

PRELUDE



If you're reading this book, I must be dead.

If I'm not, I will be soon, because this story exposes what the Force ordered me to cover up. It's the truth about Maelin Vandros, a girl who graduated from Belladonna Guardian Academy beside me and died four years later.

I wrote a beautiful lie about her, and I fear that if I don't write the ugly truth to counter it, I'll lose my sense of what actually happened. So despite the risk, and the knowledge that my words may never see the light of day, I bring my pen to the page for my own clarity, and to pay tribute to a noble soul taken too young.

My name is Blimmery Owding, and I dug Maelin's grave.

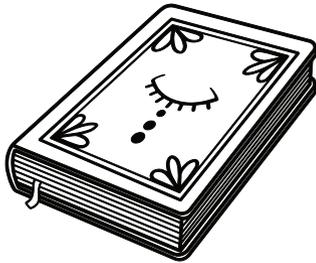
The boy woke within the confines of four towering stone walls, instinctively rising to his feet. There was no ceiling, nor a sky. Just a hole into oblivion. Even his own name was a mystery. All he knew was that he was no longer *home*—whatever that meant.

THE WALLWALKER

BLIMMERY OWNING

PART 1

IGNORANCE



CHAPTER 1

TRAINEES



The boy scraped his fingers along the cold stone walls, cursing them for sealing away a world just beyond reach.

♪ NERVOUS - OLIVER RIOT ♪

Two months into the program at Belladonna Guardian Academy, a field class exercise sent us into the woods to extract willow bark, a medicinal pain reliever. While I scanned the trees for slender trunks and drooping branches—hallmarks of willows—a flapping noise caught my attention.

In the distance, Maelin pinned a crow to the dirt as it tried to fly away.

“Please, stay with me...”

Taig knelt, casting a shadow across Maelin’s face. “If an animal’s dying, it’s meant to die, Mae. Circle of life. Leave it be.”

I frowned at his curt tone, creeping closer. Since our first day of training, Taig had clung to Maelin like moss to a log, and her laughter always coaxed out his smiles. *I thought their harmony unshakable.*

As I neared, a gust of wind plucked flowers from their stems, tangling blossoms into Maelin's hair. It was like nature itself was saying, *Take these pretty pink petals, Mae. They belong to you.*

The crow didn't seem to think she deserved them. It squawked and flickered its wings, splattering blood across the white sleeves of her button-down.

I halted, gagging at the sight of a gash in the bird's chest.

Taig's voice was deeper now. "It lost too much blood."

After a moment of thought, Maelin sighed. "You're right."

My eyes widened as she snatched a rock and raised it over the crow's head.

"Wait!" I shouted, stomping forward.

Her hand paused mid-air, and she looked over at me with a tight-lipped grin.

"Turn around, Blim Blim," Taig said, a hint of humor in his tone. "City brats can't handle pain."

Ignoring him, I held my gaze on Maelin.

"I promise, Blimmery, I tried to save it, but I was too late." Her grip on the rock tightened. "Now it can only suffer to the end, so isn't it kinder to let it go?"

The crow went quiet, its beak opening and closing as it struggled to breathe, either due to Maelin's suffocating grip or its leaking wound. I wasn't sure.

But she's right. It's suffering.

I nodded and flinched as Maelin swung the rock down.

It turned out that Taig was right too. A City boy like me couldn't handle pain.



If there was one person we *knew* would make the final five, it was Taig Bitterview. The sixteen-year-old was designed to become a guardian in the Force. With the build, the brains, and the smile as intimidating as it was captivating, everyone wanted a piece of Taig. Everyone wanted to *be* Taig. It was always Taig, Taig, Taig.

So naturally, I couldn't stand him.

I can't say he didn't intrigue me though, especially after Maelin killed that crow. *Why is a predictable boy like him best friends with a fiery girl like her?* Their dynamic was a jigsaw puzzle I felt called to finish. The closest thing I had to a best friend was Cove Starfall, but she was no longer with me.

It was Taig's mysterious bond to Maelin that significantly limited my interactions with her at the Academy. In fact, I only spoke one-on-one with her four times during our eighteen months in the program, the first taking place about a month after the willow bark extraction exercise.

Six minutes until class, I noted, eyeing a clock on the vine-covered wall. The Medical lab, located on the highest Academy floor, resembled a conservatory more than a room of instruction. Being alone under its dome-shaped glass ceiling, surrounded by plants overflowing their pots, always put me in a writing mood.

I plopped my notebook onto a standing lab table. *The Wallwalker* was a fantasy novel about a boy who could—you guessed it—walk through walls. If my family name weren't soiled, perhaps I would have been able to publish it someday.

Quite foolish of me. I plucked a pen from my book bag. Any distraction from the program would threaten my chance of making the final five. To win would not only earn me a respectable job as one of a hundred guardians in the Vakoi Empire's Force but would also

clean the mess Uncle Meridian had made. *I should be grateful and focused.*

I was one of twenty promising fifteen- and sixteen-year-olds offered a trainee contract, and among us, only the best would graduate, the losers weeded out through intellectual, physical, and emotional testing. One trainee fainted nineteen times before filtering himself, begging to go home while a pack of boys laughed in his face. Soon after, the only other girl besides Maelin sabotaged her own Research exam, seeking a less humiliating escape. Our number dropped to fourteen in just three months.

But even with the boarding school demanding my absolute dedication, I couldn't stop squeezing words into the brief moments I had to breathe. Creating a world where I controlled everything kept me sane in a world where I had little control over anything at all.

The door creaked open, stealing my eyes from the page. It was the first time I saw Maelin enter a room without Taig.

She scowled as she hurried down the aisle. "Wondering where Taig is?"

I hesitated. "Not really."

Maelin crouched by a potted belladonna plant growing in the shade of a chamomile bush. "Apparently, he thinks I raise too many questions during Research class." She scoffed. "As if the Empire forbids *learning!*"

I tensed up when she lifted the pot, half-expecting her to chuck it across the lab.

But instead, Maelin exhaled, and her voice softened. "You're not getting enough sun, are you?" She spoke to the plant with genuine concern, like she'd spoken to the injured crow.

My shoulders loosened. I started to wonder if she was kinder than I thought. Hell, I started to wonder if she was kinder than me. *Because if I had been the one to find that crow, I would have let it bleed out and die.*

“There.” She placed the pot in a beam of light. “Much better, don’t you think?”

I closed my notebook. She heard the pages clap and looked back at me, her sharp eyes pressing for words.

“Umm...” I panicked and said the first thing that came to mind. “You know that belladonna won’t talk back, right?”

“How would *you* know?” Maelin stood and dusted her pants. “Belladonna’s really quiet, and you’re not a good listener.”

My lips twitched, suppressing a smile. *How could Taig’s sidekick have a sense of humor?*

“Well, I might not talk to you much, but I do listen. I actually consider words my strong suit.”

“Of course you do, Blimmery. But you’re a writer, and writers are notoriously bad listeners, despite what they claim.”

“If you’re so confident in your listening skills,” I countered, strolling toward her, “why don’t you tell me what your dear friend is saying?”

Maelin leaned over, squinting at the plant’s dark purple berries. Even when I stopped beside her, and the door welcomed a few chattering trainees into the room, she held her concentration.

“Hey!” Maelin snapped, making me flinch. “I know Blimmery can’t hear you, but that’s just cruel!”

A chuckle escaped me. “What did it say?”

“I’d rather not repeat it.”

“Why?”

“It’s foul.”

“Damn.” I knelt and flicked a belladonna leaf. “Quite a feisty little thing.”

Another voice cut into our conversation. “Not everything’s a joke, Blim Blim.”

My smile vanished. Taig was the only person who called me that. *Blim* sounded like a word to describe the slimy bits of a rotting fruit.

“If you’re so interested in plants, why don’t you become an Imperial gardener back home? You could tend to the Prince’s tulips.”

“Taig...” Maelin warned.

I stood, facing him with a forced grin. “Relax, Bitterview.”

“Your uniform buys nothing.” Taig poked a four-petaled flower button on my vest like it was stupid—like his uniform wasn’t identical to mine. “City folk don’t need your community infrastructure bonus. Their buildings reach the clouds already.”

“That’s an exaggeration,” I muttered.

“And I doubt, even more, that your family pension goes appreciated. What is it to them? Coins on the gold bar? An extra ticket to the art gallery?”

“You’re asking *me*?” I faked a confused look. “I just play my violin while the butler cooks me supper. What do I know about money and government?”

Taig leaned in. “No one needs you here.”

“If anyone’s unneeded here, it’s you.”

“You’re wrong. *I* need me here because unlike you, I don’t have a ritzy family to console me if I lose.”

I lost myself in his eyes, my mind racing with memories of my parents flipping through bills they could no longer afford, classmates

questioning me about my uncle's execution, and my little brother crying over bullies calling him *Mini Meridian*.

"You know nothing about my family," I said, raising my voice. "If I lose, they won't console me. They need this win."

Taig paused, his eyes widening. "You're here because of the boycott."

I pursed my lips. He was right, *again*. If Uncle Meridian hadn't written that treasonous book, I wouldn't have signed the trainee contract. I'd be at home instead, agonizing over my failed writing projects, rebuking my brother's gripes about trivial matters, and rolling my eyes at my parents' disapproving remarks. I'd be dealing with problems better than Taig.

"You're only here for show!" he exclaimed, taking my silence as confirmation.

"So what if he is?" Maelin asked. "He was selected for the program all the same."

Taig faced Maelin, and his crumbling smile raised my brows. The pair spent so much time together that if one of them were to jump off a cliff, the other would've followed suit. *But I'm learning they agree on less than it seems.*

I patted Taig's shoulder. "Well, I guess I'll leave you and your lovebird—I mean, *birdlover*—alone."

Maelin laughed when he shook my hand off, his face reddening.

"Oh, and Maelin," I added. "You should move the belladonna back. It won't grow as many berries in direct sunlight."

"Okay, *Doctor*," she teased.

Taig yelled at me as I walked away. "Can't wait to see you hop, Blim!"



The hop. Oh, how I dreaded the hop...

Commander Blank had informed us that in two weeks, we'd have to jump over a bar to keep our spots in the program. Thanks to the advanced notice, I could hardly work on *The Wallwalker*. Almost every time I'd open my notebook, a nagging voice in the back of my head would say, *You shouldn't write, Blimmery. Put the pen down and hop, hop, hop.*

"Level one!" announced my roommate, Wick Saratoga. He arranged our pillows on the forest floor, then pointed to a tree branch. "Jump over that, and land on this little cloud here. Easy pie!"

Wick had offered to help me train in exchange for studying assistance after overhearing me recite a scene from my notebook one night. According to him, I could read faster out loud than he could read mentally. "*Not everyone comes from a lineage of authors like you, Blimmery.*"

Following Wick's instructions, I sprinted into a jump and spun so my back faced the branch.

"Too low!" Wick shouted.

The branch caught my vest, halting me and breaking under my weight. It struck the ground before I pummeled and slammed onto it, missing the pillows.

"Agh! It hurts!" I cried out, rolling off the branch and clutching different parts of my back. "I broke something! I broke—"

Wick burst into laughter. "Aww, do you need your diaper changed?"

"Help me," I croaked, struggling to push myself up.

“Boys!” Professor Dealio’s roaring voice rustled leaves in the woods, his black boots snapping twigs with every step toward us. “What the hell are you doing?”

Wick stood tall and cleared his throat, cutting his laughter off. “We’re training for the hop, Professor.”

Despite my aching back, I scrambled to my feet.

“You call this *training*? Disrespecting Imperial property?” He grabbed the branch I’d broken and whacked my shoulder with it.

I shut my eyes with a wince. “Sorry, Professor.”

“Was this Saratoga’s idea, or yours?”

I slowly opened my eyes, and the middle-aged guardian tossed the branch aside, his face red, his gaze unblinking.

“Mine,” I lied.

He gritted his teeth, unsheathing one of his back-strapped swords.

Before I could think to run, Wick shoved me off my feet, and I hit the ground screaming. The edge of a log scraped my arm, drawing blood, as Wick shielded his face from the oncoming strike.

I shot up into a seated position. “No!”

As the plea left my mouth, Professor Dealio pivoted, striking our pillows instead of Wick. His belladonna-laced blade sent a cloud of dove feathers into the air, turning my vision white.

“No supper this week for either of you!”



Ten days later, I gazed up at the raised bar in the training room. It was higher than Wick had prepared me for. Impossibly high. And according to Commander Blank, we would have one chance to scale it, a hop that could make or break our entire futures.

Kanter stepped forward. "I'll go first."

Despite being antisocial, Kanter sure wasn't afraid of taking initiative. He had been the first volunteer to drink belladonna-laced beet juice, the first to race Taig for a Defense exercise, and the first to poison a rabbit with serum in the lab.

"He's going home today," whispered Wick.

I nodded. Kanter Lorain was the anti-Taig, the boy who *wouldn't* make the final five. Because no matter how much initiative he had, he was still scrawny, which made him look weak, and reserved, which made him look vapid. He resembled the trainees who slipped a little more each day until they snapped under the pressure and went home in shame.

But I hoped he would prove us wrong. It would make for a good story.

The lone wolf, I mentally narrated as Kanter positioned himself a fair distance from the bar. *With everyone betting against him, he wins with nothing but the fire of his spirit!*

Trainees gasped as Kanter shot off into a leap. He soared over the bar with an elegant spin, and his shaggy hair rippled upon his descent.

I smiled when he plopped onto the bean bag.

"Maybe tomorrow," Wick said.

Next up was Taig, who glared at the bar while he stretched his hamstrings.

Maelin shoved her way to the front of the spectators, folding her hands together.

Why is she worried? Taig had passed every filtration effortlessly so far. *He's incapable of failure.*

Proving my point, Taig ran into a jump, scaling the bar with more room to spare than Kanter. His vest and button-down flew up for a second, allowing me a glimpse of a burn on his abdomen.

With a satisfying *plunk*, he landed on the beanbag. A few trainees cheered for him. Others scoffed because they *weren't* him.

Taig smirked as he pushed himself to his feet.

“Extraordinary,” Commander Blank said.

Wick nudged my arm. “I bet you can do better.” He spoke so loudly that eyes turned my way.

I shook my head, half to argue against his claim and half as a request for him to *shut it*.

Wick didn't get the latter message. “Oh, you can, you can! I know it!” He cupped his palms around his mouth and chanted, “Blimmery! Blimmery!”

A couple of boys joined in, so I had no choice but to smile and hide my desire to kill them.

Taig was rejoining the spectators when we crossed paths. He stopped me with a pat on my shoulder. “Time to hop, Blim.”

My head spun as I readied my position. *Don't let his comment get to you*, I ordered myself, which backfired, because now I was thinking about Taig's comment more. Now it was looping in my head, over and over. *Time to hop, Blim. Time to hop.*

After a few deep breaths, I managed to clear my head.

“You've had enough time, Blimmery,” Commander Blank warned.

I inhaled a deep breath and dashed forward, channeling my weight to my legs before launching into the air. The momentum wicked the sweat from my skin while I traveled high and far over the bar. So far I completely passed the beanbag.

I screeched, my ankle twisting as I crashed and rolled onto the black floor. A numbness prickled from my foot into my calf, leaving me grimacing to fend off tears.

“He should see Doctor Rem,” Commander Blank decided.

“I can take him,” offered Kanter.

“I’m already doing it,” objected Wick. I couldn’t help but cry out as he pulled me onto my good foot.

Commander Blank crossed his arms. “Hurry back.”

“You think I’m that much of a cheat, huh, Commander?” Wick exchanged a smile with the guardian as he dragged me toward the exit. “Faster, Blimmery! Faster!”

I flinched with every step, and Maelin gulped as we passed her.

“Slow down,” I whispered, my face warming up.

“Wow, you’re really in pain, huh?” Wick clearly knew it but didn’t seem to care. He laughed our entire way up the spiral staircase, recapping the hop from his perspective. “...And then you just *flew*, Blimmery! I bet you were up there for ten seconds or something. How’d you do it? Did you put springs in your boots? I mean, that wasn’t even human.”

Doctor Rem wrapped my ankle in the infirmary, a simple, cozy room across from the lab. Wick told him what happened three or four times, and the guardian never failed to burst into laughter during each retelling.

Behind my smile, my blood boiled. While their teasing wasn’t a big deal, the pain in my ankle made me an oversensitive baby about it. *Just because I like to joke around doesn’t mean I like being the joke.*

“You still have to hop,” I reminded Wick, and he laughed even louder.

“Alright, I get it. I’ve annoyed you enough.” Wick swiped an extra pillow from my infirmary bed and pouted at Doctor Rem. “Mind if I steal this?”

“Wick...” Doctor Rem warned.

He returned the pillow with a sigh and headed for the door.

“Wait,” I called weakly.

Wick stopped to look back at me, brows raised.

“Give me a smile, Wick.” I faked a sickly cough. “I want my last memory of you to be a happy one.”

He shook his head, grinning. “Oh, shut it, Blimmery! I’m not getting filtered. Just you watch. In about ten minutes, I’ll be up here with a broken leg, not a measly twisted ankle. Because I’ll hop *that* high.”

“Wick?” Doctor Rem said.

“Yeah?”

“Quit stalling.”

“Fine...”

Doctor Rem waited until Wick shut the door before meeting my gaze. “Cheer up, kid. You jumped higher than Taig.”

I smiled back, my ankle throbbing a bit less.

“You’ll be as good as new in a couple of weeks, and we don’t have any physical filtrations planned in the meantime, so you have nothing to worry about.”

“No *physical* filtrations? Do elaborate.”

“Nice try.” Doctor Rem placed the bandage roll on my nightstand, preparing to leave. My aching body urged me to ask a question I had been wondering for weeks.

“Doctor?” My smile faded. “Does it hurt?”

He trailed his fingers along the branding on his forehead—a four-petaled flower, the same Academy emblem embroidered into our trainee uniforms. Every guardian had a permanent mark.

“Not anymore, Blimmery. Just at first.” Doctor Rem patted my arm, and made his exit.

With no one to chat with and nothing to do, the pain consumed me. My only escape was through a nap, so I closed my eyes, hoping to drift off.

It was pointless. Sleep had never come easily to me.

I opened my eyes at the sound of a creaking door, expecting Wick—but it was Maelin who entered, mug in hand.

Why would she visit me? I rubbed my eyes, expecting Maelin to morph into Wick. *Was there serum in our juice today?* Hallucinations were a side effect of the belladonna doses mixed into our lunch juice, a measure ensuring that by graduation, the final five would be fully tolerant to the toxins lacing their tools.

“Surprised?” Maelin kicked the door shut behind her. “You thought I failed the hop, didn’t you?”

It’s really her.

I winced, shuffling into a seated position. “That’s not it.”

“I know. And don’t worry—Wick passed too. We’re down to twelve now.” She walked over and offered the mug. “It’s my own blend of willow bark, chamomile, and mint. Should help with the pain.”

“I’m not in pain. That was nothing.”

She laughed as I took the tea.

“Thanks,” I added, raising the mug to my lips. The earthy bitterness of willow bark melded curiously with the floral chamomile and cooling mint.

Maelin pulled a chair to my bedside and took a seat. “I’m really sorry about Taig.”

I chuckled, and a bit of tea dripped from my mouth into the mug. “What?”

“I know he’s rude to you. He’s not a fan of...you know...”

“No, actually. I *don’t* know. Care to enlighten me?” I leaned toward her, eyes wide.

“He hates City folk.”

“I don’t blame him. I’m a spoiled, entitled City boy. I write fiction while people are starving on the streets. What’s there not to hate?”

Maelin rolled her eyes, and a pang of guilt scared my smile away. Her effort to have a serious conversation was lost because of me. *Read the room, Blimmery.*

“He’s too much though,” she continued. “I mean, yes, Taig and I had a very different upbringing than yours, but—”

“Frontal Orphanage, right? I heard they beat the children there.” I regretted the statement instantly.

“They didn’t beat us.”

“Sorry, I—”

“It’s the children who beat each other.”

I couldn’t suppress my grin. “Really?”

“Why do you think Taig is so tough?”

With an amused nod, I took another sip. Then I remembered I had spit into the mug—which almost made me spit again—but I restrained myself and drank my own spit-tea like the rebel I was.

“I’m just here to make peace, Blimmery.” Maelin leaned back in her chair. “Taig doesn’t hate you. He just hates your history.”

“Right. I don’t hate mushrooms. I just hate how they taste.”

She frowned at me, and I broke a grin.

“I appreciate your peace treaty, but relax. Taig is Taig.” I shrugged.
“I can handle him.”

“But if he hadn’t pestered you about the hop, you wouldn’t have jumped that high and hurt your ankle.”

“No. I still would’ve jumped that high.”

Maelin smiled. “Oh really?”

“Oh, definitely. Taig doesn’t deserve any credit. That was all me.”

We talked a bit longer, and I remember feeling that she left me too soon.