

Chapter 1

The suffering of children is something that cannot be denied. Some never let go of it, it carries with them throughout their lives and I know something about that suffering. I've lived through the cruelty of Graceling, but I let it go even when it hurts me. You learn to accept the pain, but it still hurts when you are struck without reason or mercy. "You stupid girl," my master, Mrs. Edwin glared at me, "You have no idea what you've done."

"Sorry ma'am," I touched my aching cheek.

"You are a striking little thing, aren't you," she grabbed my chin and made me look at her, "But even with your particular skills, you'll never have my husband."

"Mrs. Edwin I would not do something like that," I promised her and I saw the spark in her eye before her hand swept the cup off her fancy dinner table.

"Take the girl away and teach her a lesson," Mrs. Edwin said. "She broke a piece of my china." I looked down at the broken glass on the floor. I wondered if the guards saw her push it off too, but even if they did they would probably still blame me. I could have screamed or reacted, I just did not have it in me to add onto my punishment. I didn't say a word; I never did when the time came. See, as long as you keep living one day the pain will stop and you'll move on.

"This is a waste of time," the guard in charge said storming down the hall to meet the men holding me.

"Sorry sir, but the girl ought to be punished," the guard on my left shrugged.

"Take her away then, but do not ruin that pretty face," he smirked and I glared at his feet whilst a war raged inside my head. *Hit him*, a voice urged me and my hands formed into fists, but I held my tongue and my temper as I was escorted away.

"You handle the girl, Simmons, I am taking my break," one of the guards said.

"Enjoy the pub, Dawson," the other said then shoved me hard towards the stairs. My pant leg got caught on a nail and then I went tumbling down the cement stairs until I hit the bottom. Every inch of me hurt and I just wanted to curl up in a ball and never stand again. "Get up slave," the guard wrenched me up to my feet, "If you think we are slowing down because you fell then you are wrong". He wrapped his cold hand around my hand, his fingers cutting into my skin. He escorted me outside and trudged through the puddles that filled the cracks in the road.

It was misty, but I could still see the government building looming over every building, like a giant watch tower. I was just glad its eyes weren't turned in my direction. The buildings around us all dated back to the time before our country was destroyed. Some were crumbling and others were better kept, depending to their owner's fortune. "You like the parliament building girl," the guard questioned, "Too bad they will not stand for slave trash in the Spector's home". He was right. I could not go into the government building I was not *fortunate* enough to be invited or to serve there. I would never be one of those kinds of people.

There are some favoured people who serve the Council, but not many. The Elite and the high-ranking officers rule over us, and the Council governs them. The Council is made up of the ministers, primes, presidents of society, and lawmen. Above even them were the Spectors of Graceling, the deadly people, who often played a role in the nightmares that had plagued me for years.

I haven't seen even a glimpse of hope in all of these years, it was ripped from me from the rich and the guards that worked for them. To make it worse, men seemed to think of my red hair as a beacon for fun, whereas the women saw me as trouble and didn't trust me. Both are equally as horrible. My past employers chopped off most of my hair, and a lack of food should make me homely looking and sickly, but even that did not make the men stop eyeing me. Horror stories about servants becoming new brides to rich men made me rather stay a servant. The torment they expected was inhumane and I'd seen homemade whip marks across their backs before.

Being below everyone wasn't the best situation to be in, but trying to fight the powers that be was even worse. Anyone who stepped out of place would be tortured and humiliated. When the world changed years ago, the Elites, Council and Spectors took advantage of situation, but the servants were too slow and ended up at the bottom of the social pillar. We had always been at the bottom. To become a slave, you are either handed over, disgraced or born into it. No one chooses this life willingly.

The country was in ruins except for the city, where I lived. I was told my family lived out in the Drifter's land somewhere, but they gave up their children to the Council in exchange for life support. Apparently, they needed food, water, and medicine more than their own children. I've never been introduced to my family, so I could be working with them and not know it.

As we walked, the women came out of their homes to look upon me with disdain. They were upper class like Mrs. Edwin. Some are heavily religious, and others are just self-important. To me, they live just to look down on the less fortunate. When I've had the chance, I've read books from the past about better worlds, but they're nothing, but fantasy. I was relieved when we left the rough broken streets and then it hit me, that we were moments away from reaching the prison like building, where the punishment was doled out. Any trace of happiness was long gone before we reached the entrance.

The guard showed no emotion as he tugged me towards the door. I obediently followed; doing anything else would result in more trouble. "Come on," he grunted. "I haven't got all day." I quickened my pace without a word.

As he dragged me to the chamber, he did not say anything to me and I wondered if the chamber had ever welcomed him for his punishment. The guards standing in front of the chamber seemed just as unsympathetic. "What is your code and serial number, girly?" His glare grew more intense the longer I took to answer.

I looked at the ground as I finally spoke. “Ciri17.” “133459.”

“Ciri17, go inside,” he boomed, and stepped away from the door before hissing, “Witch.” The guard, who took me there grabbed my arm again and led me inside the chamber. The sound of screaming, crying and pleading made my ears feel like they were bleeding. I hated to see people in pain and knowing that I was next. I’d been through enough beatings to handle it better, but I couldn’t help remembering the worse ones when the younger servants howled. I could afford to be much tougher, as I was now considered an adult at seventeen.

After passing door after door, the guard finally found me an empty room labelled Cleansing Room. I laughed to myself at the religious joke until the guard slapped the back of my head. He shoved me inside with more force than he needed to and shut the door. Nobody was inside to torture me yet, but the implications of the objects were enough to make me scream. Ropes, whips, and chains surrounded me, some covered in dried blood.

A sign took up most of the walls, a reminder meant to make us feel guilt for our actions.

Servant Code, Rule #3: Those who rebel against the Crown’s way of life should be punished. Why should one want to make such a statement against the people who raised them from nothing? This should not be so hard.

Level one – 69 lashes

Level two – 42 lashes

Level three – 30 lashes

Level four – 17 lashes

Level five – 9 lashes

Level six – 4 lashes

Level seven – 2 lashes

We hold ourselves up and we guide through the dark. To the dark we fight and we will conquer. You will thank us when you realize the full scale of what you’ve done. –signature of the High Spectors

A guard entered and I was chained to the wall. I hated that this was part of my life, but the city had been my frightful prison for too long and I did not even know if I could escape this place and never return. I heard the whip flying back and I bit my lip as hard as I could. My crime earned me the level-five punishment and I’d been at this level before so I knew exactly how to handle it. I separated my legs so they could handle it and then the whip hit me and I stayed locked in place. The next eight lashes hurt just as much and other people would cry, but that would give the guard too much pride in his work. “Does it hurt?” the guy asked me.

“No,” I held my ground.

“We’ll see about that,” he whipped me even harder and I closed my eyes.

I was glad though when they were finally over and he sent me off. “Do that again girl and it’ll be double,” the guard waiting outside told me.

“Yes sir,” I said then noticed he was eyeing me up. “May I be excused?” I asked politely.

“You may, you are relieved of duty from the Edwin home,” he said clearing his throat and I walked off until I got to an alley where I was out of view. Once I was out of view, I was free to run and I was slow at first limping, but soon I was flying. I pushed myself to get to the church faster and away from my punishers. I must get to Umber and I need someone I trust right now. When I reached the church, I walked inside and ignored the holy water near the doorway because I knew the kind of people that used it.

My friend, Umber was knelt down in front of the stained glass window. She was always here because her dad was the religious leader of this country, but she was an illegitimate child so she was a servant like me.

“Father, hear me I pray to thy, I hold you in the highest, so please listen,” she said with her hands in a prayer position, “Bless my father, mother and all those I love.” She always spoke kindly of her father even though he abandoned her. She was such a sweetheart, her dad didn’t deserve her prayers, or even her thoughts. She was two when he handed her over. He came to her mom’s house where she was living and handed her over to the authorities on the condition that she remained a secret.

She was my only family and I looked out for the people I cared about. I lied before about that glimmer of hope, I do have some hope, but it is not for myself it’s for her. I’d take a life of torture if Umber could have a life where she could always be happy and loved by her family. She should have been rich and happy not sitting in a church in tattered hand-me-downs that were barely held up by her thin frame. I wore similar clothing; it seemed to be the slave style to look like our clothes were withering away, just like us.

The only thing that made me look different was my fiery hair and the brightness of my aqua eyes, my one ‘gift’ from my birth parents. Umber said I should be happy that my situation isn’t as bad as it could be, but I found myself incomplete in some way and I couldn’t wait to be older so I could choose a profession. Being a servant hindered me. Being a shopkeeper or any kind of professional work would make me something...stronger. You chose a profession when you were twenty one, so I had four years before I was free of a life, where serving or dying are your only choices.

I wanted to go into woodwork, while Umber wanted to study religion. Other jobs included engineering, shop keeping or other needed services to the Council. Some people believe it or not stayed in the servant life for their entire lives. Sometimes it was a life sentence from the Council, or not knowing what to do with yourself outside of housework. I’d always loved working with wood.

I mean I felt bad about cutting down living things. When I was younger, I used to take days off and go into the forest to find dead trees on the ground. I would take wood to make figurines out of. I liked animal shapes the best, but they were all rough because I did them with a pocket knife I hid under my pillow, in case of emergency. I had nights off with Mrs. Edwin and I made an eagle to represent her constant harping at her husband and the servants.

I was a very cautious person overall, but I wasn’t ashamed of who I am. “In your name, I pray, protect Ciri through all her wars, and let everyone sleep safely at night,” she said blowing out her candle.

"And may there be light," I said turning on the lights. She flipped her black mane back smiling at me and her eyes were gleaming. She was sweeter than me, but men never seemed to bother her, like they bothered me. I hated the thought of those men, the ones who tried to take advantage of me and I wanted to get away from them more than anything. I am not complaining I am glad my friend has never been attacked, but it's strange how different people's idea of beauty is.

"Hey Ciri," Umber said running over and hugged me.

"Hey Number," I laughed and her eyes narrowed. In this century, people weren't very original with names; servants got their names based on their first skill. I could speak before I was supposed to and say my code and serial number, so they named me Ciri. That is what I was told anyways. Umber used to play with her mother's calculator so they named her Umber after the word number. There were girls named Silver because they were good at polishing silver and guys named Cal because they knew how to read calendars.

It was irregular to get a fancy name when you were a slave, but the Elite and the rich had more powerful names. Elites were often named after rocks, which was fitting given their thick skulls and personalities. "So how was your day?" she asked wrapping her arm around me.

"It was pretty good I have a few new cuts no big deal," I shrugged.

"Oh yes, I heard you broke Mrs. Edwin's spare cup, Ciri you have to be more careful," she said amused.

"I know, Umber, but she knocked the cup over in the first place," I said with a sigh, "I tried to be good."

"I am glad you are safe now," she said happily.

"Yeah, I am out of Edwin house and you should hear some of the gossip going around about Mr. Edwin," I said quietly.

"Very funny, you need to watch your tongue, my fragile ears can't hear such filth," she said dramatically.

"Filth is brilliant in the mind of the rich, because it gives us a reason to clean," I said.

"I think you need cheering up you've been so down lately," she said hugging me.

"Well I always get in trouble for things I did not do and if I get one more hit to my spine it'll get displaced," I explained.

"Cheer up; you have the day off now," she smiled.

"Yes a whole day of relief and then I am back on duty with someone, that does not like me," I said moodily.

"Maybe this time, you'll get lucky and the husband will be uninterested," she suggested.

"I can only hope," I said hopefully.

"Just relax and hang out with me until that happens," she said cheerily.

"You know you're the only reason I ever fight back," I sat down on one of the benches, "My best friend, you keep me going, even when insanity should have consumed me."

"I only hope that one day, you make more friendships," she sat down in the delicate manner her mother taught her.

"I gave up on that years ago," I rolled my eyes, "I cannot trust anyone else."

"I still think we should look for your parents together," she bit her lip.

"They didn't want me, Umber," I clenched my fists.

“Their loss,” she nudged me. “Are there any men in your future, Ciri17?” she questioned.

“I doubt it,” I muttered, “I do not have it in me, Umber nothing would ever be real in that kind of relationship.”

“Ever the pessimist,” she teased me.

“Always,” I grinned.

“Ciri17,” a woman walked into the church wearing a fancy dress out of place here.

“Yes, miss,” I stood up.

“These two are China13 and Darius19,” she gestured to the two teenagers behind her. The young girl looked ill and the man looked at me suspiciously.

“Did I do something wrong, ma’am?” I asked.

“You were recommended to us, actually,” she smiled, “An Elite will be coming to stay in our area and you will be working with China and Darius in his household.”

“In what position, ma’am?” I asked hoping my first guess was wrong.

“As a private servant,” she said and my heart sank.

“No,” Umber interjected, “You cannot do that to her, you know what the Elite men do with young girls.” I shuddered internally. Elites were known to be cruel and ruthless warriors.

“It is an honour, Ciri17, even if it is unbecoming,” the woman smiled at me, “It could be the greatest achievement of your life.”

“How dare you?” Umber started forward and I held her back.

“Look after yourself, Umber, promise me you will,” I hugged her.

“You are not one of those girls, Ciri17,” she hugged me, “I will miss you more than the sun in winter.” I held back tears then left with my mind anticipating the brute waiting for me.