



# CRYSTAL CLEAR

WESTON FIELDS



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Crystal Clear



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# Chapter 1

Jewel Macky woke up with a start, seeing the sunlight streaming in through her window. She sat up quickly, looking at the clock beside her bed. She groaned when she saw the time.

*We're going to be late for our first day of our apprenticeship!*

Rolling out of bed, she shook her sister awake. "We overslept!" she whispered urgently as Crystal stared sleepily at her. "We're going to be late!"

Crystal's eyes widened as she scrambled out of bed. Quickly, the pair got dressed and dashed out the door, not even pausing to grab breakfast cubes from the pantry. They sprinted through the streets of Kawts to the Science Building. Howard Kolt, their boss for the duration of the Training Months, was waiting for them on the front steps, frowning.

"You're fifteen minutes late," he said, looking up from his watch. Jewel instinctively looked at her wrist, only to realize that she had left her own watch on her bed stand when she had gone to wake up her sister. Howard sighed. "Oh, well. There's nothing we can do about that now. Not without some sort of time machine." His brow furrowed, as if he were suddenly struck by an idea of how to build such a machine. Then he shook his head.

"You will be selecting a research project for the duration of the Training Months," he continued formally. "I'll give you whatever help I can. Madison can show you to your workstation. I'll be in my lab if

you need me.”

“Well, that was helpful,” Crystal said, rolling her eyes as the head of Kawts’ Science Guild retreated back inside the building, replaced by a strawberry blonde-haired girl about their age.

“Don’t put too much thought into it,” the girl said. “Dad’s got a lot on his mind right now, with the anarchists poisoning the river and all.”

“Wait - Howard Kolt is your *dad*?” Jewel asked.

The girl smiled brightly. “I’m Madison. Madison Kolt,” she said, extending her hand. “I’m a year below you,” she explained. “Eighth level. I can’t get an apprenticeship until next year.”

“Nice to meet you, Madison,” Jewel said, shaking her hand. “I’m Jewel. This is my sister, Crystal.”

Crystal nodded stiffly. “Howard said you’d show us to our workstation?”

Madison nodded. “Right. It’s right in here,” she said, pushing open the doors.

Suddenly, the sound of shouting echoed from a nearby street. A man with robotic legs and a man with a green cylinder on his arm emerged from the alleyway, pursued by a dozen Blanks. Jewel recognized them instantly as two of the anarchists who’d poisoned Kawts’ water supply. As they watched, frozen, the two men turned back to face the oncoming Blanks. The one with the cylinder on his arm raised it and fired a warning shot into the pavement at the Blanks’ feet, creating a smoking crater. The Blanks marched on, undeterred. Jewel saw the man who had fired his weapon shrug, and then his companion raised his own weapon.

There was no doubt in Jewel’s mind that the squadron of Blanks was mere seconds away from being vaporized.

“No!” she shouted before she could stop herself, reaching out her hand as if she could somehow prevent the anarchists from attacking. To her utter amazement, a stream of blue light shot out of her hand,

encasing a nearby lamppost in a chunk of transparent blue crystal. Jewel staggered back in shock, her mind racing. The man with the robotic legs stared at her, recognition flashing across his face. Then he and his companion turned and fled from Kawts.

Jewel watched them go with confusion, only then realizing that Crystal and Madison were staring at her.

“What... was... that?” Madison whispered, her eyes wide.

“I have absolutely no idea,” Jewel said, inspecting her hands nervously.

“We should go inside,” Crystal said, glancing around to see if anyone else had witnessed Jewel’s impossible feat.

Jewel nodded mutely and followed Madison into the Science Building. The younger girl led them directly to their workstation, a plain, isolated room on the far end of the building. They shut the door behind them, and, for a long time, no one spoke.

“How did you do that?” Crystal asked at last, voicing the question on everyone’s mind.

“I don’t know,” Jewel repeated. “It just... happened.”

“Can you do that?” Madison asked, turning to Crystal.

Crystal shook her head. “I don’t think so.” They sat in silence for a while before Crystal added, “We have to try to figure this out. This could be the biggest scientific discovery Kawts has seen since - well, ever!”

Jewel nodded distractedly, still trying to wrap her head around what had just happened.

“Can you do that again?” Crystal asked, grabbing one of the notepads lying on the table for their research project.

“I can try,” Jewel said after a moment’s hesitation. She held up her hands again, palms facing outwards. A blue stream of light shot out from her hands again, and a thin film of crystal appeared on the opposite wall.

“Interesting,” Crystal murmured, inspecting it. “It looks different than

it did outside.”

As Crystal scraped off a sample of the crystal from the wall, Jewel sat down in a chair, suddenly exhausted. Madison noticed the movement and hurried over, concern written across her face.

“Are you okay?” she asked. “You look kind of pale.”

Jewel blinked slowly. “I’m just... really tired,” she said. Crystal stopped what she was doing and faced her sister, suddenly concerned.

“It could be a side effect of - whatever that was,” Crystal said, putting her wrist on Jewel’s forehead. “I don’t think you have a fever, at least. But maybe you should rest, anyway. Just to be safe.”

“I’ll be fine,” Jewel said, standing up. A wave of dizziness washed over her, and for a moment, she feared she would fall down again. “What do you want me to do?”

Crystal frowned, but she knew her sister too well to think that she could convince her to take a break. “We need a microscope,” she said at last.

“There’s a couple of microscopes in storage,” Madison said. “I can show you the way!”

“Thanks,” Jewel said, following Madison out of the room.

She returned alone a few minutes later, a microscope in her hands.

“Madison had to go check on something,” she explained, setting the microscope down on the table. “She said she’d be back in a few minutes.”

Crystal nodded, noting how the energy had returned to her sister’s voice. Indeed, Jewel already felt considerably more awake than she had previously. Whatever had caused the exhaustion had evidently only been temporary.

“I’ll get the microscope set up,” Crystal said. “You should start making a list of anything you can think of that’s been out of the ordinary lately. Nothing’s too insignificant to write down. We have to consider all the possibilities, no matter how unlikely.”

As Crystal examined the sample of crystal under the microscope, Jewel

wracked her brain for anything unusual that had happened recently. The answer, it turned out, was not much, aside from being late for their first apprenticeship and witnessing an attack by the anarchists.

She had almost finished writing her list when Madison returned, a smile lighting up her face.

"I've just discovered something very important," she announced. Crystal looked up from her work, annoyed at the interruption.

"What is it?" she asked icily.

"You're not the first one to do that," Madison continued, undaunted. She tossed a file folder onto the table. Jewel picked it up and paged through it as Madison continued. "About seven years ago, one of the anarchists started displaying similar abilities to what you just did. The Council asked my dad to analyze the crystal to learn more about it. That's the file, there," she added, pointing to the papers in Jewel's hands.

"The anarchists?" Jewel asked. "You mean the anarchists are involved in this somehow?"

Madison nodded. "Unfortunately, yes. The anarchist in question disappeared after the virus struck. Everybody assumed they must've died from it." She looked up at Jewel. "But obviously, there's more to the story than that."

"You know there's no way I was an anarchist when I was *five*, right?"

"I know that," Madison said defensively. "That wasn't what I was saying."

"It could be genetic, though, I suppose," Crystal mused. Then she shook her head. "No, that can't be it. None of our relatives died of the virus. Or even caught it, for that matter. It must be some sort of circumstance that both of you had in common."

"I'm not sure I like the idea that I have something in common with the anarchists," Jewel said.

"We'll just have to find out what it is," Crystal said, ignoring Jewel's concerns. "I don't suppose the Council ever found out who it was," she

asked Madison.

Madison shook her head. “Nope. Everyone just assumed that they’d died and stopped worrying about it.”

“Okay,” Crystal said. “Then let’s get to work.”

\* \* \*

For the rest of the day, the three of them remained holed up in their workstation, trying to determine the cause of Jewel’s strange new abilities. Finally, they were forced to stop for the night, agreeing to all come back again the following day.

The next morning, however, they received an unpleasant surprise. The samples Crystal had gathered the day before were gone. Even the wall showed no signs of having ever had the crystal on it. A bluish residue remained in the bottom of some of the sample jars, which Crystal inspected with a frown.

“I think it dissolved,” she said at last, rubbing some of the residue off onto her finger.

“I don’t think there was any crystal left on the lamppost, either,” Madison said.

“I’ll just have to make some more,” Jewel said, lifting her hands to re-coat the wall in crystal. Nothing happened. She tried again, willing the crystal to form. Like before, nothing happened. “Or not,” she said, lowering her arm and staring at her hand. “It’s not working.”

“What do you mean?” Crystal asked, coming to her sister’s side.

“I can’t do it,” Jewel repeated. “I’m doing exactly what I did yesterday, but nothing’s happening.”

“Why don’t you try again?” Madison suggested. “Maybe it’s one of those things that works better when you don’t think about it.”

“Or adrenaline,” Crystal put in, her confidence returning. “It has to be adrenaline fueled! You just need to be scared or in danger or

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something!”

“I vote we don’t do that,” Jewel said quickly.

“Fine,” Crystal said with an exaggerated sigh. “But it could very well be the only way to figure this out.”

“Let’s compromise,” Jewel said drily. “Next time I’m in danger, I’ll see if the crystal works.”

“So that’s it?” Madison said. “We’re done?”

“I think we should keep trying,” Jewel said. “For all we know, this was caused by something else entirely. We should test a few other possibilities before we give up.”

\* \* \*

For the next several hours, they tried one thing after another, trying to pinpoint what had given Jewel powers the day before. But by the end of the day, they were still no closer to discovering the answer.

“Tomorrow,” Crystal said. “We’ll try to recreate yesterday. See if it was something you did. Aside from foiling the attack, that is.”

Long before the sun rose the next morning, Jewel was already awake, trying to guess what had caused her powers first to appear and then to vanish. As she puzzled over the problem, she decided to try once more to create a crystal. She stared up at the ceiling and imagined the crystal coming from her palms. To her utter amazement, a thin film of crystal appeared on the ceiling above her. She moved over to Crystal and shook her awake.

“What is it?” she grumbled sleepily.

“Look at the ceiling,” Jewel whispered, pointing.

Begrudgingly, Crystal rolled over and followed her sister’s gaze. “Wow,” she said, suddenly awake. “It happened again. What did you do?”

“The same thing I did yesterday,” Jewel said, shaking her head. “I just

don't get it. What about this morning is similar to two days ago?"

Crystal was silent, her brow furrowed in concentration as she tried to find the connection. "The watch," she said at last, looking her sister in the eyes. "You weren't wearing your watch two days ago, and you're not wearing it now."

"Let's test it," Jewel said, slipping her Council-issued watch onto her wrist. She tried again to use her powers, but nothing happened.

"Well, that settles it," Crystal said, knowing by the look on her face that her powers were no longer working. "Now I'm going back to sleep. We can figure this out in the morning." She rolled over and quickly fell back asleep, snoring softly. Jewel tried to follow suit, but she couldn't stop thinking about the strange situation she found herself in.

Did the Council know that the watch blocked her powers? Did they even know that Jewel could do what she did? And, most importantly, was she the only one, or were there others? She was still worrying about it when she finally fell asleep, drifting off into a fitful slumber.

\* \* \*

Madison was beside herself with excitement when they told her about their discovery the following morning.

"So it was the watch the whole time!" she exclaimed. "Does the Council know? They must, right?" She stopped suddenly, as a thought struck her. "Maybe I can do that too!" she said, excitedly slipping off her watch. She flung her hand out in front of her. Nothing happened.

"So much for that idea," she muttered as she put the watch back on.

"We still don't know *why* or *how* your powers work," Crystal said. "All we know is that the watch somehow prevents you from using them." She looked around the lab thoughtfully. "We need somewhere where you can test them out," she said. "Figure out what exactly you can do."

"You could use the track," Madison suggested. "The school year's over."

There shouldn't be anyone else there."

"Perfect," Crystal said, snapping her fingers. "Tell your dad we'll be... collecting samples for our research project. We'll meet you there."

Madison nodded and ran off through the Science Building's twisting corridors in search of her father. Crystal grabbed a pair of notebooks and a handful of pencils and started off for the track, Jewel close behind her.

"Are you sure we need to do all this?" Jewel asked. "I mean, we already know why my powers showed up a few days ago. Isn't that good enough?"

Crystal turned to face her sister. "Don't you want to know what's causing it, though?" she countered. "Why you have this ability at all? And don't you want to know what exactly the Council knows about it?"

"I'm not sure I do," Jewel said. "The things we've learned so far seem to suggest that I won't like the answer."

Crystal had no reply to that, staring at the path ahead. They walked in silence for a short distance. Jewel looked at her sister thoughtfully. Crystal was by far the more scientifically minded of the pair, always needing to understand how everything worked.

"All right," she conceded at last. "I'll help you figure this out."

"Thanks," Crystal said, grinning.

As they neared the track, she stopped and glanced around. "Coast's clear," she said, jogging off into the trees. "Come on!"

Jewel followed, excitement growing within her despite what she had told Crystal. They continued on to the middle of the forested section of the track, completely shielded from the view of anyone on the outside. A few minutes later, they were joined by Madison, and the practicing began.

"See if you can hit that tree over there," Crystal said, pointing to a large oak a few yards away.

Jewel nodded and took aim, encasing the trunk of the tree in blue

crystal.

“Can you make it dissolve?” Crystal asked. “Try telling it to dissolve.”

“What do you mean, ‘tell it?’” Jewel asked, turning to her sister.

Crystal shrugged. “Try telling it verbally. Or thinking at it. Or just willing it to go away. I don’t know. That’s why we’re trying this out. To see where the limits of your powers are.”

Sighing, Jewel turned back to the tree and did what Crystal suggested. The crystal didn’t change, and Crystal made a note in her notebook.

“Now can you try doing that filmy thing you did on the wall?” she suggested. “Only this time, do it on that tree trunk,” she said, pointing to a different tree. Jewel complied and was pleasantly surprised to find that after a few tries, she could control the intensity of her powers. Her excitement quickly faded, however, as she was suddenly overcome with dizziness. She flopped down on the dirt beside the others, feeling completely drained.

“I think that’s all I can do for now,” she said, struggling to stay awake. “It kind of sucks the energy out of you.”

“But you were able to use your powers more times consecutively without getting tired this time,” Crystal observed, jotting something down. “Last time, you only used them twice before having to stop. I’d be willing to bet that the more you use your powers, the easier it will get.” She opened her mouth as if she were going to add something else, but at that moment, a voice rang out through the forest.

“Hey! Who’s where?” the track manager called, stepping into the clearing just as the trio ducked out of sight. He stopped short when he saw the crystal encasing several of the trees. The man remained silent and slowly left the clearing, although Jewel could tell by the gleam in his eye that he wasn’t retreating. There was no doubt in her mind that he would be waiting for them at the entrance of the track.

“What do we do now?” Madison whispered once they were sure he was gone. “I’m assuming we don’t want him to find out what you can

do?”

“At least not until we know for sure what we’re dealing with,” Crystal agreed.

“We’ll have to leave the path and walk through the forest,” Jewel said. “And we should probably split up. We’ll make less of a noticeable trail that way.”

“We can regroup back at the lab,” Crystal said, pocketing a chunk of the crystal. “I’ll run some tests on this and see if I can figure out what it actually is.”

“Good luck,” Jewel said. Then the trio split ways, vanishing into the trees.

\* \* \*

For the next two weeks, they continued their experiments. As Jewel’s understanding of her powers grew, so did the list of things she could do with them. Already, by the end of the first week, she had discovered how to make crystal that would not dissolve and how to fire shards of crystal from her palms. Each day, however, Taranis did his best to catch them, forcing them to vary their routine to avoid being spotted. Even so, they knew it was only a matter of time before he managed to get a good look at them, and none of them knew what would happen then.

They were in the middle of discussing that very issue when Howard opened the door to the lab, followed by a stranger in a deliveryman’s uniform.

“Mr. GW here has a package for you,” the scientist explained, showing the man into the room. The delivery man handed Jewel an unmarked box, then backed out of the room. Howard Kolt remained behind, looking mildly puzzled.

“Did you request some extra supplies for your project?” he asked, indicating the box.

“No-” Jewel started to answer, but Crystal cut her off.

“Yes,” she said quickly. “These are the... old molds from the Food Production Plant.”

Jewel nodded hesitantly. “Right,” she said. “We’re testing them for... decomposition?”

“You know, I don’t believe you ever told me what you were researching,” Howard said. The room settled into an uncomfortable silence as they all avoided meeting Howard’s eyes. The silence was finally broken by a beeping coming from Howard’s watch.

“Ack!” he exclaimed, scrambling backwards. “I’m supposed to be in a meeting with Councilman Simms in five minutes!” He bolted out of the room, desperately hoping to make his appointment.

“Note to self,” Crystal said drily as Jewel and Madison sighed with relief. “Come up with a cover story for what we’re doing *before* someone asks about it.”

Jewel didn’t speak, her focus on the package in front of her. Slowly, she opened the box, which was empty save for a single sheet of paper. A note. She pulled it out of the box, reading it aloud.

“To Crystal and Jewel Macky,” it began. “I have information that pertains to your investigations. Meet me tomorrow night at 11:00 in the watchtower. Don’t bring your watches. I know what you can do, and I can tell you the whole story.” At the bottom, it was marked with the initials GW.

Jewel stared at the note, at once confused and curious. Finally, Madison voiced the question that they were all wondering. “Who is GW, and how does he know about you?”

“I think - I think he must be one of the anarchists,” Jewel said at last. “The other person with powers like mine worked for them. And besides you two, the only people who saw what I did were the Blanks and those two anarchists. And if it was a Blank, I doubt there’d be this much secrecy.”

“So it might be a trap,” Madison said. “You should tell the Council.”

“No!” Crystal and Jewel both shouted at the same moment.

“It could very well be a trap,” Jewel said. “But on the other hand, this ‘GW’ probably does know something. This may be our only chance to find the truth.”

“At least let me come with you,” Madison protested. “In case it is a trick!”

“We’ll be fine,” Crystal said, grinning mischievously. “There’s a little gadget I’ve been wanting to build lately that I think will be just the thing we’ll need if this goes south.”

Under Crystal’s direction, the three of them spent the rest of that day and most of the next perfecting the device she had imagined. When the time came for them to go to their meeting, Crystal slipped the small silver cylinder into her pocket. As instructed by the letter, they left their watches at home, although for what purpose, they could only guess.

They made their way slowly to the watchtower, keeping a sharp lookout for any rebel patrols. Finally, they approached the tower itself, reasonably certain that the only anarchists in the area were already inside.

To their surprise, however, only one anarchist was inside the building - the same grey-bearded man with the robotic legs who had seen her the day she had discovered her powers.

“Jewel. Crystal,” he said, nodding to each of them in turn. “I’m Gearwire. I imagine you have a lot of questions right now. But before I begin, let me tell you this - I came here tonight alone, and my sword is on the floor to your left,” he said, pointing. “The only weapon I will retain is this non-lethal glue gun,” he added, touching a holster on his metal hip. “And I only wear that in case the Council shows up while we’re talking. My only goal here is to tell you your story. You’re free to leave at any time.” He paused to make sure that the twins had understood what he was saying.

“Now then,” he said, clearing his throat. “I suppose I should start at the beginning - we first became aware of your powers nearly eight years ago. Edeline and Ethos were on an inspection of the town when she saw one of you two cover the corner of a nearby building in crystal. Ethos noticed the crystal as well, but unlike Edeline, he hadn’t seen the two of you create it.”

“The *two* of us?” Crystal interjected. “You mean *both* of us have powers?”

Gearwire nodded slowly. “I thought you would have discovered that yourselves by now,” he said. “Especially with all the tests you’ve been doing lately. Which reminds me - Taranis is catching on to you. It’ll only be a matter of time before he either catches you or gets the Council involved. And if that happens, you’ll have no choice but to become the Council’s weapon.”

“You’re saying that we should stop using our powers,” Jewel said icily.

“No, no,” Gearwire said. “I’m only saying that you need somewhere else to practice. And the resistance can help with that.”

“We don’t want anything to do with anarchists,” Crystal said.

Gearwire winced, but said nothing.

Seeing that the meeting might soon come to a premature end, Jewel intervened. “You were saying something about Edeline and Ethos?” she prompted.

“Right. When Edeline saw what had happened, she contacted me immediately.”

“And why would she have done that?” Crystal argued. Jewel elbowed her sister in the side, wanting to learn all she could about her powers. Still, she had to admit that she was curious to see how Gearwire would respond.

“She was one of the original rebels,” Gearwire explained. “It’s a bit of a long story. But once she told me about what she’d seen, I knew we had to act quickly. If the Council realized what you could do, they’d train

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you to be their weapons against us before you were even old enough to choose a side for yourselves. So we installed a device in your watches that allowed us to redirect your powers to other people - mostly Edeline. Our plan was to-

“You did what?” Jewel demanded.

“We installed a device in your watches to redirect your powers elsewhere,” he repeated carefully, seeing her anger.

“You stole our powers!” Jewel shouted incredulously.

“Well, technically, yes,” Gearwire said. “But we were only trying to protect you from the Council-”

“The same Council that risks their lives protecting the city from the likes of you?” Crystal snapped. “I don’t think so.” She removed the silver cylinder from her pocket and tossed it onto the floor of the watchtower. As the room filled with smoke, Crystal and Jewel slipped out the door, hurrying back to their own house.

\* \* \*

When morning came, Crystal and Jewel were already in the forest, practicing.

“To encase something in crystal, just do this,” Jewel instructed, thrusting her arm out aggressively. She was still furious over what Gearwire had said the night before, and it showed clearly in her movements. She called out her training regimen at a rapid pace, not noticing how her sister was struggling to keep up.

“Could you slow down a little?” Crystal asked wearily. “I’ve never done this before, remember?”

Jewel sighed, lowering her arm. “Sorry. I’m just thinking about what happened last night.”

Crystal nodded. “I get it,” she said. “Although, in hindsight, I think Gearwire really did think he was helping us. It makes me wonder if

there's something more going on here."

"You're going to believe the word of public enemy number one over the protectors of our town?" Jewel asked. Crystal said nothing, staring at the ground.

"I knew you'd be here," the track manager said triumphantly, stepping into the clearing. Instinctively, Jewel shot a burst of crystal at the man, encasing him in the clear blue substance.

Jewel froze, unable to believe what she had just done.

"Is he... is he dead?" Crystal stammered, equally shocked.

"He'll be fine," a voice said behind them. The twins whirled around to see Gearwire striding out of the trees. "There's about a fifty percent chance he'll have a mild case of amnesia, which is probably for the best, considering he knows who you are now."

"What are you doing here?" Jewel demanded.

"Lending you a hand," Gearwire said. "I came as soon as I heard Taranis' message."

"What message?" Crystal asked, ignoring a glare from Jewel.

"He contacted the Council and told them where you were," Gearwire said. He pulled out a small silver rectangle and spoke urgently into it. "Thomas, we're going to need an extraction."

"We're not going anywhere with you," Jewel said stubbornly. Bullets whizzed through the air over her head. She flinched and glared at Gearwire.

"It's not me," he said, one of his guns appearing in his hand.

"He's right," Crystal said, peering around a tree. "It's the Council." A bullet hit the tree she was hiding behind, spraying splinters of wood everywhere. "And they're aiming at us."

"Thomas Maddium!" Gearwire barked into the silver box. "We need an extraction NOW!"

"I can't see you through the trees," a voice squawked from the box. "You'll have to get out of the forest."

“I don’t think that’ll work,” Gearwire said as another bullet flew by. “The Council will have the place surrounded by now.” As he spoke, he fired at the approaching Councilmen with his weapon, spraying the trees with sticky glue. “Stand clear!” he shouted to the twins as he loaded a new cartridge into his weapon, firing it at the canopy of leaves overhead. A gaping hole emerged, and Gearwire shouted into the device again. “Can you see us now?”

“Perfectly,” the device replied. “Henry’s letting down a rope as we speak.”

The bottom of a rope dropped through the hole in the forest, brushing against the ground.

“Climb up,” Gearwire instructed with a jerk of his head. “I’ll cover you.”

Crystal immediately began scrambling up the rope, and Jewel begrudgingly followed, still not entirely trusting Gearwire.

*Still, she reasoned grimly, it’s better than being shot to death by the Council.*

She reached the top of the rope to see the other anarchist from the attack she had witnessed standing in the open doorway of a massive flying machine, pulling Crystal inside.

As Jewel neared the top, the man shouted something into a device identical to the one Gearwire carried. “They’ve both made it up, Chief. Get out of there before they kill you!”

“I’ll meet you at the rendezvous point,” Gearwire’s voice called back. “I’ve got to throw them off our track.”

Henry nodded, and Jewel suspected he had forgotten that Gearwire couldn’t see him. “Just be careful.”

“You know me,” came the joking reply. “I’ll be fine.”

“Take us out, Professor,” Henry called into the cockpit. “The Cap’n will meet us at the rendezvous.”

“Where are you taking us?” Jewel asked.

“Right now, we’re going to the rendezvous point,” Henry said evasively. “From there, I suspect we’ll go wherever the Cap’n tells us to.”

Crystal rolled her eyes and sat down on one of the benches that were fastened to the outer walls of the ship. “We might as well make ourselves comfortable,” she said, gesturing for her sister to join her.

Jewel sighed and sat down on the bench. “Why are you so trusting of these people?” she complained.

“Well, for starters, they took credit for something bad that we wouldn’t have even known about otherwise. If they were lying, that would definitely be something they would have left out.”

Jewel nodded reluctantly, realizing that her sister was right.

“Plus, the Council did just try to kill us,” she added wryly. “And that certainly makes me less likely to trust *them*.”

Jewel laughed wearily, feeling the anger drain out of her. “I suppose you have a point there.” They sat in silence for a moment. “All right,” she said at last. “I’ll at least hear them out.”

“We’re almost there,” Henry announced, emerging from the cockpit, the coil of rope slung over his shoulder. He pushed open the door to the ship, sending a gust of wind blowing through the cabin.

Anchoring one end of the rope to a small hook on the floor, he tossed the other end out of the ship. A short while later, Gearwire’s head appeared in the doorway. He hauled himself into the ship, and Henry pulled the rope up behind him.

“If you’ll allow me to, I’d like to explain,” Gearwire said, nodding his thanks to Henry.

Jewel looked at Crystal, and then nodded. “We’ll listen to what you have to say,” she said.

Gearwire nodded and took a seat on the bench opposite to them. “First of all, I’d like to say how impressed I was by that little smoke bomb of yours. You made it yourself, didn’t you?”

Crystal nodded silently, turning red.

“You have to understand that we know things about the Council that the public doesn’t. They were directly responsible both for the virus and the river being poisoned - in fact, the river itself is still perfectly safe to drink from.” He paused, gauging the twins’ reactions. “We have seen the Council wipe out entire tribes of innocent nomads and kill their own people for mild insubordination. We knew that if they discovered what you could do, they would force you to fight for them. So we installed an extra device in your watches - something that would transfer your powers to somewhere else until you were old enough to choose your own path.”

“And what if we choose to fight for the Council?” Crystal asked.

Gearwire looked her in the eyes as he responded. “If that’s what you want, I will have Dr. Maddium remove the devices from your watches, and you’ll be free to go. But I severely doubt that’s really what you want.”

“And how do we know you’re telling the truth?” Jewel asked.

“I suppose you could ask Howard Kolt about the river. I strongly suspect that he’s caught on by now. He’s a brilliant man. But unless you’re willing to break into the Council Building to verify, you’ll just have to trust me.”

Jewel was silent, thinking over what Gearwire had said. If he was telling the truth, then the Council had to be stopped. And, as Crystal had pointed out, he had incorporated a decent amount of incriminating information that would have been much more convenient to leave out if he was lying.

“I believe you,” she said, surprising both Crystal and herself. “I’ll help you find out what the Council’s up to. But if I discover that you’re lying, I will do everything in my power to stop you.”

Gearwire nodded. “That’s all I can ask. And what about you, Crystal?”

“I’m in,” Crystal said with a smirk. “It’ll give me an excuse to work on some more of those smoke bombs.”

“Henry, give these two a radio communicator,” Gearwire instructed as he disappeared into the cockpit. Henry nodded, handing Crystal a small silver disk. A few seconds later, an old man in a lab coat emerged from the cockpit.

“I’m Dr. Maddium,” the man said, retrieving a toolbox from a hidden compartment in the wall. “I’m here to remove our device from your watches.”

Crystal and Jewel passed their watches to the man, who immediately opened them up with a slender screwdriver.

“Another thing you should know about these watches,” the scientist rambled on as he worked. “is that the Council has a tracking chip inside each one. It’s their way of trying to deduce who our agents are.”

“So they already know our identities, then,” Jewel said.

“Not at all,” Dr. Maddium said with a smile. “Once Gearwire saw you discover your powers, we knew it was only a matter of time before you started experimenting. So I took the liberty of hacking the tracking chips to tell the Council where you were supposed to be instead of where you actually were. It wasn’t complicated, really. Nothing like the stunts I had to pull in the old days...” he trailed off, the smile fading from his face.

Abruptly, he stood, handing the twins’ watches back to them. “There you are,” he said. “I’d tell you to try it out, but that might not be such a good idea in this enclosed space. We’ll have some of our agents arrange a place for you two to practice. We’ll contact you through that radio communicator as soon as it’s ready.” He stuck his head into the cockpit and said something that they couldn’t quite make out.

“We’ll lower you down at the bank of the Kawts River,” he said, returning. “The Council’s security has been a little lax there as of late.”

Five minutes later, the twins were back on solid ground, watching the ship disappear in the direction of Mount Elbrus.

Slowly, they walked back to the Science Building, where Madison was

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waiting, frantic with worry. Briefly, they explained what had happened, only leaving out the part about Gearwire's offer.

"It turns out the anarchists put a device in our watches to siphon our powers to other people," Crystal said.

"Which they refused to remove," Jewel added, elbowing her sister. "Which means that anytime we have our watches on us, they can steal our powers."

Crystal looked at her sister with confusion, but Jewel avoided her gaze. She would have to explain to her sister later what she could already see. If Madison heard about a pair of anarchists who had crystal powers, she was sure to connect the dots. And then she would have to choose between protecting her town and protecting her friends. And that was a situation that Jewel didn't want to put her in. One day, perhaps, Madison would be able to understand why they had joined Gearwire. But for now, it was best to keep their alliance secret.

*For now.*

