

THE PSI CHRONICLES

ARCHON



Lana Krumwiede

ONE

Even the fiercest warrior will be tortured with moments of regret and sorrow. Let them wash over you like cleansing waters. Do not absorb them.

— THE WARRIOR'S SERENITY

A throng gathered around the hauler as it inched through the city of Deliverance. Taemon was in the passenger seat, Amma was in the middle, and Drigg was driving. Or trying to, anyway. The press of desperate people made it difficult.

“We need food!” someone called.

“It’s all going to the Relief Center!” Taemon yelled.
“You can get food there.”

The mob’s fervor increased.

“There’s never enough!”

“My children . . .”

“Is there any milk in there?”

Taemon leaned out the window and searched the crowd for his parents, as he had done for the past four months while accompanying Drigg on his weekly trips bringing food to the city dwellers who had decided to stay put after the Fall—the day psi mysteriously disappeared from Deliverance.

It was hard to believe that Deliverance had been clean, orderly, and impressive just four short months ago. Now it was a filthy, bedraggled heap—a shadow of its former glory.

Some of the damage was due to the earthquake that had rocked the city on the day of the Fall. But most of the destruction was a result of the riots that had occurred in the weeks afterward. Once people had lost their telekinetic abilities, their lives were completely upended. Their vehicles didn't work. They had to kick down their own front doors to enter their homes. Even the simplest of tasks—cooking, dressing, and hygiene—had to be reinvented using nothing but their hands. For people who had been taught that manual labor was beneath them, the situation was appalling.

While the violence had died down, the quality of life had yet to improve much for the thousands of people still living in the city. Food was frightfully scarce—the spring crops had withered because people could not figure out how to water that many plants without psi. Volunteers from the colony tried to help, but the city dwellers still hadn't grasped the fact that psi was gone for good. It made Taemon sick to see so many city dwellers stand by uselessly while their food supply was ruined rather than adopting the tools and techniques of the colonists. It seemed people would rather go hungry than accept the truth.

But for Taemon, hardest of all was the knowledge that the destruction, the anger, and the hunger were all his fault. Because he had caused the Fall.

Four months ago, the Heart of the Earth had given him a choice: accept his role as the True Son and do what was best for the people, or turn his back on his destiny and become an instrument of war. It wasn't much of a choice. Taemon had directed the Heart of the Earth to do away with psi, the telekinetic power that had become a weapon in the hands of the corrupt. He'd believed he was ushering in a new era—an era of peace and equality. He had

pictured the people of Deliverance living in harmony with the people of the colony, learning from their powerless brethren how to live a new kind of life, one that would bring them closer to the Heart of the Earth—and closer to the teachings of the Prophet Nathan.

Instead, the people of Deliverance had clung to their old beliefs and were praying for the day when this punishment would be lifted and they could go back to a life free of labor.

Only Taemon and Amma knew that no such day was coming.

Still, every week, he made himself go with Drigg to the city, where he had to confront the repercussions of his decision, in the hope that he would find Mam and Da. Or find someone who knew where they were, and maybe get word of them. So far, though, nothing.

Taemon rolled up the window and sat back in his seat. “Will it ever get better?”

Amma sighed. “Someday. It has to get better someday.”

“I’m just happy if I don’t run anybody over with the hauler,” Drigg said.

Taemon watched a man who walked beside the truck as it crept along. He looked like most city dwellers since the

Fall: hair matted, shirt rumpled and dirty, psi collar ripped out and replaced by yarn ties crudely laced through the fabric, psi cuffs torn off, psi shoes bound with strips of cloth to keep them on his feet. This was the new uniform of the people of Deliverance.

“After we unload all this, I’ve got a list of things to pick up in the city.” Drigg’s voice cut through Taemon’s gloomy mood. “It’ll take me a couple of hours, and if you want to take some time to look for your folks, that’d be all right.”

“Thanks, Drigg,” Taemon said. “There’s still one asylum I haven’t checked.”

They found the asylum, a grim, squat building secluded in a woody area and surrounded by an iron fence.

Drigg drove into a gravel parking lot that held a few abandoned quadriders. He stopped the hauler at the gate, which led to a long path lined with spindly pine trees. “Now, listen: when I get back to pick you up, you have to be watching for me. I can’t leave the hauler to go looking for you.”

Taemon nodded. The hauler had come from the powerless colony, which had only a handful of corn-fueled vehicles. Now they were the only vehicles in all

of Deliverance that still worked. If they left the hauler unattended, someone would surely steal it. “Right,” said Taemon. “Thanks.”

“I’m coming with you,” Amma said, scooting across the front seat. “Unless you need my help with your errands, Drigg?”

“Nah, you go on with the boy. Keep an eye on him.”

Taemon was grateful for the company. The abandoned asylums were even more disturbing than the rest of the city. Even though he’d never seen an asylum before the Fall, he couldn’t help but think they had always been disturbing.

He forced his feet to move forward, stepping on the thin shadows that the trees cast across the path. He told himself that each shadow he passed brought him closer to his family—or what was left of it.

His brother was gone, buried under the stones when the temple collapsed during the Fall. There was no way to bring Yens back, but he could find his parents. He had to.

“This is the last place I know to look,” Taemon said.

“We’ll find them,” Amma said. “Other families got separated during the Fall. It takes time, but they find each other.”

Taemon nodded, trying to keep his spirits up despite the unsettling sights ahead: the overgrown shrubs and grass, the cracked sidewalk, the walls streaked with water stains, the roof sagging in several places. The disrepair had clearly started long before the Fall. “Skies, I hate these places.”

Amma shuddered. “I know.”

Before the Fall, anyone who was deemed too dangerous was sent to an asylum. Usually *dangerous* meant that their powers were abnormal, which Taemon now knew meant they simply had one of the rarer types of psi, like precognition or telepathy, but it could also mean their behavior was odd or violent. In the asylum, these people were medicated heavily to suppress their psionic abilities. Toward the end of his reign, Elder Naseph had used asylums as a handy way of silencing anyone who opposed him. That included Da, Taemon had learned, who’d become more and more vocal in his opposition to Naseph’s warmongering ways. Mam had been deemed guilty by association.

The front door was wide open and askew, the top hinge long since missing. Taemon knocked on the door frame, a gesture that still felt a bit foreign to him, though he’d been functioning without psi for months before the Fall. “Hello?

Anyone here?" He leaned inside the door and called again. "Hello?" His voice echoed inside the entryway.

He glanced at Amma. "Looks pretty empty, just like the others."

"There could be some squatters inside. They might know something."

"Squatters usually don't want to be found," Taemon said.

They stepped inside, the grit-covered linoleum scratchy underfoot. A wide staircase led down to what may have been a common room for the patients to gather in. Chairs, sofas, and lamps, many of them broken, were piled in random places. They'd seen the same disarray in the other asylums.

"Why is the furniture always thrown around like that?" Amma said.

"Looting, maybe?" Taemon guessed. "During the Fall?"

"What would they be trying to loot? The drugs in here are used to take psi away, not bring it back."

Taemon grunted. He tried to picture the chaos that must have erupted when the people who ran this place realized they no longer had psi. There would have been

no way to keep the doors locked, no way to subdue the inmates. He looked again at heaps of broken furniture. Barricades. Fighting. The image of it came perfectly to his mind, squashing his hopes for finding Mam. "Is anyone here? We're looking for a former inmate. We won't cause any trouble."

A scuffling sound startled them, but it was only a bird trapped inside, fluttering against the ceiling.

They went from door to door and found no one. There was no electricity, but there were windows, small and high, next to the ceiling. They let in enough natural light to see the same things they'd seen in other asylums: bizarre scratch marks on many of the walls, odd designs or symbols that held no meaning for Taemon. Beds and chairs were turned on end in strange places.

"So sad," Amma said. And she was right. Everything about this place was sad.

They checked every room, but there were no signs of habitation.

"We can search the grounds," Amma said as they neared the end of the last hallway. "There might be people hiding in the woods."

Taemon looked down the hall one last time and saw a door they hadn't noticed before. "Hold on. There's one more room."

He jogged to the door and tried to push it open, but something was blocking the way. Leaning his shoulder into the door, he pushed harder.

The door gave way with a smash, but it still didn't open all the way. Taemon peered into a dim storage room. Shelves filled with cleaning supplies, linens, and medicine lined the walls. One shelf held a stash of food and drink pouches. Brooms and mops were propped up against the far wall.

Amma had her hand on his shoulder, trying to get a look. "We need more light," she whispered.

Taemon tried to open the door wider, but something was blocking it. It looked like a chair had been braced against the door and been broken when he'd forced it open. One large piece remained wedged between the door and the wall. He stepped into the tiny room to clear the debris.

"Two yellow, one blue, three red," a hoarse voice whispered from a dark corner. "Two yellow, one blue, three red."

“Hello?” Cautiously, Taemon moved toward the sound of the voice. “We’re here to help.”

“Two yellow! One blue! Three red!” The tone was more frantic now.

“I didn’t mean to upset you,” Taemon said. “I’ll pick up this mess.”

A thin figure in a dingy, shapeless dress darted forward and got to the chair before Taemon did. She leaned over the furniture pieces, her lank hair covering her face. “Don’t worry,” she said. “I’m here. You are broken, but you’ll get better.”

Gently she gathered the splintered wood in her arms, cradling it as she moved toward the opposite wall. She arranged the pieces thoughtfully among the mops and brooms. “Two yellow. One blue. Three red,” she muttered. Then she turned to face Taemon.

It was Mam.

Thin, sunken cheeks. Matted hair. Eyes that appeared cloudy and vacant.

But it was Mam.

“Mam!” he tried to say, but the lump in his throat turned it into little more than a gasp.

She smiled at him, looking more like herself.

“Mam, I can’t believe it’s you! I’ve been looking everywh—”

“Two yellow. One blue. Three red.”

“What? Mam, it’s me. Taemon.”

She smiled again, but Taemon realized that the smile wasn’t for him. It was a vacant smile, void of recognition. She turned and busied herself with something on the shelf.

Amma stepped up beside him. “It’s okay,” she whispered. “We’ll take her back to the colony, and the healers will help her.”

Taemon nodded, fighting to breathe past the despair that pressed on his chest.

“She’s alive,” Amma said. “That’s what’s important.”

Mam turned around with something in her hand. She held it out for Taemon and Amma to see. Pills. Different sizes, different colors. He stared at the pills in Mam’s hand for a frozen moment before he understood: two yellow, one blue, three red.

“No!” He lunged toward her.

She was too quick. She brought her hand to her mouth, and the pills were gone.

“Mother of Earth,” Taemon whispered. “She’s been taking those horrible drugs this whole time.”

Amma stepped past him and gathered all the medicine bottles. “We need to get rid of these.”

With no trash can in sight, they ended up piling the bottles in the corner behind the door to keep them out of Mam’s reach.

Meanwhile, Mam seemed more interested in the mops and brooms that were lined against the wall. She stroked the strands of the mop and plucked dust bits off the broom bristles, murmuring to herself all the while.

Taemon spoke as gently as he knew how. “Mam, we came to help you. Where’s Da? Do you know?”

“You’ll be fine,” Mam murmured, but she wasn’t looking at Taemon. She was still inspecting the broom. “Just fine. I’ll take care of you.”

Taemon and Amma exchanged a worried look.

“Wouldn’t you like to come with us?” Amma said. “We’ll take you to a safe place.”

Mam didn’t respond.

“Mam?” Taemon put his hand on her back. “What happened? Where’s Da?”

She shrugged his hand away and glared at him, then turned back to the broom. “Don’t worry. I won’t leave you here alone. I’ll take care of you.”

Taemon stepped back. “What do I do?” he whispered to Amma.

Amma looked as helpless as he felt. “I don’t know. If we can get her back to the colony, she might—”

“They took him away,” Mam said suddenly. “They took him.”

The words filled the tiny room even though Mam’s voice was barely audible.

“You mean Da?” Taemon asked. Somehow he managed to keep his voice soft and relaxed.

“They took Darling away,” Mam said. Then she looked up, and for a moment Taemon thought she recognized him.

“Where, Mam? Where did they take him?”

“They took him to the Republik,” she said, her eyes back on the floor. “They made him go. They said if he didn’t . . .” She hugged herself and began to moan. When she looked up again, her eyes were vacant.

“Two yellow. One blue. Three red.” She looked toward the shelves.

“No more drugs,” Amma said gently. She turned to Taemon. “We have to get her out of here.”

“I can’t leave,” Mam said. “I can’t! They need me.” She clutched a broom and mop close.

“I need you, too,” Taemon said. “Please, Mam.”

A horn sounded from outside. One long honk, then two short ones.

“That’s Drigg,” Taemon said. “We have to go.”

Mam moaned again, louder this time.

“I know!” Amma said, stepping forward. “We can take them with us.” She started gathering mops and brooms.

“Brilliant!” Taemon said, moving to do the same.

“Stop!” Mam shrieked. “Leave them alone! They’ve done nothing!”

Amma and Taemon froze as Mam carefully replaced each mop and broom.

“What are we going to do?” Amma asked just as Drigg’s horn sounded again.

Taemon and Amma exchanged a look. They seemed to come to the same conclusion at the same time. Quickly, before she could react, they each took hold of one of Mam’s arms and half dragged her into the hallway. She was so thin, so frail. She hollered and squirmed, but she was too weak to struggle very much.

They moved as quickly as was possible with Mam resisting. It was a long way back to the parking lot: down hallways, around corners, across the big room, up the stairs, and, finally, through the front door.

Halfway across the cracked sidewalk, he looked up and saw the hauler waiting for them. Mam must have seen it, too, because she chose that moment to dig in her heels with a vengeance.

That's when they tripped.

Taemon went down hard, skinning his palms, but Mam took the worst of it. She landed on her back, and her head hit the sidewalk with a sickening crack.

Taemon knelt next to Mam. She looked at him, her breathing shallow, the black centers of her eyes wide and deep.

“Mam? Are you okay?”

“Darling Houser,” she said. “Find him.”

“Mrs. Houser?” Amma shook Mam's shoulder. “Stay awake, okay? We're taking you to see your sister.”

Will Mam even remember that she has a sister? Taemon wondered vaguely. They'd been separated as children, his aunt Challis sent to live in the powerless colony when it was discovered that she possessed unusual—and

therefore dangerous—powers. He wondered what sort of behind-the-scenes negotiations had resulted in Challis's being sent to the colony rather than to an asylum.

Regardless, Taemon had grown up believing that his aunt had died at the age of four. Would Mam remember the truth?

Taemon looked up when he heard footsteps crunching down the path. Drigg was running toward them.

"I'll carry her," he said. "You go back to the hauler."

Drigg picked up Mam, and the four of them continued down the path. Taemon hurried ahead to the gate. As he held it open for the others, he heard a sound that made his stomach twist.

The hauler.

Taemon watched their only source of transportation speed away without them, spitting gravel as it went.

TWO

There will come a moment when despite all your training, all your studies, all your knowledge, you will be unable to find a solution. And yet you will know the solution. Forget everything, and you will remember it.

— THE WARRIOR'S SERENITY

Drigg eased Mam off his shoulder and laid her gently on the grass before he started cursing. “Blazing skies in the morning! I thought it would be safe for a few seconds. I didn’t see anyone nearby.”

“I think there are people hiding in the woods,” Amma said. “I got that feeling when we first came here.”

Taemon knelt to check on Mam. She was out cold. Amma crouched next to him. “Is she sleeping?” Taemon asked. All the excitement and struggling had probably worn her out.

“I think she’s unconscious,” Amma said. “We need to get her to the healers as quickly as possible.”

Drigg rubbed the bald spot on his head. “It’s at least a day’s walk to the colony. And sundown’s in a couple hours.”

“Then we’d better start walking,” said Taemon.

Drigg looked longingly at the quadriders that had been abandoned in the parking lot after the Fall. Taemon knew exactly what Drigg was thinking because he thought the same thing every time he saw the useless quadriders. They were surrounded by vehicles that no one could drive again.

“I hate to say this,” Drigg said, “but maybe we should stay here for the night and get an early start in the morning.”

“I’m not spending the night in that place.” Taemon shuddered.

“I’m with Taemon on this one,” Amma said. “Besides, if people really are living in the woods around here, we may not be safe overnight.”

Taemon turned back toward the asylum. “I’ll go find something to carry Mam with.”

“I’ll see if I can find any food pouches,” Amma added as she followed.



It had been fully dark for at least an hour before they agreed to stop. Drigg had put together a stretcher from some poles and rough canvas Taemon had found at the asylum. They had taken turns as they walked, two of them carrying the stretcher and one resting. Even so, they were tired and hungry, and they still had a long way to go. This was the kind of situation where psi could really be helpful. Taemon and Amma could have used psi to carry the stretcher with very little exertion. They might even have been able to press on through the night and arrive at the colony by midmorning.

Instead, exhaustion forced them to stop and rest. They sat down next to another abandoned quadrider. They'd passed several since leaving the asylum. The windshield of this one was smashed; the owner had probably had to break it to get out. Without psi to open the door, a person could easily get trapped inside a car.

Taemon wondered if the days of quadriders were over. Would people go back to horses and carts? Or would someone take the time to convert the quadriders to corn fuel? Drigg was the only person who knew how, and it took weeks to do just one conversion.

This would be a good one to convert. It reminded

Taemon of the quad rider Uncle Fierre used to own before he bought his unisphere. He'd let Taemon drive it once and made him promise not to tell Mam.

Mam. He should be looking after Mam, not day-dreaming about quadriders.

Taemon checked on her again while Amma pulled out the food and drink pouches she'd found in the asylum.

"How's she doing?" Amma asked.

Taemon shrugged. "Same, though I worry she'll be cold now that it's dark. I wish we could have found a blanket for her."

"I know," Amma said. "But the blankets must have been the first thing people took from the asylum. We're lucky we managed to find food and drink."

He ran his hands through his hair. "It's my fault. I tripped. Skies, if something happens to her, I . . ."

"She's been through a lot," Amma said. "None of that is your fault."

Taemon looked up. It was his fault, he wanted to tell her. All of it. But he couldn't say that in front of Drigg. He would have to bear the weight of his decision secretly, because if word got out that he was to blame for the Fall . . .

“If anyone’s to blame, it’s Elder Naseph,” Anna continued. “He’s the one who started all this business of using psi for evil.” As if adding an exclamation point, she slapped a mosquito on her arm. “We’ll get her to the colony, and everything will be fine,” Amma said. “You wait and see.”

Taemon nodded. He appreciated the encouragement, but things had not been fine in a long, long time. He had a feeling that fine was a good way off.

Amma handed him a pouch with a picture of an apple on the label. He was fiddling with the cap, trying to figure out how it opened, when a cloud blocked the moonlight.

“Amma, can you help me with this?” he asked, holding out the bottle toward her.

“You’re worse than a child,” Amma teased, her hand brushing his as she felt for the pouch.

Taemon was glad for the cover of darkness, which hid his flushed cheeks. He wasn’t sure if it was the teasing or the brush of her fingers, though, that embarrassed him.

Suddenly, a man’s voice echoed in the darkness.

“Everybody stop right where you are.”

Taemon looked up to see a figure stepping forward

from the shadows. A figure who had a bow with an arrow nocked and aimed right at him.

Slowly, Taemon raised both hands. “We mean no harm.”

“Maybe you don’t,” said the man. “But maybe we do.”

More archers stepped into view. It was hard to count them in the dark, but Taemon thought he could see at least six. Were there more? The surrounding trees would make it easy for them to hide.

For a moment, everything was silent except for the distant throbbing of cicadas.

The archers were a ragged, scrappy-looking group, some men, some women, with mismatched clothes, lean bodies, and wild looks in their eyes. The one aiming at Taemon had stringy hair that hung in waves around his narrow face.

“What’re you doing on this road after dark?” said the archer.

Taemon swallowed. “My mother’s hurt. We’re taking her to get help.”

“That’s your mother?” The man jerked his head toward Mam, but his eyes never left Taemon.

“Yes,” Taemon answered. “We have to get her to—”

“Well, ain’t that interesting?” The man smiled eerily. “The boy came for his mam.” The others chuckled dutifully. “Get up slowly, now. The big man can carry the lady. We’re takin’ you to see Free Will.”

“Look, she’s hurt,” Taemon protested. “Just let us go. We won’t bother you.”

His words had no effect.

“Who’s Free Will?” Amma asked as one of the archers gathered up the food.

The man’s grin grew wider. “You’ll know soon enough.”

“Should we tie ’em up, Lervie?” another archer asked.

“Nah,” said the man—Lervie, apparently. “They won’t do anything that might injure the lady. Just use your arrows to keep ’em in line. Now get goin’!” He shouted that last part and motioned with a quick twitch of the arrow.

Unfortunately, Lervie was right: they had no choice but to follow. Taemon set his mind to finding a way out of this. If it were just him, he could chance doing something reckless, like charging the leader and hoping the others would be too surprised to stop him. But there was Mam to think about. And Drigg and Amma. Still, there had to be a way out of this.

Under the archer's watchful eye, Taemon rose to his feet and inched closer to the quadrider. Perhaps he could push it over and distract Lervie long enough for them to get away. But a quadrider must be immensely heavy—far too heavy for him to tip over on his own.

If only he still had psi! He could tip the quadrider over with ease. Or better yet, they could pile into the quadrider and tear out of these woods before the archers knew what was happening. And Mam would be at the colony and under the care of the healers in no time.

Stop it! Useless, stupid thoughts like that weren't going to help. He had to think of a plan that had at least a chance of working, even if it was slim.

Still, the urge to drive the quadrider and get the blazes out of there was overwhelming, and the image of the engine came unbidden to his mind—the gears, the springs, the coils that stored energy as the driver gradually released it to the transmission. Before he realized what he was doing, Taemon reached out for psi. As if he had it. As if it had never left him.

An automatic response, he thought. Like trying to turn on the lights even when you know the power is out. A mindless attempt at the impossible.

But the engine roared to life.

The noise startled him and everyone else. The archers momentarily lowered their arrows.

Taemon's mind was reeling. Had he actually started that engine? There was one way to find out. In his mind, Taemon held the image of the doors opening and gave the order: *Be it so.*

All four doors swung open.

How had he done that? He pondered the impossibility of it for an entire second before snapping into action. The archers reacted, too. They raised their bows, and Taemon used psi to deflect the arrows harmlessly into the trees. Amma and Drigg hustled Mam inside the quadrider and settled her into the backseat. Drigg climbed in beside her, and Amma took the passenger's seat.

Taemon flung himself into the front seat, closed the doors, and threw as much psi as he dared into the engine. The quadrider rocketed forward, tires squealing as it sped past the archers.

Drigg leaned forward in the backseat. "What happened back there? I'm not complaining, mind you, but I'd really like to know who's driving this thing and how."

“I’m driving,” Taemon said, not daring to turn around.

“How in the Great Green Earth can you do that?” Amma shouted over the roaring of the wind through the broken windshield.

“I don’t know! My psi is back. Is yours?”

Amma was one of the few people in the powerless colony to have had psi before the Fall, though it had been a carefully guarded secret. Her family had been in charge of protecting a hidden library; there would have been deadly consequences if it had fallen into the hands of the city dwellers. Unfortunately, that’s exactly what happened. A stupid mistake on Taemon’s part had led to Elder Naseph and Yens discovering the library, and the books had been looted.

Amma frowned in concentration. Taemon wondered what she was trying to move with her mind. Was it working?

She blew out a breath. “No. How is this happening? Did the adrenaline trigger your psi somehow?”

“I’ve never heard of adrenaline, but there’s no mistaking the feel of psi,” Taemon said. He was turning his head

to see how far they'd gotten when pain burst like starfire in his left shoulder.

He cried out, and the engine sputtered.

"You okay?" Amma leaned forward. "Taemon, you're hurt!"

He looked down and saw an arrow lodged in his shoulder just next to the joint. Skies! What now?

Archon

Lana Krumwiede

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