strength > 250  
Cleanser - clone creation > 110  
Dual - two-ability wielding > 100  
Gust - air manipulation > 125  
Hydro - water manipulation > 150  
Ignite - explosion creation > 100  
Shell - skin of stone > 125  
Tele - object movement via mind > 100  
Volt - electricity manipulation > 100

**KNOWN RECORDED ELITES**  
"Widder - sense and use others' abilities within proximity - 1

**TOTALS - 1 OF EACH IN POSSESSION OF THE KING**  
Controller - manipulate others - 1  
Mind Reader - 1  
Silencer - smother abilities of others - 1



Izram

Plummet

Sanctuary of Soul

Dor

The Bowl Arena

Slows

Loot Alley

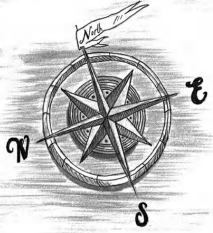
The Shallows

The Scorches

The Whispers

Tando

Iya





## PROLOGUE

# Adena

FIVE YEARS AGO

**T**he biggest man I've ever seen is barreling behind me.

Then again, it is likely that I'm exaggerating. Mama always did tell me what a curse it is to be blessed with such an overactive imagination.

I would hate to proclaim that he's the largest man I've ever seen if he isn't truly worthy of the title. So, I dare a glance over my shoulder, dodging carts and jutting cobblestone beneath the boots swallowing my feet. Mama said I would grow into them. I'm still waiting for that day.

No, that is definitely a giant man. The white mask he wears leaves the bottom half of his face exposed, displaying red cheeks and a twisted scowl between each panted breath.

A tangled strand of hair whips me in the face when I turn back towards the street sprawled before me. Several curls crawl into my mouth when a rare gust of wind decides to rush down Loot Alley on its way to somewhere far more important. I lift a hand to swipe at the unruly strands, only to be reminded of the very reason I'm running from an Imperial in the first place.

Honey oozes between my fingers, dripping lazily from the sticky bun squished in my palm. I might have gotten away with my first attempt at thievery if it weren't for the fact that I'd tripped into the very stand I'd tried to steal from.

Unfortunately, it only got worse from there.

I then profusely apologized for stealing before spinning on my heel and running off. This got the merchant's attention, then the Imperial's, and now everyone on the market street is bearing witness to the scene I'm causing.

It's not as though the Imperial – or the king he serves – cares about the overcooked dough I sloppily stole. No, it's the example that he is chasing. The spectacle I will become at the bloody post in the center of Loot. Imperials like their whips, and I like my sticky buns. And, for some reason, the starving girl is in the wrong.

Men, women and wandering children jump out of my path, though most look unfazed by the sight of me hurtling past. Looting on Loot is hardly uncommon. Merchants curse as I weave between their carts, though I shout my apologies at anyone who cares to accept them.

This may be the most terrifying thing I've ever done.

I mean, attempting to sew a pleated skirt was certainly a daunting task. But the threat that pointy needles pose likely pale in comparison to what this Imperial has in store for me.

I glance down at the sticky bun that is, in fact, feeling like its name suggests.

*What has gotten into me?*

I shout an apology to the woman scurrying out of the way, likely swallowed up by the sound of her cursing my name.

*Hunger. That's what has gotten into me.*

But I don't particularly like being cursed at. In fact, if most of the people yelling in my direction actually got to know me, I'm sure I would make a completely respectable impression under different circumstances.

Hair flinging over a shoulder, I peek at my giant pursuer. Face still red as ever, he charges persistently.

*Well, he's definitely not a Flash, that's for certain.*

When my head swivels back towards the street, it's glinting silver that catches my eye.

The girl stands in my path, staring curiously at the scene sprinting towards her. Silver hair spills from her head, pouring down her back. And if I make it out of this unscathed, I'm determined to find a fabric of the same shimmering shade.

I admire her hair until it is suddenly right in front of me. She hasn't moved, and I'm not planning on slowing down. So, without a second thought, I run right into her.

Well, technically, I run right *through* her.

I phase when our bodies meet, feeling nothing as I pass through her body to the other side of the open street. And I don't dare look back until I hear a heavy thud hit the cobblestones behind me. I barely catch the Imperial's face hitting the stones before the girl is bounding behind me.



‘Don’t stop!’ she shouts, not bothering to fight the smile pulling at her lips. All I can manage is a breathless laugh in response as I focus on forcing my tired legs faster.

We run until she yanks me down a narrow alley, dodging the huddled homeless. ‘This way,’ she orders, continuing to tug on my arm. It’s only after slinking down several shadowed alleyways that we allow ourselves to lean against a grimy brick wall, gulping down equally dusty air.

She looks over at me, and I look over at her.

Something like understanding seems to settle between us. As though loneliness has found its equal.

The girl raises her eyebrows at the sticky bun still gripped in my hand. ‘First time stealing?’

‘That obvious?’ I smile sheepishly.

She shrugs. ‘You would think a Phaser would be better at escaping.’

‘See,’ I say with a sigh, ‘that’s what I thought. And look at where it got me.’ There is a stretch of silence before I blurt, ‘Oh, and I’m not really sure what you did back there, but thanks for your help.’

She flashes a smile. ‘Nothing difficult. Just stuck my foot out. It’s the Imperial’s fault for running into it, really.’

We laugh. It’s nice, this brief moment of companionship. The warmth coats my chest when I giggle for the first time in a long while. For the first time since Mama.

I raise the sticky bun between us. ‘Wanna split?’ She laughs again when I wave the dough beneath her nose.

‘What, with your sweat all over it?’

‘Oh, this is nothing,’ I say, the words muffled by the bite I take. ‘I’ve sweat more while trying to stitch up a corset.’

She looks absolutely distraught at that statement. ‘Why would you ever need a corset?’

‘Unfortunately,’ I sigh wistfully, ‘I wouldn’t. But richer people do.’

She blinks at me, something brewing behind her blue eyes. ‘You sell clothes?’

My eyes skim down the dirtied shirt hanging from her shoulder to land on the pants bunched at her boots. ‘Yeah, and it looks like you could certainly use some.’

I run a hand down her sleeve, feeling the coarse fabric rubbing against her skin. 'No, this won't do at all.'

'Stealing food is kind of my priority at the moment,' she grumbles.

Excitement bubbles up my throat in the form of a hushed shout. 'You steal? Like, steal good?'

'Steal good?' she echoes skeptically.

'Well, whatever I just did was bad.' She is quick to nod in agreement. 'So, can you do what I did, but, like, good?'

'Anything is better than that,' she says with an amused smile. 'But yes, I steal *good*.'

'Perfect,' I say cheerily before sticking out the hand currently unoccupied with my stolen goods. 'I'm Adena.'

She takes my hand, seemingly shaking it just to humor me. 'I'm Paedyn.'

'Well, Paedyn-' I rip the sticky bun in half, offering a smushed side to her - 'I think we could make a great team.'

She pops a piece of dough into her mouth. 'So, you sew, and I steal? We share the money and the food?'

'Exactly.' I hesitate for a moment. 'I mean, unless you have somewhere better to go than the slums...'

'Not anymore,' she says a bit too quickly. 'So, partners?'

'Partners.' I smile before looking down the length of her. 'And my first order of business is getting you into something far less horrendous.'

She huffs out a laugh. 'Yeah, because that's a priority.'

I take another bite of sticky bun, humming at the sweet honey melting on my tongue. 'And your first order of business,' I mumble between bites, 'is getting me more of these.'



## CHAPTER 1

# Makoto

Her name is on a list of the dead.

I squint into the stinging sunlight, scrutinizing every name inked onto the banner. Hers sits among the eight others, likely overlooked beneath the prince's crowning the top. But despite being on the list, our future Enforcer will easily evade the death awaiting the other contestants. Because these Trials were made for Elites like him. Not Elites like her.

My eyes skim over the list once again, recognizing no other names. I've never been one to keep up with which Elites manage to wrangle enough relevance to make it into the Trials.

A shoulder collides with mine, followed by several other limbs pushing against me. Loot is swimming with sticky bodies and echoing shouts of celebration, further adding to the list of reasons why I would rather be anywhere else but the slums of Ilya. It's a struggle to push my way through the crowded street, every inch of it crawling with ignorance incarnate. Every inch cheering for each contestant they chose to represent Loot.

I push through the crowd, ignoring their celebrations.

They have done nothing more than send Mundanes and Defensive Elites to their deaths.

And she is one of them.

But it should be me. Me who dies brutally. Dies alone. Dies at all.

Chants in honor of the sixth ever Purging Trials ring in my ears, each word a reminder of what I've done – nothing.

I've spent my whole life huddling in her shadow, hiding from life itself. And now she has been chosen simply because she did nothing of the sort. The people knew her, loved the street magic she performed as a Veil. And yet, they sentence her to death under the guise of honor.

She is a Defensive. Therefore, she is dead.

And I need to find her.

My hands are streaked with coal dust, leathers clinging to my sweaty body as though I'm still hammering steel over a scalding fire. I had worked through the night and was continuing still when the commotion managed to drag me from the shop.

I should have gone to see her last night. Should have been there when she found out.

And now I'm shoving through a sea of people, attempting to find her before it's too late. I scan the packed street, catching sight of a coach rumbling towards the end of it. It screeches to a halt, the horses nearly as impatient as the drivers, eager to escape the slums.

*I sure as hell know how that feels.*

I'm shoved forward when the congested crowd begins flocking towards the coach, clustering it as though they're offering free rides out of this shithole. Begrudgingly, I allow myself to be swept forward, managing to catch a glimpse of her climbing inside.

An Imperial ushers her up the step, and in typical Hera fashion, she shyly thanks him as though he's not escorting her to her doom. Her sleek black hair is the last thing I see before she's swallowed by the four walls, sitting in the belly of the coach.

The world seems to quiet, slow its spinning with each shaky breath I manage.

I didn't get to say goodbye.

My thumb finds the scar cutting crookedly through my lips, tracing it like I had the day my life truly became a secret. A familiar numbness begins to bleed over my body, bathing every bit of me in bitterness.

I'm about to turn away, unable to watch her be paraded towards her death.

That's when a flash of silver catches my eye.

I peer over the dozens of heads dotting the street, watch her walk towards the coach with hair that tells me all I need to know.

*So, this is the famous Silver Savior.*

Word of her saving Prince Kai managed to reach even my ears – evidence of how significant she's become amongst the slums. Perhaps I'm a skeptic, or simply

the only logical person living in the vicinity, but I'm not entirely convinced by her battle with a Silencer. A battle that the future Enforcer himself couldn't win.

And I know exactly what it's like to be in Kai's shoes.

I'm watching her climb into the coach when a hopping figure captures my attention. Dark curls bounce with each attempt to see over the crowd. Her hands are raised, waving haphazardly at the Silver Savior. She's shouting something that looks quite heartfelt, likely a wasted goodbye that will never be heard.

I lean over a pair of young women who are chanting terribly off-key to the rest of the street. Squinting, I struggle to scan the girl's face with how persistently she's bouncing. Something about her seems faintly familiar, as though this isn't the first time I've been graced by the presence of her perpetual perkiness.

I roll my eyes when recognition rams into me.

Oh, I know exactly who this is. In fact, I believe she even made it onto my ever-growing list of reasons to never leave my shop.

I was buying supplies from a merchant who was just as eager to take my money as I was to retreat back into my glorified shed. It was with a bundle of leather tucked beneath my arm and a severe lack of pep in my step that I heard the most absurdly bubbly sales pitch.

And that's when I saw her, curly hair bouncing with each energetic bob of her head. A plethora of clothing piled around her while she described what is commonly known as a blue shirt with about a dozen more words than necessary.

I may have said a thing or two, though the details of our conversation were hardly interesting enough for me to waste time recalling now.

That was several weeks ago now, but there is no mistaking that the girl currently waving a crazed set of hands down the street is the same seamstress who sells on the corner of an alley.

And she's a Phaser. I know that much about her. Well, that, and her astounding ability to never tire of talking.

I watch her blow kisses to the Silver Savior, so many that I brace myself to witness her faint. But she does nothing of the sort, leaving me to continue watching the endearing embodiment of her affections for this girl.

There is no mistaking the sincerity in each flailing wave and shouted sentiment. This seamstress knows the Silver Savior, and quite personally by the

looks of it. Likely enough to do just about anything for her.

My mind races recklessly, scheming. A horribly impulsive plan begins to form, one that should likely never leave the confines of my mind, let alone be executed at all.

*But this just might work.*

That is typically what one thinks right before everything goes to shit.

Then again, one might argue that things couldn't possibly get any shittier.





## CHAPTER 2

# Adena

Scraps of fabric are my only company.

The whole thing sounds far more depressing than it is, really. This is a very temporary lapse of loneliness. Once Pae returns from the Trials – because I refuse to believe there is any other outcome – she will be back to sleeping soundlessly on my left.

I scoot over at the thought, ensuring there is plenty enough space for the presence of her to sleep peacefully. I refuse to occupy her side and, instead, reserve it with my pile of fabric. A memorial, if you will. But not in a dead, depressing way. More like an ‘I miss you and, don’t worry, I’m saving your spot’ sort of way.

The Fort is a bit drafty tonight, though that’s likely due to the fact that we constructed it from dozens of miscellaneous items at the age of thirteen. The sudden urge to give our little home a makeover has me far too giddy to sleep. Pae deserves a more fabulous Fort to come home to. Though I suppose she’ll be able to buy half the slums if she happens to win these Trials.

How remarkable would it be if she manages it? Manages to win what is meant to showcase the Elite power, yet she has nothing of the sort. But if any Ordinary could, it would be Pae. She will fool them all with her ‘Psychic’ abilities, because if she hadn’t told me otherwise, I likely would still believe her act of observance.

I burrow into our blanket, my mind buzzing with possibilities. And then I nod to myself, settling on my Fort redecoration surprise. This will be my gift to her.

I hadn’t realized I’d drifted asleep until a ray of sun tickles my forehead.

Rolling over, my face finds the mound of scraps to be rather comfortable before the strands have me sneezing. Once my nose has finished throwing its fit, I sit up, brushing back the bangs sticking to my forehead. My sleepy eyes are slow to open but quick to find the spot beside me empty.

I stutter from where I sit behind the Fort, unsure of what to do with myself. For the past five years, Paedyn has only woken up due to my perseverance each

morning. And, maybe a part of me reveled in the routine of it, of being the first person she sees. Though, the task is certainly not for the faint of heart. She's stubborn, even in sleep.

With resolve I'd rather not muster at the moment, I manage to get to my feet. Exchanging one oversized shirt for another, I attempt to run fingers through the tangled curls earned from a night of tossing and turning. It's not long before I give up, as I do each day. I've decided it is now part of my routine.

After twisting my hair into a messy knot at the nape of my neck, I gather a bundle of clothes into my arms and phase right through the barrier that is our Fort.

Sunlight coats the tops of crumbling shops as I set out onto Loot, its rays creeping down the walls to splatter the pavement. I smile at the sight before silently saying good morning to the shiny star. We've always been close, connected in a way I can't explain.

I pass several merchants preparing their carts for the day, smiling at the few who appreciate the gesture.

Routine. Again.

I've nearly made it to my corner when the smell of fresh dough wafts towards me. My stomach complains loudly at the scent, grumbling about its lack of food. And apparently, my feet listen. They carry me towards the source of the smell while I hug the mass of fabric tighter against me.

That's how I find myself standing before a merchant's cart, piled high with sticky buns. The man nods curtly while I smile sweetly as though I'm not considering anything unlawful. But it's as though the temptation was created just for me. My stomach is insistent, my hands greedy to snatch a glazed piece of dough.

I never have been much good at snatching, hence why I've always left that area of expertise to Pae. But she's left me alone with my appetite and no voice of reason. What a dangerous combination. And my hunger is currently drowning out all rationality.

So, when the merchant's back is turned, I repeat history.

I steal a sticky bun.

The honey seeping between my fingers feels like the embodiment of déjà vu. I stare at it glistening in my palm while struggling to clutch my bundle of clothing beneath a single arm. Turning away slowly, I whisper an apology to the seemingly kind man as I step away from his stand.

That is when the green pleated skirt I spent hours stitching falls from the pile, landing behind me. I spin on my heel, bending to pick it up before the merchant notices and—

‘Hey! You got money for that, girl?’

I stumble into a run.

I’m a terrible person who steals and runs from the consequences. Not that Pae is a terrible person. No, I’m just not cut out for this. My conscience can’t condone this sort of dreadful deed.

‘I’m sorry!’ I shout as I tear off down the street. ‘I’m sure it’s delicious and very much worth the money I don’t have!’

I weave through the growing crowd, feeling the clothes slipping with each bounding step. Blurry faces watch me race by, one of them partially covered with a white mask.

*Perfect. I’ve caught the attention of an Imperial.*

Just as I had five years ago for the exact same crime.

I could laugh at my repeated stupidity. Except, Paedyn isn’t here to save me this time around, leaving me no other option but to run alone and attempt to escape my crime.

The Imperial is now in pursuit behind me, shouting orders to stop my sprinting. Forcing myself to ignore his threats, I run by the familiar alley that has our Fort tucked inside. It physically pains me to throw my clothes towards the dead end, but I offer them a reassuring, ‘I’ll come back for you!’ And then I’m squeezing my eyes shut so I don’t have to witness the sight of my beloved clothing plummeting towards the dirty cobblestone.

Free from the bundle, I race down the street while mentally scolding myself for what I’ve done. Though, that doesn’t stop me from scarfing down several bites of dough as I try to dwindle the amount of incriminating evidence.

I turn down several streets, cutting through alleys while attempting not to choke on my stolen goods. The Imperial is still on my heels when I skid round a

corner and—

Large arms wrap round my body, pulling me against a foreign one. My attempt to struggle is futile in comparison to the size of this someone behind me. I'm about to yell for anyone who might care enough to help when a hand suddenly clamps over my mouth, smelling of a sort of soot that stings my nose.

I'm being pulled backwards, farther and farther until my captor collides with the wall and—

And phases right through it, forcing me to do the same.

I stumble on the other side of the brick, my feet fumbling beneath me. A muscled arm is lifting me off the floor before I can slip and fall face-first into it. A large hand still covers my nose and mouth and I'm desperately trying to free myself so I can spew every word that's being smothered.

That's when I sneeze into the palm.

'Shit!'

My feet have only just returned to the floor before I'm being shoved away from the source of that deep voice, my nose still burning from the dust covering his hand. I take a deep breath before turning to face him, attempting to collect my thoughts and rein in my emotions.

But it seems I do neither of those things, because I spin on my heel at the same moment I harshly whisper, 'You're a Phaser, too?'

If I had a single rational thought left, it vanishes when I lay eyes on him.

If there is a God, this man is certainly proof that He has His favorites.

He's breathtaking in the way I would imagine a stab wound to be, so handsome it's piercing. Like a blade, everything about him is sharp and cold.

And suddenly I have a vague sense of familiarity at the sight of him.

Tipping my head up, my eyes find his dark ones before trailing down to the sharp cheekbones beneath them. I follow the curve of his Cupid's bow until my gaze traces the scar slicing through his lips. Everything below his face is hidden beneath thick, partially leathered clothing, though the sheer size of him is obvious. His dark sleeves are sloppily rolled to his elbow, displaying muscled arms streaked in the black dust that made me—

'You sneezed in my hand.' His arm is stretched out in front of him as he blinks down at his palm in disbelief.