

[Read free] File size: 63.Mb

Fire



*Par Kristin Cashore
DOC | *audiobook | ebooks |
Download PDF | ePub*

Dtails sur le produit Rang parmi les ventes : #169917 dans eBooksPubli le: 2009-09-24Sorti le: 2009-09-24Format: Ebook Kindle

[Read free] Fire

Par Kristin Cashore : Fire before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Fire:

Download

Read Online

Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurA must-read title for all fans of Patrick Rothfuss and Trudi Canavan, FIRE is an exceptional fantasy novel. From the deft characterisation to the gripping story, the fast-paced action to the evocative prose, this is one of the strongest fantasy novels of the year. Set in a world of stunningly beautiful, exceptionally dangerous monsters, Fire is one of the most dangerous monsters of all - a human one. Marked out by her vivid red hair, she's more than attractive. Fire is mesmerising. But with this extraordinary beauty comes influence and power. People who are susceptible to her appeal will do anything for her attention, and for her affection. They will turn away from their families, their work, and their duties for her. They will forget their responsibilities to please her ... and worse, crush nations, neglect kingdoms and abuse their power. Aware of her power, and afraid of it, Fire lives in a corner of the world away from people, and away from temptation. Until the day comes when she is needed - a day when, for her king, she has to take a stand

not only against his enemies, but also against herself ...ExtraitPrologueLarch often thought that if it had not been for his newborn son, he never would have survived his wife Mikras death. It was half that the infant boy needed a breathing, functioning father who got out of bed in the mornings and slogged through the day; and it was half the child himself. Such a good-natured baby, so calm. His gurgles and coos so musical, and his eyes deep brown like the eyes of his dead mother.Larch was a game warden on the riverside estate of a minor lord in the southeastern kingdom of Monsea. When Larch returned to his quarters after a day in the saddle, he took the baby from the arms of the nursemaid almost jealously. Dirty, stinking of sweat and horses, he cradled the boy against his chest, sat in his wifes old rocker, and closed his eyes. Sometimes he cried, tears painting clean stripes down a grimy face, but always quietly, so that he would not miss the sounds the child made. The baby watched him. The babys eyes soothed him. The nursemaid said it was unusual for a baby so young to have such focused eyes. Its not something to be happy about, she warned, a child with strange eyes.Larch couldnt find it within himself to worry. The nursemaid worried enough for two. Every morning she examined the babys eyes, as was the unspoken custom of all new parents in the seven kingdoms, and every morning she breathed more easily once shed confirmed that nothing had changed. For the infant who fell asleep with both eyes the same color and woke with eyes of two different colors was a Graceling; and in Monsea, as in most of the kingdoms, Graceling babies immediately became the property of the king. Their families rarely saw them again.When the first anniversary of the birth of Larchs son had come and gone with no change to the boys brown eyes, the nursemaid still did not leave off her muttering. Shed heard tales of Graceling eyes that took more than a year to settle, and Graceling or not, the child was not normal. A year out of his mothers womb and already Immiker could say his own name. He spoke in simple sentences at fifteen months; he left his babyish pronunciation behind at a year and a half. At the beginning of her time with Larch, the nursemaid had hoped her care would gain her a husband and a strong, healthy son. Now she found the baby who conversed like a miniature adult while he drank at her breast, who made an eloquent announcement whenever his underwrappings needed to be changed, positively creepy. She resigned her post.Larch was happy to see the sour woman go. He constructed a carrier so that the child could hang against his chest while he worked. He refused to ride on cold or rainy days; he refused to gallop his horse. He worked shorter hours and took breaks to feed Immiker, nap him, clean his messes. The baby chattered constantly, asked for the names of plants and animals, made up nonsense poems that Larch strained to hear, for the poems always made Larch laugh.Birdies love treetops to whirl themselves through, for inside of their heads they are birds, the boy sang absentmindedly, patting his hand on his fathers arm. Then, a minute later: Father?Yes, son?You love the things that I love you to do, for inside of your head are my words.Larch was utterly happy. He couldnt remember why his wifes death had saddened him so. He saw now that it was better this way, he and the boy alone in the world. He began to avoid the people of the estate, for their tiresome company bored him, and he didnt see why they should deserve to share in the delight of his sons company.One morning when Immiker was three years old Larch opened his eyes to find his son lying awake beside him, staring at him. The boys right eye was gray. His left eye was red. Larch shot up, terrified and heartbroken. Theyll take you, he said to his son. Theyll take you away from me.Immiker blinked calmly. They wont, because youll come up with a plan to stop them.To withhold a Graceling from the king was royal theft, punishable by imprisonment and fines Larch could never pay, but still Larch was seized by a compulsion to do what the boy said. They would have to ride east, into the rocky border mountains where hardly anyone lived, and find a patch of stone or scrub that could serve as a hiding place. As a game warden, Larch could track, hunt, build fires, and make a home for Immiker that no one would find.Immiker was remarkably calm about their flight. He knew what a Graceling was. Larch supposed the nursemaid had told him; or perhaps Larch himself had explained it and then forgotten hed done so. Larch was growing forgetful. He sensed parts of his memory closing up on him, like dark rooms behind doors he could no longer open. Larch attributed it to his age, for neither he nor his wife had been young when shed died birthing their son.Ive wondered sometimes if your Grace has anything to do with speaking, Larch said as they rode the hills east, leaving the river and their old home behind.It doesnt, Immiker said.Of course it doesnt, Larch said, unable to fathom why hed ever thought it did. Thats all right, son, youre young yet. Well watch out for it. Well hope its something useful.Immiker didnt respond. Larch checked the straps that held the boy before him in the saddle. He bent down to kiss the top of Immikers golden head, and urged the horse onward.A Grace was a particular skill far surpassing the capability of a normal human being. A Grace could take any form. Most of the kings had at least one Graceling in his kitchens, a superhumanly capable bread baker or winemaker. The luckiest kings had soldiers in their armies Graced with sword fighting. A Graceling

might have impossibly good hearing, run as fast as a mountain lion, calculate large sums mentally, even sense if food was poisoned. There were useless Graces, too, like the ability to twist all the way around at the waist or eat rocks without sickening. And there were eerie Graces. Some Gracelings saw events before they happened. Some could enter the minds of others and see things it was not their business to see. The Nanderan king was said to own a Graceling who could tell if a person had ever committed a crime, just by looking into his face. The Gracelings were tools of the kings, and no more. They were not thought to be natural, and people who could avoid them did, in Monsea and in most of the other six kingdoms as well. No one wished the company of a Graceling. Larch had once shared this attitude. Now he saw that it was cruel, unjust, and ignorant, for his son was a normal little boy who happened to be superior in many ways, not just in the way of his Grace, whatever it might turn out to be. It was all the more reason for Larch to remove his son from society. He would not send Immiker to the kings court, to be shunned and teased, and put to whatever use pleased the king. They were not long in the mountains before Larch accepted, bitterly, that it was an impossible hiding place. It wasn't the cold that was the problem, though autumn here was as raw as midwinter had been on the lords estate. It wasn't the terrain either, though the scrub was hard and sharp, and they slept on rock every night, and there was no place even to imagine growing vegetables or grain. It was the predators. Not a week went by that Larch didn't have to defend against some attack. Mountain lions, bears, wolves. The enormous birds, the raptors, with a wingspan twice the height of a man. Some of the creatures were territorial, all of them were vicious, and as winter closed in bleakly around Larch and Immiker, all of them were starving. Their horse was lost one day to a pair of mountain lions. At night, inside the thorny shelter Larch had built of sticks and scrub, he would pull the boy into the warmth of his coat and listen for the howls, the tumbled stones down the slope, the screeches, that meant an animal had scented them. At the first telltale sound he would strap the sleeping boy into the carrier on his chest. He would light as powerful a torch as he had the fuel for, go out of the shelter, and stand there, holding off the attack with fire and sword. Sometimes he stood there for hours. Larch didn't get a lot of sleep. He wasn't eating much either. You'll make yourself sick if you keep eating so much, Immiker said to Larch over their paltry dinner of stringy wolf meat and water. Larch stopped chewing immediately, for sickness would make it harder to defend the boy. He handed over the majority of his portion. Thank you for the warning, son. They ate quietly for a while, Immiker devouring Larch's food. What if we went higher into the mountains and crossed to the other side? Immiker asked. Larch looked into the boy's mismatched eyes. Is that what you think we should do? Immiker shrugged his small shoulders. Could we survive the crossing? Do you think we could? Larch asked, and then shook himself as he heard his own question. The child was three years old and knew nothing of crossing mountains. It was a sign of Larch's fatigue, that he groped so desperately and so often for his son's opinion. We would not survive, Larch said firmly. I've heard of no one who has ever made it across the mountains to the east, either here or in Estill or Nander. I know nothing of the land beyond the seven kingdoms, except for tall tales the eastern people tell about rainbow-colored monsters and underground labyrinths. Then you'll have to bring me back down into the hills, Father, and hide me. You must protect me. Larch's mind was foggy, tired, starved, and shot through with one lightning bolt of clarity, which was his determination to do what Immiker said. Snow was falling as Larch picked his way down a sheer slope. The boy was strapped inside his coat. Larch's sword, his bow and arrows, some blankets, and bundled scraps of meat hung on his back. When the great brown raptor appeared over a distant ridge, Larch reached for his bow tiredly. But the bird lunged so fast that all in an instant it was too close to shoot. Larch stumbled away from the creature, fell, and felt himself sliding downward. He braced his arms before him to shield the child, whose screams rose above the screams of the bird: Protect me, Father! You must protect me, Father! Suddenly the slope under Larch's back gave way and they were falling through darkness. An avalanche, Larch thought numbly, every nerve in his body still focused on protecting the child under his coat. His shoulder hit something sharp and Larch felt tearing flesh, and wetness, warmth. Strange, to be plunging downward like this. The drop was heady, dizzying, as if it were vertical, a free fall; and just before he slipped into unconsciousness Larch wondered if they were falling through the mountain to the floor of the earth. Larch jackknifed awake, frantic with one thought: Immiker. The boy's body wasn't touching his, and the straps hung from his chest, empty. Larch felt around with his hands, whimpering. It was dark. The surface on which he lay was hard and slick, like slimy ice. He shifted to extend his reach and screamed suddenly, incoherently, at the pain that ripped through his shoulder and head. Nausea surged in his throat. He fought it down and lay still again, weeping helplessly and moaning the boy's name. All right, Father, Immiker's voice said, very close beside him. Stop crying and get up. Larch's weeping turned to sobs of relief. Get up, Father.

I've explored. There's a tunnel and we must go. Are you hurt? I'm cold and hungry. Get up. Larch tried to lift his head, and cried out, almost blacked out. It's no use. The pain is too great. The pain is not so great that you can't get up, Immiker said, and when Larch tried again he found that the boy was right. It was excruciating, and he vomited once or twice, but it was not so bad that he couldn't prop himself on his knees and his uninjured arm, and crawl across the icy surface behind his son. Where, he gasped, and then abandoned his question. It was too much work. We fell through a crack in the mountain, Immiker said. We slid. There's a tunnel. Larch didn't understand, and forward progress took so much concentration that he stopped trying to. The way was slippery and downhill. The place they went toward was slightly darker than the place they came from. His son's small form scuttled down the slope ahead of him. There's a drop, Immiker said, but comprehension came so slowly to Larch that before he understood, he fell, tumbling knees over neck off a short ledge. He landed on his injured shoulder and momentarily lost consciousness. He woke to a cold breeze and a musty smell that hurt his head. He was in a narrow space, crammed between close walls. He tried to ask whether his fall had injured the boy, but only managed a moan. Which way? Immiker's voice asked. Larch didn't know what he meant, and moaned again. Immiker's voice was tired, and impatient. I've told you, it's a tunnel. I've felt along the wall in both directions. Choose which way, Father. Take me out of this place. The ways were identically dim, identically musty, but Larch needed to choose, if it was what the boy thought best. He shifted himself carefully. His head hurt less when he faced the breeze than when he turned his back to it. This decided him. They would walk toward the source of the breeze. And that is why, after four days of bleeding, stumbling, and starving, after four days of Immiker reminding him repeatedly that he was well enough to keep walking, Larch and Immiker stepped out of the tunnel not into the light of the Monsean foothills, but into that of a strange land on the other side of the Monsean peaks. An eastern land neither of them had heard of except for foolish tales told over Monsean dinnerstales of rainbow-colored monsters and underground labyrinths. Larch wondered sometimes if a blow to his head on the day he'd fallen through the mountain had caused some hurt to his brain. The more time he spent in this new land, the more he struggled against a fog hovering on the edge of his mind. The people here spoke differently and Larch struggled with the strange words, the strange sounds. He depended on Immiker to translate. As time passed he depended on Immiker to explain a great many things. This land was mountainous, stormy and rough. It was called the Dells. Variations of the animals Larch had known in Monsea lived in the Dells—normal animals, with appearances and behavior Larch understood and recognized. But also in the Dells lived colorful, astonishing creatures that the Dellian people called monsters. It was their unusual coloration that identified them as monsters, because in every other physical particular they were like normal Dellian animals. They had the shape of Dellian horses, Dellian turtles, mountain lions, raptors, dragonflies, bears; but they were ranges of fuchsia, turquoise, bronze, iridescent green. A dappled gray horse in the Dells was a horse. A sunset orange horse was a monster. Larch didn't understand these monsters. The mouse monsters, the fly and squirrel and fish and sparrow monsters, were harmless; but the bigger monsters, the man-eating monsters, were terribly dangerous, more so than their animal counterparts. They craved human flesh, and for the flesh of other monsters they were positively frantic. For Immiker's flesh they seemed frantic as well, and as soon as he was big enough to pull back the string of a bow, Immiker learned to shoot. Larch wasn't sure who taught him. Immiker always seemed to have someone, a man or a boy, who guarded him and helped him with this and that. Never the same person. The old ones always disappeared by the time Larch had learned their names, and new ones always took their places. Larch wasn't even certain where the people came from. He and Immiker lived in a small house, and then a bigger house, then even bigger, in a rocky clearing on the outskirts of a town, and some of Immiker's people came from the town. But others seemed to come out of crevices in the mountains and in the ground. These strange, pallid, underground people brought medicines to Larch. They healed his shoulder. He heard there were one or two monsters of a human shape in the Dells, with brightly colored hair, but he never saw them. It was for the best, because Larch could never remember if the human monsters were friendly or not, and against monsters in general he had no defense. They were too beautiful. Their beauty was so extreme that whenever Larch came face-to-face with one of them, his mind emptied and his body froze, and Immiker and his friends had to defend him. It's what they do, Father, Immiker explained to him, over and over. It's part of their monstrous power. They stun you with their beauty, and then they overwhelm your mind and make you stupid. You must learn to guard your mind against them, as I have. Larch had no doubt Immiker was right, but still he didn't understand. What a horrifying notion, he said. A creature with the power to take over one's mind. Immiker burst into delighted laughter, and threw his arm around his father. And still Larch didn't understand; but Immiker's displays of

affection were rare, and they always overwhelmed Larch with a dumb happiness that numbed the discomfort of his confusion. In his infrequent moments of mental lucidity, Larch was sure that as Immiker had grown older, Larch himself had grown stupider and more forgetful. Immiker explained to him over and over the unstable politics of this land, the military factions that divided it, the black market that flourished in the underground passages that connected it. Two different Dellian lords, Lord Mydogg in the north and Lord Gention in the south, were trying to carve their own empires into the landscape and wrest power from the Dellian king. In the far north was a second nation of lakes and mountain peaks called Pikkia. Larch couldn't keep it straight in his head. He knew only that there were no Gracelings here. No one would take from Larch his son whose eyes were two different colors. Eyes of two different colors. Immiker was a Graceling. Larch thought about this sometimes, when his mind was clear enough for thought. He wondered when his son's Grace would appear. In his clearest moments, which only came to him when Immiker left him alone for a while, Larch wondered if it already had. Immiker had hobbies. He liked to play with little monsters. He liked to tie them down and peel away their claws, or their vividly colored scales, or clumps of their hair and feathers. One day in the boy's tenth year, Larch came upon Immiker slicing stripes down the stomach of a rabbit that was colored like the sky. Even bleeding, even shaking and wild-eyed, the rabbit was beautiful to Larch. He stared at the creature and forgot why he'd come looking for Immiker. How sad it was, to see something so small and helpless, something so beautiful, damaged in fun. The rabbit began to make noises, horrible, panicked squeaks, and Larch heard himself whimpering. Immiker glanced at Larch. It doesn't hurt her, Father. Instantly Larch felt better, knowing that the monster wasn't in pain. But then the rabbit let out a very small, very desperate whine, and Larch was confused. He looked at his son. The boy held a dagger dripping with blood before the eyes of the shaking creature, and smiled at his father. Somewhere in the depths of Larch's mind a prick of suspicion made itself felt. Larch remembered why he'd come looking for Immiker. I have an idea, Larch said slowly, about the nature of your Grace. Immiker's eyes flicked calmly, carefully, to Larch's. Do you? You've said that the monsters take over my mind with their beauty. Immiker lowered his knife, and tilted his head at his father. There was something odd in the boy's face. Disbelief, Larch thought, and a strange, amused smile. As if the boy were playing a game he was used to winning, and this time he'd lost. Sometimes I think you take over my mind, Larch said, with your words. Immiker's smile widened, and then he began to laugh. The laughter made Larch so happy that he began to laugh as well. How much he loved this child. The love and the laughter bubbled out of him, and when Immiker walked toward him Larch held his arms open wide. Immiker thrust his dagger into Larch's stomach. Larch dropped like a stone to the floor. Immiker leaned over his father. You've been delightful, he said. I'll miss your devotion. If only it were as easy to control everyone as it is to control you. If only everyone were as stupid as you are, Father. It was strange, to be dying. Cold and dizzying, like his fall through the Monsean mountains. But Larch knew he wasn't falling through the Monsean mountains; in death he knew clearly, for the first time in years, where he was and what was happening. His last thought was that it hadn't been stupidity that had allowed his son to enchant him so easily with words. It had been love. Larch's love had kept him from recognizing Immiker's Grace, because even before the boy's birth, when Immiker had been no more than a promise inside Mikras body, Larch had already been enchanted. Fifteen minutes later Larch's body and his house were on fire and Immiker was on his pony's back, picking his way through the caves to the north. It was a relief to be moving on. His surroundings and his neighbors had become tedious of late, and he was restless. Ready for something more. He decided to mark this new era in his life with a change of his foolish, sentimental name. The people of this land had an odd way of pronouncing Larch's name, and Immiker had always liked the sound of it. He changed his name to Leck. A year passed. PART ONE Monsters Chapter One It did not surprise Fire that the man in the forest shot her. What surprised her was that he shot her by accident. The arrow whacked her square in the arm and threw her sideways against a boulder, which knocked the air out of her. The pain was too great to ignore, but behind it she focused her mind, made it cold and sharp, like a single star in a black winter sky. If he was a cool man, certain in what he was doing, he would be guarded against her, but Fire rarely encountered this type. More often the men who tried to hurt her were angry or arrogant or frightened enough that she could find a crack in the fortress of their thoughts, and ease her way in. She found this man's mind instantly so open, so welcoming, even, that she wondered if he could be a simpleton hired by someone else. She fumbled for the knife in her boot. His foot falls, and then his breath, sounded through the trees. She had no time to waste, for he would shoot her again as soon as he found her. You don't want to kill me. You've changed your mind. Then he rounded a tree and his blue eyes caught hold of her, and widened in astonishment and horror. Not a girl! he cried out. Fire's thoughts scrambled. Had he

not meant to strike her? Did he not know who she was? Had he meant to murder Archer? She forced her voice calm. Who was your target? Not who, he said. What. Your cloak is brown pelt. Your dress is brown.

Rocks alive, girl, he said in a burst of exasperation. He marched toward her and inspected the arrow embedded in her upper arm, the blood that soaked her cloak, her sleeve, her headscarf. A fellow would think you were hoping to be shot by a hunter. More accurately, a poacher, since Archer forbade hunting in these woods at this time of day, just so that Fire could pass through here dressed this way. Besides, she'd never seen this shortish, tawny-haired, light-eyed man before. Well. If he was not only a poacher, but a poacher who'd accidentally shot Fire while hunting illegally, then he would not want to turn himself in to Archer's famous temper; but that was what she was going to have to make him want to do. She was losing blood, and she was beginning to feel lightheaded. She would need his assistance to get home. Now I'll have to kill you, he said glumly. And then, before she could begin to address that rather bizarre statement: Wait. Who are you? Tell me you're not her. Not who? she hedged, reaching again for his mind, and finding it still strangely blank, as if his intentions were floating, lost in a fog. Your hair is covered, he said. Your eyes, your face, oh, save me. He backed away from her. Your eyes are so green. I'm a dead man. He was an odd one, with his talk of killing her, and himself dying, and his peculiar floating brain; and now he looked ready to bolt, which Fire must not allow. She grasped at his thoughts and slid them into place. You don't find my eyes or my face to be all that remarkable. The man squinted at her, puzzled. The more you look at me the more you see I'm just an ordinary girl. You've found an ordinary girl injured in the forest, and now you must rescue me. You must take me to Lord Archer. Here Fire encountered a small resistance in the form of the man's fear. She pulled harder at his mind, and smiled at him, the most gorgeous smile she could muster while throbbing with pain and dying of blood loss. Lord Archer will reward you and keep you safe, and you will be honored as a hero. There was no hesitation. He eased her quiver and her fiddle case from her back and slung them over his shoulder against his own quiver. He took up both of their bows in one hand and wrapped her right arm, her uninjured arm, around his neck. Come along, miss, he said. He half led her, half carried her, through the trees toward Archer's holding. He knows the way, she thought tiredly, and then she let the thought go. It didn't matter who he was or where he came from. It only mattered that she stay awake and inside his head until he'd gotten her home and Archer's people had seized him. She kept her eyes and ears and her mind alert for monsters, for neither her headscarf nor her own mental guard against them would hide her from them if they smelled her blood. At least she could count on this poacher to be a decent shot. Archer brought down a raptor monster as Fire and the poacher stumbled out of the trees. A beautiful, long shot from the upper terrace that Fire was in no state to admire, but that caused the poacher to murmur something under his breath about the appropriateness of the young lord's nickname. The monster plummeted from the sky and crashed onto the pathway to the door. Its color was the rich orange-gold of a sunflower. Archer stood tall and graceful on the stone terrace, eyes raised to the sky, longbow lightly in hand. He reached to the quiver on his back, notched another arrow, and swept the treetops. Then he saw them, the man dragging her bleeding from the forest. He turned on his heel and ran into the house, and even down here, even from this distance and stone walls between them, Fire could hear him yelling. She sent words and feeling into his mind, not mind control, only a message. Don't worry. Seize him and disarm him, but don't hurt him. Please, she added, for whatever it was worth with Archer. He's a nice man and I've had to trick him. Archer burst through the great front door with his captain Palla, his healer, and five of his guard. He leapt over the raptor and ran to Fire. I found her in the forest, the poacher cried. I found her. I saved her life. Once the guards had taken hold of the poacher, Fire released his mind. The relief of it weakened her knees and she slumped against Archer. Fire, her friend was saying. Fire. Are you all right? Where else are you hurt? She couldn't stand. Archer grasped her, lowered her to the ground. She shook her head numbly. Nowhere. Let her sit, the healer said. Let her lie down. I must stop the flow of blood. Archer was wild. Will she be all right? Most certainly, the healer said curtly, if you will get out of my way and let me stop the flow of blood. My lord. Archer let out a ragged breath and kissed Fire's forehead. He untangled himself from her body and crouched on his heels, clenching and unclenching his fists. Then he turned to peer at the poacher held by his guards, and Fire thought warningly, Archer, for she knew that with his anxieties unsoothed, Archer was transitioning now to fury. A nice man who must nonetheless be seized, he hissed at the poacher, standing. I can see that the arrow in her arm came from your quiver. Who are you and who sent you? The poacher barely noticed Archer. He stared down at Fire, boggle-eyed. She's beautiful again, he said. I'm a dead man. He won't kill you, Fire told him soothingly. He doesn't kill poachers, and anyway, you saved me. If you shot her I'll kill you with pleasure, Archer said. It makes no difference what you do, the poacher said. Archer glared down at the man. And if you were so intent on

rescuing her, why didnt you remove the arrow yourself and bind the wound before dragging her half across the world?Archer, Fire said, and then stopped, choking back a cry as the healer ripped off her bloody sleeve. He was under my control, and I didnt think of it. Leave him alone.Archer swung on her. And why didnt you think of it? Where is your common sense?Lord Archer, the healer said testily. There will be no yelling at people who are bleeding themselves to unconsciousness. Make yourself useful. Hold her down, will you, while I remove this arrow; and then youll do best to look to the skies.Archer knelt beside her and took hold of her shoulders. His face was wooden but his voice shook with emotion. Forgive me, Fire. To the healer: Were mad to be doing this outside. They smell the blood.And then sudden pain, blinding and brilliant. Fire wrenched her head and fought against the healer, against Archers heavy strength. Her scarf slipped off and released the shimmering prism of her hair: sunrise, poppy, copper, fuchsia, flame. Red, brighter than the blood soaking the pathway.She ate dinner in her own stone house, which was just beyond Archers and under the protection of his guard. He had sent the dead raptor monster to her kitchen. Archer was one of very few people who made her feel no shame for craving the taste of monster meat.She ate in bed, and he sat with her.

He cut her meat and encouraged her. Eating hurt, everything hurt. The poacher was jailed in one of the outdoor monster cages Fires father, Lord Cansrel, had built into the hill behind the house. I hope theres a lightning storm, Archer said. I hope for a flood. I would like the ground under your poacher to crack open and swallow him.She ignored him. She knew it was only hot air.I passed Donal in your hall, he said, sneaking out with a pile of blankets and pillows. Youre building your assassin a bed out there, arent you?

And probably feeding him as well as you feed yourself.Hes not an assassin, only a poacher with fuzzy eyesight.You believe that even less than I do.All right, but I do believe that when he shot me, he thought I was a deer.Archer sat back and crossed his arms. Perhaps. Well talk to him again tomorrow. Well have his story from him.I would rather not help.I would rather not ask you, darling, but I need to know who this man is and who sent him. Hes the second stranger to be seen on my land these two weeks.Fire lay back, closed her eyes, forced her jaw to chew. Everyone was a stranger. Strangers came out of the rocks, the hills, and it was impossible to know everyones truth. She didnt want to know nor did she want to use her powers to find out. It was one thing to take over a mans mind to prevent her own death, and another thing entirely to steal his secrets.When she turned to Archer again, he was watching her quietly. His white-blond hair and his deep brown eyes, his proud mouth. The familiar features shed known since she was a toddler and he was a child, always carrying a bow around as long as his own height. It was she whod first modified his real name, Arklin, to Archer, and he had taught her to shoot. And looking into his face now, the face of a grown man responsible for a northern estate, its money, its farms, its people, she understood his anxiety. It was not a peaceful time in the Dells. In Kings City, young King Nash was clinging, with some desperation, to the throne, while rebel lords like Lord Mydogg in the north and Lord Gentian in the south built armies and thought about how to unseat him.War was coming. And the mountains and forests swarmed with spies and thieves and other lawless men. Strangers were always alarming.Archers voice was soft. You wont be able to go outside alone until you can shoot again. The raptors are out of control. Im sorry, Fire.Fire swallowed.

Shed been trying not to think about this particular bleakness. It makes no difference. I cant play fiddle, either, or harp or flute or any of my instruments. I have no need to leave home.Well send word to your students. He sighed and rubbed his neck. And Ill see whom I can place in their houses in your stead. Until you heal, well be forced to trust our neighbors without the help of your insight. For trust was not assumed these days, even among long-standing neighbors, and one of Fires jobs as she gave music lessons was to keep her eyes and ears open. Occasionally she learned something information, conversation, the sense of something wrongthat was a help to Archer and his father, Brocker, both loyal allies of the king.It was also a long time for Fire to live without the comfort of her own music. She closed her eyes again and breathed slowly. These were always the worst injuries, the ones that left her unable to play her fiddle. She hummed to herself, a song they both knew about the northern Dells, a song that Archers father always liked her to play when she sat with him.Archer took the hand of her uninjured arm, and kissed it. He kissed her fingers, her wrist. His lips brushed her forearm.She stopped humming. She opened her eyes to the sight of his, mischievous and brown, smiling into hers.You cant be serious, she thought to him.He touched her hair, which shone against the blankets. You look unhappy.Archer. It hurts to move.You dont have to move. And I can erase your pain.She smiled, despite herself, and spoke aloud. No doubt. But so can sleep. Go home, Archer. Im sure you can find someone elses pain to erase.So callous, he said teasingly, when you know how worried I was for you today.She did know how worried. She merely doubted that the worry had changed his nature.Of course, after hed gone, she did not sleep. She tried, but nightmares brought her awake over and

over again. Her nightmares were always worse on days when she spent time down among the cages, for that was where her father had died. Cansrel, her beautiful monster father. Monsters in the Dells came from monsters. A monster could breed with a non-monster of its species her mother had not been a monster but the progeny was always monstrous. Cansrel had had glittery silver hair with glints of blue, and deep, dark blue eyes. His body, his face breathtaking, smooth and beautifully cut, like crystal reflecting light, glowing with that intangible something that all monsters have. He had been the most stunning man alive when he lived, or at least Fire had found him so. He had been better than she at controlling the minds of humans. He had had a great deal more practice. Fire lay in her bed and fought off the dream memory. The growling leopard monster, midnight blue with gold spots, astride her father. The smell of her father's blood, his gorgeous eyes on her, disbelieving. Dying. She wished now that she hadn't sent Archer home. Archer understood the nightmares, and Archer was alive and passionate. She wanted his company, his vitality. In her bed she grew more and more restless, and finally she did a thing that would have turned Archer livid. She dragged herself to her closets and dressed herself, slowly, painfully, in coat and trousers, dark browns and blacks to match the night. Her attempt to wrap her hair almost sent her back to bed, since she needed both arms to do it and lifting her left arm was an agony. Somehow she managed, capitulating at one point to the use of a mirror to be sure that no hair was showing in back. Generally she avoided mirrors. It embarrassed her to lose her own breath at the sight of herself. She stuck a knife in her belt and hefted a spear and ignored her own conscience calling, singing, screaming to her that she couldn't even protect herself from a porcupine tonight, let alone a monster raptor or monster wolf. Next was the hardest part of all, one armed. She had to sneak out of her own house by way of the tree outside her window, for Archer's guards stood at all her doorways, and they would never allow her to wander the hills injured and alone. Unless she used her power to control them, and that she would not do. Archer's guards trusted her. Archer had been the one to notice how closely this ancient tree hugged the house and how easily he could climb it in the dark, two years ago, when Cansrel had still been alive, and Archer had been eighteen and Fire had been fifteen and their friendship had evolved in a manner Cansrel's guards hadn't needed to know the particulars of. A manner that had been unexpected to her, and sweet, and boosted her small list of happinesses. What Archer hadn't known was that Fire had begun to use the route herself, almost immediately, first to skirt Cansrel's men and then, after Cansrel was dead, Archer's own. Not to do anything shocking or forbidden; just to walk at night by herself, without everyone knowing. She pitched her spear out the window. What followed was an ordeal that involved much swearing and tearing of cloth and fingernails. On solid ground, sweating and shaking and appreciating fully now what a foolish idea this had been, she used her spear as a cane and limped away from the house. She didn't want to go far, just out of the trees so that she could see the stars. They always eased her lonesomeness. She thought of them as beautiful creatures, burning and cold; each solitary, and bleak, and silent like her. Tonight they were clear and perfect in the sky. Standing on a rocky patch that rose beyond Cansrel's monster cages, she bathed in the light of the stars and tried to soak up some of their quiet. Breathing deep, she rubbed the place in her hip that still ached sometimes from an arrow scar that was months old. Always one of the trials of a new wound: All the old wounds liked to rise up and start hurting again, too. She'd never been injured accidentally before. It was hard to know how to categorize this attack in her mind; it almost seemed funny. She had a dagger scar on one forearm, another on her belly. An arrow gouge from years ago in her back. It was a thing that happened now and then. For every peaceful man, there was a man who wanted to hurt her, even kill her, because she was a gorgeous thing he could not have, or because he despised her father. And for every attack that had left a scar there were five or six other attacks she'd managed to stop. Tooth marks on one wrist: a wolf monster. Claw marks at one shoulder: a raptor monster. Other wounds, too, the small, invisible kind. Just this morning, in the town, a man's hot eyes on her body, and the man's wife beside him, burning at Fire with jealousy and hatred. Or the monthly humiliation of needing a guard during her woman's bleedings to protect her from monsters who could smell her blood. The attention shouldn't embarrass you, Cansrel would have said. It should gladden you. Don't you feel it, the joy of having an effect on everyone and everything simply by being? Cansrel had never found any of it humiliating. He'd kept predator monsters as pets: a silvery lavender raptor, a blood-purple mountain lion, a grass-colored bear glinting with gold, the midnight blue leopard with gold spots. He'd underfed them on purpose and walked among their cages, his hair uncovered, scratching his own skin with a knife so that his blood beaded on the surface. It had been one of his favorite things to make his monsters scream and roar and scrape their teeth on the metal bars, wild with their desire for his monster body. She couldn't begin to imagine feeling that way, without fear, or shame. The air was turning damp and cold, and peace was too far away for her to reach tonight. Slowly she

headed back to her tree. She tried to grab hold and climb, but it didnt take much scrabbling at the trunk for her to understand that she was not, under any circumstances, going to be able to enter her bedroom the way shed exited. Leaning into the tree, sore and weary, Fire cursed her stupidity. She had two options now, and neither was acceptable. Either she must turn herself in to the guards at her doors and tomorrow wage a battle over her freedom with Archer, or she must enter the mind of one of those guards and trick his thoughts. She reached out tentatively to see who was around. The poachers mind bobbed against hers, asleep in his cage. Guarding her house were a number of men whose minds she recognized. At her side entrance was an older fellow named Krell who was something of a friend to her or would have been, did he not have the tendency to admire her too much. He was a musician, easily as talented as she and more experienced, and they played together sometimes, Fire on her fiddle and Krell on flute or whistle. Too convinced of her perfection, Krell, ever to suspect her. An easy mark. Fire sighed. Archer was a better friend when he did not know every detail of her life and mind. She would have to do this. She slipped up to the house and into the trees near the side door. The feeling of a monster reaching for the gates of ones mind was subtle. A strong and practiced person could learn to recognize the encroachment and slam the gates shut. Tonight Krells mind was alert for trespassers but not for this type of invasion; he was open and bored, and she crept her way in. He noticed a change and adjusted his focus, startled, but she worked quickly to distract him. You heard something. There it is, can you hear it again? Shouts, near the front of the house. Step away from the door and turn to look. Without pause he moved from the entrance and turned his back to her. She crept out of the trees toward the door. You hear nothing behind you, only before you. The door behind you is closed. He never swung around to check, never even doubted the thoughts shed implanted in his mind. She opened the door behind him, slipped through, and shut herself in, then leaned against the wall of her hallway for a moment, oddly depressed at how easy that had been. It seemed to her that it shouldnt be so easy to make a man into a fool. Rather bleak now with self-disgust, she slumped her way upstairs to her room. A particular song was stuck in her head, dully playing itself over and over, though she couldnt think why. It was the funeral lament sung in the Dells to mourn the waste of a life. She supposed thoughts of her father had brought the song to mind. She had never sung it for him or played it on her fiddle. Shed been too numb with grief and confusion to play anything after hed died. A fire had been lit for him, but she had not gone to see it. It had been a gift from Cansrel, her fiddle. One of his strange kindnesses, for hed never had patience for her music. And now Fire was alone, the only remaining human monster in the Dells, and her fiddle was one of few happy things she had to remember him by. Happy. Well, she supposed there was a kind of gladness in his remembrance, some of the time. But it didnt change reality. In one way or another, all that was wrong in the Dells could be traced back to Cansrel. It was not a thought to bring peace. But delirious now with fatigue, she slept soundly, the Dellian lament a backdrop to her dreams.

Chapter Two

Fire woke first to pain, and then to the consciousness of an unusual level of agitation in her house. Guards were bustling around downstairs, and Archer was among them. When a servant passed her bedroom door Fire touched the girls mind, summoning her. The girl entered the room, not looking at Fire, glaring mutinously instead at the feather duster in her own hand. Still, at least she had come. Some of them scurried away, pretending not to hear. She said stiffly, Yes, Lady? Sofie, why are there so many men downstairs? The poacher in the cages was found dead this morning, Lady, Sofie said. An arrow in his throat. Sofie turned on her heel, snapping the door shut behind her, leaving Fire lying heartsick in bed. She couldnt help but feel that this was her fault somehow, for looking like a deer. She dressed and went downstairs to her steward, Donal, who was grizzled and strong-headed and had served her since she was a baby. Donal raised a gray eyebrow at her and cocked his head in the direction of the back terrace. I dont think he much cares whom he shoots, he said. Fire knew he meant Archer, whose exasperation she could sense on the other side of the wall. For all his hot words, Archer did not like people in his care to die. Help me cover my hair, will you, Donal? A minute later, hair wrapped in brown, Fire went out to be with Archer in his unhappiness. The air on the terrace was wet like coming rain. Archer wore a long brown coat. Everything about him was sharp the bow in his hand and the arrows on his back, his frustrated bursts of movement, his expression as he glared over the hills. She leaned on the railing beside him. I should have anticipated this, he said, not looking at her. He as good as told us it would happen. Theres nothing you could have done. Your guard is already spread too thin. I could have imprisoned him inside. And how many guards would that have taken? We live in stone houses, Archer, not palaces, and we dont have dungeons. He swiped at the air with his hand. Were mad, you know that? Mad to think we can live here, so far from Kings City, and protect ourselves from Pikkians and looters and the spies of rebel lords. He hadnt the look or the speech of a Pikkian, she said. He was Dellian, like us. And he was clean and tidy and

civilized, not like any looter we've ever seen. The Pikkians were the boat people from the land above the Dells, and it was true that they crossed the border sometimes to steal timber and even laborers from the Dellian north. But the men of Pikkia, though not all alike, tended to be big, and lighter-skinned than their Dellian neighbors at any rate, not small and dark like the blue-eyed poacher had been. And Pikkians spoke with a distinctive throaty accent. Well, Archer said, determined not to be soothed, then he was a spy. Lord Mydogg and Lord Gentian have spies crawling all over the kingdom, spying on the king, spying on the prince, spying on each other, spying on you, for all we know, he added grudgingly. Has it never occurred to you that the enemies of King Nash and Prince Brigan might want to steal you and use you as a tool to overthrow the royal family? You think everyone wants to steal me, Fire said mildly. If your own father had me tied up and sold to a monster zoo for spare change, you'd claim that you'd suspected him all along. He spluttered at this. You should suspect your friends, or at least anyone other than me and Brocker. And you should have a guard whenever you walk out your door, and you should be quicker to manipulate the people you meet. Then I'd have less cause to worry. These were old arguments and he already knew her responses by heart. She ignored him. Our poacher was a spy of neither Lord Mydoggs nor Lord Gentians, she said calmly. Mydogg has grown quite an army for himself in the northeast. If he decided to borrow our more central land to use as a stronghold in a war against the king, we wouldn't be able to stop him. Archer, be reasonable. The King's Army wouldn't leave us alone to defend ourselves. And regardless, the poacher was not sent here by a rebel lord; he was far too vapid. Mydogg would never employ a vapid scout, and if Gentian lacks Mydoggs intelligence, well, still, he's not fool enough to send a man with a floating, empty head to do his spying. All right, Archer said, voice rising in exasperation, then I return to the theory that it's something to do with you. The moment he recognized you he talked about being a dead man, and clearly he was well-informed on that point. Explain it to me, will you? Who was the man, and why the rocks is he dead? He was dead because he'd hurt her, Fire thought; or maybe because she'd seen him and talked to him. Little sense in it, but it would make a good joke, if Archer were in the mood for any sort of joke. The poacher's murderer was a man after Archer's own heart, for Archer also didn't like men to hurt Fire or make her acquaintance. And a rather good shot, she said out loud. He was still glowering into the distance, as if he expected the murderer to pop up from behind a boulder and wave. Hmm? You'd get along well with this murderer, Archer. He would've had to shoot through both the bars of the outer enclosure and the bars of the poacher's cage, wouldn't he? He must be a good shot. Admiration for another archer seemed to cheer him slightly. More than that. From the depth of the wound and the angle, I think he fired long-range, from the trees beyond that rise. He pointed to the bald patch Fire had climbed the night before. Through two sets of bars is impressive enough, and then into the man's throat? At least we can be sure none of our neighbors did it personally. Not one of them could have made that shot. Could you? The question was a small gift to him to improve his mood, for there was no shot made that Archer couldn't match. He glanced at her, grinning. Looked at her again more closely. His face softened. I'm a beast for taking this long to ask how you feel this morning. The muscles of her back were tight knots of rope and her bandaged arm ached; her entire body was paying dearly for last night's abuse. I'm all right. Are you warm enough? Take my coat. They sat for a while on the steps of the terrace, Fire wrapped in Archer's coat. They talked about Archer's plans for breaking ground in the fields. Soon enough it would be time for the spring planting, and northern soil, rocky and cold, always resisted the start of a new growing season. Now and then Fire sensed a raptor monster overhead. She kept her own mind hidden from them so they wouldn't recognize her for the monster prey she was; but of course, in the absence of monster prey, they ate any living creature available. One that spotted Fire and Archer dropped down and began to circle, posing shamelessly, intangibly lovely, reaching for their minds, radiating a feeling that was hungry, primitive, and oddly soothing. Archer stood and shot it, then shot another that did the same, the first violet like sunrise, the second so pale a yellow it looked like the moon dropping from the sky. At least fractured on the ground, Fire thought, the monsters added color to the landscape. There was little color in the north of the Dells in early spring; the trees were gray and the grass that tufted between cracks in the rocks was still brown from winter. Truly, even at the height of summer the north of the Dells was not what one would call colorful, but at least in summer, gray with patches of brown turned to gray with patches of green. Who found the poacher, anyway? Fire asked idly. Tovat, Archer said. One of the newer guards. You'll not have met him yet. Oh, yes, the young one with the brown-orange hair that people called red. I like him. He's strong-minded and he guards himself. You know Tovat? You admire his hair, do you? Archer said in a sharp and familiar tone. Archer, honestly. I said nothing of admiring his hair. And I know the names and faces of all the men you station at my house. It's simple courtesy. I won't be stationing Tovat at your house

any longer, he said, an unpleasant edge to his voice that drove her to silence for a moment, so that she wouldnt say anything unpleasant back about Archers dubious and rather hypocritical right to jealousy. He opened a feeling to her that she didnt particularly care to feel just now. Biting back a sigh, she chose words that would protect Tovat. I hope youll change your mind. Hes one of the few guards who respects me both with his body and in his mind. Marry me, Archer said, and live in my house, and I will be your guard. She could not bite back this sigh. You know that I wont. I wish you would stop asking me. A fat raindrop plopped onto her sleeve. I think Ill go visit your father. She stood, creaking with pain, and let his coat slide off into his lap. She touched his shoulder once, gently. Even when she did not like Archer, she loved him. As she went into the house, rain began to fall. Archers father lived in Archers house. Fire asked a guard who was not Tovat to accompany her along the path through the rain. She carried a spear, but still, without her longbow and quiver she felt naked. Lord Bocker was in his sons armory, thundering instructions at a large man Fire recognized as the assistant to the blacksmith in town. At the sight of her Lord Bocker did not let off his thundering, but momentarily he lost the attention of his listener. The blacksmith turned to stare at Fire, some base thing in his eyes and in his silly, stupid smile. Hed known Fire for long enough, this man, to have learned how to guard himself against the power of her strange monster beauty, so if he was not guarding himself, then he must not want to. His prerogative, to give up his mind in return for the pleasure of succumbing to her, but not something she cared to encourage. She kept her headscarf on. She pushed his mind away and walked past him into a side room so that she couldnt be seen. A closet really, dark, with shelves full of oils and polish and ancient, rusted equipment no one ever used. It was humiliating to have to retreat to a smelly old closet. The blacksmith should be the one to feel humiliated, for he was the dunce who chose to give up his self-control. What if while he gaped at her and imagined whatever his small mind cared to imagine, she convinced him to draw his knife and take out his own eye? It was the sort of thing Cansrel would have liked to do. Cansrel had never retreated. The mens voices stopped and the blacksmiths mind receded from the armory. The big wheels of Lord Bockers chair squeaked as he rolled himself toward her. He stopped in the doorway of the closet. Come out of there, child; hes gone. The moron. If a mouse monster stole that ones meal from under his nose, hed scratch his head and wonder why he couldnt remember eating his food. Lets go to my rooms. You look like you should sit down. Archers house had been Bockers house before Bocker had turned the running of the estate over to his son, and Bocker had used a wheeled chair before Archer had ever been born. The house was organized such that everything but Archers rooms and servant rooms were on the first floor, where Bocker could reach them. Fire walked beside him down a stone hallway that was dim in the gray light seeping through tall windows. They passed the kitchen, the dining room, the stairway, and the guard room. The house was full of people, servants and guards coming in from outside, coming down from upstairs. The servant girls who passed them greeted Bocker but carefully ignored Fire, their minds guarded and cool. As always. If Archers servants did not resent her because she was a monster and Cansrels daughter, they resented her because they were in love with Archer. Fire was happy to sink into a soft chair in Lord Bockers library and drink the cup of wine an unfriendly servant clapped into her hand. Bocker positioned his chair across from hers and settled his gray eyes on her face. Ill leave you alone, dear, he said, if you wish to nap. Perhaps later. Whens the last time you had a good nights sleep? Bocker was one person she felt comfortable admitting pain to, and fatigue. I cant remember. Its not a thing that happens very often. You know there are drugs that will put you to sleep. They make me groggy, and stupid. Ive just finished writing a history of military strategy in the Dells. Youre welcome to take it with you. Itll put you to sleep while making you clever and unbeatable. Fire smiled and sipped the bitter Dellian wine. She doubted that Bockers history would put her to sleep. All she knew about armies and war came from Bocker, and he was never boring. Twenty-some years ago, in the heyday of old King Nax, Bocker had been the most brilliant military commander the Dells had ever seen. Until the day King Nax had seized him and shattered his legs not broken them, but shattered them, eight men taking turns with a mallet and then sent him home, half-dead, to his wife, Aliss, in the northern Dells. Fire didnt know what terrible thing Bocker had done to justify such treatment from his king. Neither did Archer. The entire episode had taken place before they were born, and Bocker never spoke of it. And the injuries were only the beginning of it, for a year or two later, when Bocker had recovered as well as he ever would, Nax had still been angry with his commander. Hed handpicked a brute from his prisons, a dirty, savage man, and sent him north to punish Bocker by punishing Bockers wife. This was why Archer was brown-eyed, light-haired, handsome, and tall, while Bocker was gray-eyed and dark-haired and plain in appearance. Lord Bocker was not Archers true father. In some places and times Bockers would have been a mind-boggling story, but not in Kings City

and not in the days when King Nax had ruled at the pleasure of his closest adviser. Cansrel. Bocker spoke, interrupting her gruesome thoughts. I understand you've had the rare pleasure of being shot by a man who was not trying to kill you, he said. Did it feel any different? Fire laughed. I've never been shot more pleasantly. He chuckled, studying her with his mild eyes. It's rewarding to make you smile. The pain in your face drops away. He had always been able to make her smile. It was a relief to her, his dependable light mood, especially on days when Archers mood was heavy. And it was remarkable, since every moment he was in pain. Bocker, she said. Do you think it could have been different? He tilted his head, puzzled. I mean Cansrel, she said, and King Nax. Do you think their partnership could ever have been different? Could the Dells have survived them? Bocker considered her, his face gone quiet and grave at the very mention of Cansrel's name. Nax's father was a decent king, he said. And Cansrel's father was a valuable monster adviser to him. But, darling, Nax and Cansrel were two other creatures entirely. Nax didn't inherit his father's strength, and you know as well as anyone that Cansrel didn't inherit even a touch of his father's empathy. And they grew up together as boys, so when Nax took the throne, he'd already had Cansrel living inside his head his whole life. Oh, Nax had a good heart, I'm sure of it, sometimes I saw it but it didn't matter, because he was also just the smallest bit lazy, the smallest bit too willing to let someone else do his thinking and that was all the opening Cansrel ever needed. Nax never had a chance, Bocker said, shaking his head, squinting at memories. From the start, Cansrel used Nax to get everything he wanted, and all Cansrel ever wanted was his own pleasure. It was inevitable, sweetheart, he said, bringing his attention back to her face. As long as they lived, Cansrel and Nax were always going to lead the kingdom to ruin. Ruin. Fire knew, for Bocker had told her, the progressive steps that had led to ruin once young Nax had taken the throne. It had started with women and parties, and that hadn't been so bad, for Nax had fallen in love with a black-haired lady from the northern Dells named Roen and married her. King Nax and Queen Roen had produced a son, a handsome, dark boy named Nash, and even with a somewhat neglectful king at its helm the kingdom had had an aura of stability. Except that Cansrel had been bored. His gratification had always required excess, and now he began to need more women and more parties, and wine, and children from the court to alleviate the monotony of the women. And drugs. Nax had agreed to it all; Nax had been like a shell to hold Cansrel's mind and nod its head yes to whatever Cansrel said was best. Yet, you've told me that ultimately it was the drugs that destroyed Nax, Fire said. Could Nax have held on if it hadn't been for the drugs? Perhaps, Bocker said lightly. Cansrel could always keep hold of himself with poison in his veins, blast him, but Nax couldn't; it made him high-strung, and paranoid, and uncontrolled, and more vindictive than he'd ever been before. He stopped at that, staring bleakly at his own useless legs. Fire kept her feeling tight within herself so that he would not be flooded with her curiosity. Or her pity; her pity must never touch him. A moment later he looked up and held her eyes again. He smiled very slightly. Perhaps it would be fair to say that Nax might not have turned into a madman if it weren't for the drugs. But I believe the drugs were as inevitable as the rest. And Cansrel himself was the truest drug to Nax's mind. People saw what was happening they saw Nax punishing law-abiding men and making alliances with criminals and wasting all the money in the king's coffers. Allies of Nax's father began to withdraw their support for Nax, as they were bound to do. And ambitious fellows like Mydogg and Gentian began to think and plot, and train squadrons of soldiers, under the guise of self-defense. And who could blame a mountain lord for that, with things so unstable? There was no law anymore, not outside the city, for Nax couldn't be troubled to attend to it. The roads were no longer safe, you had to be mad or desperate to travel the underground routes, looters and raiders and black-market thugs were cropping up everywhere. Even the Pikkians. For ages, they'd been content to squabble among themselves. Now, suddenly, even they couldn't resist taking advantage of our lawlessness. Fire knew all of this; she knew her own history. In the end, a kingdom connected by underground tunnels and riddled with caves and hidden mountain holdings could not bear so much volatility. There were too many places for bad things to hide. Wars had broken out in the Dells; not proper wars with well-defined political adversaries, but bungling mountain turf wars, one neighbor against another, one party of cave raiders against some poor lords holding, one alliance of Dellian lords against the king. Bocker had been in charge of quelling all uprisings, all across the Dells. He'd been a far better military leader than Nax had deserved, and for several years, Bocker had done an impressive job of it. But he and the army had been on their own; in King's City, Cansrel and Nax had been busy, plowing their way through women and drugs. King Nax had fathered a set of twins with a palace laundry girl. Then Bocker had committed his mysterious offense, and Nax had retaliated. And on the day that Nax had destroyed his own military commander, he'd dealt a fatal blow to any hope of rule in his kingdom. The fighting had burgeoned out of control. Roen had borne Nax another dark-haired son named

Brigan. The Dells had entered a desperate time. Cansrel had quite enjoyed being surrounded by desperation. It had entertained him to smash things apart with his power, and for entertainment he had been insatiate. The few women Cansrel couldnt seduce with the power of his beauty or his mind, he raped. The few women Cansrel impregnated he killed. He didnt want monster babies growing into monster children and adults who might undermine his power. Brocker had never been able to tell Fire why Cansrel hadnt killed Fires mother. It was a mystery; but she knew better than to hope for a romantic explanation. Fire had been conceived in a time of depraved pandemonium. Cansrel had probably forgotten he had taken Jessa to his bed, or never noticed the pregnancy she was only a palace servant, after all. He had probably not realized the pregnancy was his, until the child had been born with hair so astonishing that Jessa had named her Fire. Why had Cansrel allowed Fire to live? Fire didnt know the answer to that, either. Curious, he had gone to see her, probably intending to smother her. But then, looking into her face, listening to the noises she made, touching her skin absorbing her tiny, intangible, perfect monsterness he decided, for some reason, that here was a thing he didnt want to smash. While she was still a baby, Cansrel took her away from her mother. A human monster had too many enemies, and he wanted her to grow up in a secluded place far from Kings City where she would be safe. He brought her to his own estate in the northern Dells, a holding he rarely inhabited. He left her with his dumbfounded steward, Donal, and a scattering of cooks and maids. Raise her, he said. The rest Fire remembered. Her neighbor Brocker took an interest in the orphan monster and saw to her education in history and writing and mathematics. When she showed interest in music, he found her a teacher. Archer became Fires playmate, eventually her trusted friend. Aliss died of a lingering sickness that had set in after Archers birth. Fire learned from the reports Brocker received that Jessa had died as well. Cansrel visited often. His visits were confusing, because they reminded her that she had two fathers, two who never entered each others presence if they could help it, never conversed beyond what civility demanded, and never agreed. One was quiet and gruff and plain in a chair with big wheels. Child, he would say to her gently, just as we respect you by guarding our minds from you and behaving decently to you, so must you respect your friends by never using your powers deliberately against us. Does that make sense to you? Do you understand? I dont want you to do a thing unless you understand it. Her other father was luminous and brilliant and, in those earlier years, happy almost all the time. He kissed her and swirled her around and carried her upstairs to bed, his body hot and electric, his hair like warm satin when she touched it. What has Brocker been teaching you? he would ask in a voice smooth as chocolate. Have you been practicing using the power of your mind against the servants? The neighbors? The horses and the dogs? Its right that you should do so, Fire. Its right and its your right, because youre my beautiful child, and beauty has rights that plainness never will. Fire knew which one of the two was her true father. He was the one she called Father instead of Brocker, and he was the one she loved the more desperately, because he was always either just arriving or just leaving, and because in their pockets of time together she stopped feeling like natures freak. The people who despised her or loved her to excess had precisely the same feelings for Cansrel, though their behavior toward him was different. The food her own cooks laughed at her for craving was the same food Cansrel craved, and when Cansrel was home, the cooks stopped laughing. Cansrel could sit with Fire and do something no one else could: give her lessons to improve the skill of her mind. They could communicate without saying a word, they could touch each other from opposite ends of the house. Fires true father was like her was, in fact, the only person in the world like her. He always asked the same question when he first arrived: My darling monster girl! Was anyone mean to you while I was gone? Mean? Children threw stones at her in the road. She was tripped sometimes, slapped, taunted. People who liked her hugged her, but they hugged her too hard and were too free with their hands. And still, Fire learned very young to answer no to his question to lie, and to guard her mind from him so he wouldnt know she was lying. This was the beginning of another of her confusions, that she would want his visits so much but fall immediately to lying once he came. When she was four she had a dog she had chosen from a litter born in Brockers stables. She chose him, and Brocker let her have him, because the dog had three functional legs and one that dragged, and would never be any use as a worker. He was inky gray and had bright eyes. Fire called him Twy, which was short for Twilight. Twy was a happy, slightly brainless fellow with no idea he was missing something other dogs had. He was excitable, he jumped around a lot, and had a tendency on occasion to nip his favorite people. And nothing worked him into a greater frenzy of excitement, anxiety, joy, and terror than the presence of Cansrel. One day in the garden Cansrel burst upon Fire and Twy unexpectedly. In confusion, Twy leapt against Fire and bit her more than nipped her, so hard that she cried out. Cansrel ran to her, dropped to his knees, and took her into his arms, letting her fingers bleed all over his shirt. Fire! Are you all right? She clung to him, because for just a moment Twy had scared

her. But then, as her own mind cleared, she saw and felt Twy throwing himself against a pitch of sharp stone, over and over. Stop, Father! Stop it! Cansrel pulled a knife from his belt and advanced on the dog. Fire shrieked and grabbed at him. Don't hurt him, Father, please! Can't you feel that he didn't mean it? She scrabbled at Cansrel's mind but he was too strong for her. Hanging on to his trousers, punching him with her small fists, she burst into tears. At that Cansrel stopped, shoved his knife back into his belt, and stood there, hands on hips, seething. Twy limped away, whimpering, his tail between his legs. And then Cansrel seemed to change, dropping down to Fire again, hugging her and kissing her and murmuring until she stopped crying. He cleaned her fingers and bandaged them. He sat her down for a lesson on the control of animal minds. When finally he let her go she ran to find Twy, who had made his way to her room and was huddled, bewildered and ashamed, in a corner. She took him into her lap. She practiced soothing his mind, so that next time she'd be able to protect him. The following morning she woke to silence, rather than the usual sound of Twy stumping around outside her door. All day long she looked for him on her own grounds and Brockers, but she couldn't find him. He'd disappeared. Cansrel said, with smooth sympathy, I suppose he's run away. Dogs do that, you know. Poor darling. And so Fire learned to lie to her father when he asked if anyone had hurt her. As the years passed Cansrel's visits became less frequent but lasted longer, for the roads were unsafe. Sometimes, appearing at her door after months away, he brought women with him, or the traders who dealt his animals and drugs, or new monsters for his cages. Sometimes he spent his entire visit strung out on the poison of some plant; or, completely sober, he had strange, arbitrary, gloomy fits of temper, which he took out on everyone but Fire. Other times he was as lucid and lovely as the high notes Fire played on her flute. She dreaded his arrivals, his brassy, gorgeous, dissolute invasions of her quiet life. And after every one of his departures she was so lonesome that music was the only thing to comfort her, and she threw herself headlong into her lessons, never even minding the moments when her teacher was hateful, or resentful of her growing skill. Bocker never spared her the truth about Cansrel. I don't want to believe you, she'd think to him after he'd told her another tale of something Cansrel had done. But I know it's true, because Cansrel himself tells me the stories, and he is never ashamed. He means them as lessons to guide my own behavior. It worries him that I don't use my power as a weapon. Does he not understand how different you are from him? Bocker would ask. Does he not see that you're built from a different mold entirely? Fire couldn't describe the loneliness she felt when Bocker talked that way. How she wished at times that her quiet, plain, and good neighbor had been her true father. She wished to be like Bocker, built from his mold. But she knew what she was and what she was capable of. Even after she'd done away with mirrors, she saw it in other people's eyes, and she knew how easy it would be to make her own miserable life just a little bit more pleasant, the way Cansrel did all the time. She never told anyone, even Archer, how much the temptation of it shamed her. When she was thirteen the drugs killed Nax, and a twenty-three-year-old Nash became king of a kingdom in shambles. Cansrel's fits of fury became even more frequent. So did his periods of melancholy. When she was fifteen Cansrel opened the door of the cage that held back his midnight blue leopard monster, and departed from Fire for the last time. *Revue de presse* Praise for *Fire* A New York Times bestseller YALSA, Best Fiction for Young Adults Amelia Elizabeth Walden Book Award Winner A Washington Post Best Book of the Year An Best Book of the Year A Kirkus's Best Book of the Year A Booklist Best Book of the Year A School Library Journal Best Book of the Year A Publishers Weekly Best Book of the Year "Cashore is wonderful, tough and nuanced everything you could want from a writer." Junot Diaz, author of *The Brief Wonderful Life of Oscar Wao* "There aren't enough words to describe how awesome this book is." Top Pick, *Romantic Times*, starred review "Piercing and elegant." *The Horn Book*, starred review "Fresh, hopeful, tragic and glorious." Kirkus's, starred review "Shot through with romance and suspense. . . This is Fire's story, and readers will fall in love with her. . . Marvelous." *SLJ*, starred review "Absorbing." *Publishers Weekly*, starred review "Elegantly written. . . blazes with the questions of young adulthood. . . Compelling." *Washington Post* "Breathtaking. . . Cashore is that rare gifted writer who can give a fantasy novel real depth." *Los Angeles Times* "As a fantasy writer, Cashore sets herself apart with a passionate descriptive style." *New York Times Book* "Readers can enjoy this novel without having read *Graceling*. And enjoy it they will, with its vivid characters, convincing fantasy elements, gripping adventure scenes, and memorable love story." *Booklist*, starred review