

Danny Arrows

Danny Arrows

By : **SleepU2**

Danny Arrows is an Apprentice living in the Capital Rings of Royal City where he has trained for 12 years to one day become an Elitist. Elena Carey is a native of the Northern Territory where she has lived a quiet rural life with her twin brother and younger sister. Danny and Elena live separate lives in a world where the Gifted are required to use their special abilities to serve the Royal Family. When they are both summoned to stand before the Counsel, they dive headfirst into a reality that neither of them were expecting.

Published on
Booksie

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The Letters

Prologue

The Letters

The letter had come only 3 days ago and already Elena was worried she might forget how life had been before that day. The days of working in the fields with her brother and the evenings of reading stories and reciting poems with her sister would be etched in her memory forever. Her mother's artwork still hung on the walls in their house, her last piece laying unfinished on the easel in the front room, never to be completed. Her father's boots still stood by the front door awaiting their next trek through the fields the second he returned home. The house had been emptier with her parents' absence over the last year, but she and her siblings had managed. She'd never forget the little life they had in the Northern Territory, but she found it surprising how distant that life felt now as she rode the noisy train headed south. Three days might as well be three decades.

Even now, cramped in the too-small train seat with her little sister's nose pressed against the glass to her left and her twin brother snoozing in the seat opposite her, the letter sat folded in her jacket pocket. She didn't need to look at it anymore to remember what it said. She'd read it so many times on the day it arrived that she had it memorized in minutes. She'd thought that maybe if she kept reading it again and again, eventually it'd have a different message. It never did.

Elena Carey,

You are to report to the Royal City to stand before the Counsel as a candidate for admission as a Royal Healer. Congratulations for this renowned honor to serve the Royal Family. You have four days to comply. Should you choose to ignore this request, the consequences shall be decided upon by the Counsel.

It hadn't been signed by anyone, but she knew where it had come from. She'd spent most of her life hiding from the Talent Seekers that scoured the earth looking for the gifted. It was difficult to keep a gift like hers hidden from the world, especially when she knew how much good she could do if she'd been allowed to use it openly. Healing capabilities were extremely rare, and even those that possessed the ability were usually limited to minor injuries. Elena had always known her extraordinary capacity to heal the sick and wounded was unique. In her short 16 years of life she hadn't met an illness too severe nor a wound too deep.

It'd been so much easier to hide her talent when her parents were still around. Her mother played the part of the local nurse, and the sick and injured came to her seeking relief. They never suspected it was actually her young daughter's amazing abilities that alleviated their pain, not the placebo medicines. She had once overheard her father warning her mother that the seekers would eventually find her, it was only a matter of time. And sadly, he was right.

â It smells funny here.â

Elena looked over to her little sister. Sabella was raised up on her knees, her fingers gripping the window ledge and her small nose crinkled up in disgust.

â We must be getting close.â Her brother looked up from under the brim of his hat, his arms folded across his chest as he slouched down in his seat. Until now, Elena had been convinced he was sleeping, though she admitted that such a feat in the racket of the train ride would be near impossible. He hadn't said anything since their last stop over three hours ago. In fact, most of the trip had been accompanied by his

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silence since they left North City Station a day prior. He leaned across his seat to look out his own window with the same look of disgust as Sabella. "It smells like confinement and slavery."

Elena sighed, "Ellie, that doesn't even make sense." She took a deep breath, registering several different smells that were all new to her. "I'm sure it's just the smell of the city. Something we aren't used to."

Elliot closed the curtains over the two windows, "Whatever it is, it's strong."

Sabella sat back in her seat. "We've been to the city and it's never smelled like that."

"Sabella, Royal City is nothing like any of the cities back home," Elliot pointed out.

"How do you know?" Sabella argued. "You've never been there."

"I just know," Elliot glared in the direction of the closed curtains as he crossed his arms into their prior position firmly across his chest.

Sabella scowled at her older brother, "If you know, then tell me what it's like there."

"It's dark and dirty and full of people who are selfish and cruel," Elliot answered at once.

Sabella's mouth dropped open in shock.

Elena scowled at her brother's response before smiling down at her younger sister, "Bells, do you remember those books we used to read with mom? Remember the one about the traveling circus?"

The little girl nodded apprehensively, "You mean the King's Carnival?"

"That's right. The book was about a circus that traveled all over the world. And do you remember the part when they visited the king and queen?"

Sabella finally smiled at her older sister. "Of course! They put on a show for the king's birthday and everyone came to see. The entire city was there."

Elena nodded. "They had to go through a lot of trouble to go, remember? But once they finally reached the city, it was a magical place. There were lanterns lining the city streets and parks with huge fountains flowing with pink water. Musicians were everywhere playing all kinds of crazy instruments..."

"And food!" Sabella chimed in, excitedly. "There were restaurants with all different kinds of food that smelled so good!"

"You're right! They had food and drinks that the circus people had never seen before. The city was new and different, but it was beautiful. And that city..."

Sabella gasped with realization and shot back to the window, her little head disappearing under the curtain as she pressed her nose against the glass once more, "Elena, do you mean that's the city we're going to?" She peered as far as she could past the fast moving train before turning back to her older sister. "The city with the colorful buildings and the streets lined in lights?"

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Elena nodded and pulled Sabella's curtain open again. She looked over her sister's shoulder, past the window to the rushing scenery. Approaching their side of the train she could just make out the edge of a city glowing in the light of dusk. She pointed, "Yes Bells! That's where we are going!"

Elliot sighed and got up to leave, muttering something about the streets probably being lined in something other than lights.

His actions earned him a scowl from Sabella before she stuck out her tongue at him. "See Ellie? It's not dark and dirty. You don't know what you're talking about."

He waved her off as he disappeared down the jolting train car, struggling to keep his balance as it hit a particularly big bump.

Sabella turned back to her window for a few moments. "Wow, it's sure pretty. And we get to live there?" she asked quietly, facing her sister once more.

Elena nodded, trying to hide the disappointment she felt at the thought of living in Royal City. Sabella didn't know about the letter. She didn't know that the three of them were on their way to this new city because if they didn't, Elena would most likely be arrested and imprisoned for crimes against the Royal Family. At least, that's what Elliot had said happened to the other gifted that didn't comply with the Counsel. It was important not to let Sabella see this disappointment and Elena struggled to smile convincingly. "Yes Bells. We get to live there."

She knew the next words out of Sabella's mouth would be to ask if Elena had brought along the book about the traveling circus, the king and queen, and their magical city. She pulled it out of the pack under her seat, hitting her head against the empty seat across from her. Two days on this cramped train had been enough and for the first time in three days, she found herself anxious to reach their destination. Her fingers lightly traced the golden letters as she remembered the many nights their mother had read them the story. Finally, she handed the book to Sabella, who opened it eagerly and sat with it sprawled across her tiny lap.

"I'm going to go see where Ellie went, ok?" Elena smoothed the hair over her sister's head, sure that her words were most likely falling on deaf ears. Sabella nodded faintly as she flipped through the colorful pictures, her eyes betraying that her mind was lost in a fairytale world far away from the loud bumpy train. Satisfied that Sabella was content for the next several minutes, Elena set off in the direction Elliot had gone only minutes prior.

She had dreaded telling her brother about the letter from the second she had received it. She'd known his reaction before he even knew about the letter's existence. Elliot had always had a less-than-favorable opinion of Royal City and its inhabitants, including the Royal Family. However, it wasn't until after their mother's death that his opinion turned into what she considered irrational hatred. She was convinced that he blamed their mother's death on the Royalists—the inhabitants of Royal City. Her father had shared in that hatred and after he was arrested and charged with crimes against the Royal Family, it became impossible to convince Elliot otherwise.

The circumstances surrounding their mother's death were vague at best and Elena doubted the Royalists were involved at all. Their mother was no one of any political importance, she held no principal title or stature. There was no way her mother's death was connected to anyone or anything in a city so far from home.

Elena realized Elliot's blame for what it was: a reason. Death of a loved one is a terrible experience, and its grief and emptiness is only heightened when it is senseless. In Elliot's mind, if their mother died with cause, it was easier to accept than her death having no reason. At least, this was Elena's theory.

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Sometimes, she was convinced she knew her brother better than herself. Not surprising. He was her twin after all and they shared so much more than just a birthday. Which is how she knew exactly where to find him on the train.

She headed for the rear car, already knowing what she'd find. Elliot, standing on the rear platform, leaning over the railing and watching the rail ties wiz by with a sour scowl on his face. She pulled open the rear door, and there he was, just as she knew he would be. His hat was folded and tucked in his back pocket, letting the wind rustle through his hair. It was the same chestnut color as her own. She leaned over the railing next to him. It had been a very long train ride to this point and she was content to watch the passing scenery in silence.

The setting sun had turned the landscape and the few buildings that darted by to a soft purple and blue. Dusk had always been Elena's favorite time of day. At home, it signaled the end of a long day working in the fields, when she was free to do whatever she wanted. A year ago that had been helping her mother finish dinner while Elliot and her father fed the animals. Most recently it had been starting dinner on her own while Elliot tried to help Sabella with her homework.

After several long minutes, Elliot broke the silence. "Do you remember that train ride we took with mom and dad?"

It was a fond memory. "Of course I remember it. We were going to the White Mountains to go sledding for our birthday. We begged them for weeks to take us."

He nodded. "We must have been about Sabella's age."

"You're right. I think it was our 8th birthday." She remembered the trip vividly. In her mind's eye her 8 year old self sat on the seat next to her father, admiring the mountain peaks that beckoned from the distance and envisioning herself gliding gracefully over their peaks. Their mother had been pregnant with Sabella at the time, so she hadn't spent much time on a sled during that particular trip. Elena, Elliot, and their father had spent two blissful days soaring over the mountain while the four of them sat around the fire at night drinking hot cocoa and laughing at their father's stories and antics. She couldn't remember a time in her life when she felt more happy and safe in the world.

Elliot stirred beside her, waking her from her reveries. "I never thought then that our next train ride would be headed for Royal City." He sighed heavily and hung his head. "Or that Mom would be dead and Dad would be in jail."

"It is hard to believe." Elena said softly. Several more minutes passed in silence before she turned to her brother. "I know you aren't happy about this."

Elliot remained silent, his gaze affixed on a distant hillside, one of the last remaining in sight as they approached the outer limits of the city. The train was slowing and Elena could almost count how many streets and buildings they were passing. Her heart sank when she realized how much she would miss the countryside.

"I'm not thrilled about it either, but there's nothing either one of us can do to change it. I tried to get you and Bells to stay home..."

"You know I would never let you go by yourself. It's way too dangerous," he interrupted. "I only wish we didn't have to get Sabella wrapped up in this."

"Ellie..."

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Elliot shot her a warning look, "You know I hate it when you call me that."

Elena rolled her eyes and continued, "Elliot, I know you're concerned, but this could be a new start for us. Things have been really hard since Dad was arrested, and I really think that we could make things work in Royal City."

Truthfully, Elena would have been quite content to stay at home in the Northern Territory. She liked it there where life was simple.

"And your business with the Counsel?" Elliot asked. "Are you going to make that work, too? Elena, you know they don't want you to just heal one person and send you home. Once they see what you can do, you'll be their's forever."

"I know," Elena conceded. "But maybe working with the Counsel won't be so bad."

Elliot shook his head, the scowl returning to his face immediately. "Working with the Counsel? I think you mean working for the Counsel."

"Ellie," Elena touched her brother's arm. He turned away, shaking his head.

"You don't get it, Elena," he said. "I should have never let them find you. I should have done a better job hiding you, like dad did."

"It's not your fault," she argued. "The seekers would have found me no matter what we did."

Elliot's expression was clear that he didn't agree with his sister, but he didn't argue. "I know you think I'm crazy, but I don't trust these people. I don't think any good will come of this. At all. I'll have no way to protect you if and when something bad happens."

Elena nodded, "I understand, but I really need your support on this. You and I both know that I don't have a choice in the matter. It was either come here, or go to jail."

The train's brakes began to squeal as they approached what Elena assumed was the station. The engine whistled loudly to signal their arrival and she could imagine people in the other cars getting their bags ready to depart. Sabella would be wondering where they were. She looked once more to her brother. "Please Elliot, can you at least try to make it work here?"

He let out a slow breath and finally met her eyes. "Ok."

The train stopped and the door behind them opened automatically. To the side Elena could see a huge sign hanging over the station platform. In big red letters lined in gold it read: Royal City Station.

Elena turned back to her twin, holding out her arm. "Promise?"

Elliot paused before slowly grabbing her elbow. In return, she grabbed his elbow in a gesture they had used for as long as she could remember. To them, it was the ultimate commitment. "Promise."

Danny sat on his bunk, his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands. Clutched in his right fist, a red envelope with his name scrawled across it in black lettering.

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He knew that he should be excited. He should feel honored and relieved that the letter had finally come. He'd seen dozens of other Apprentices' reactions when getting their letters. Most of them had boasted proudly about it, eager to show it off at every opportunity. Some of them had been quiet and reserved, but there was never any doubt to their satisfaction at being chosen.

Danny didn't feel any of this. He didn't feel pride or honor. He was mostly confused and unsure. It was still 2 years until his 18th birthday. Surely the Counsel must be mistaken.

Immediately, his mind triggered. No, of course they were not mistaken. "The Counsel does not make mistakes, they do not falter, and they never fail. I trust the Counsel and their decision."

He took a deep breath and looked one last time at the still-sealed envelope before sliding it into his back pocket. He just couldn't bring himself to open it yet. Today was Sunday, which meant that he would be visiting his uncle following afternoon training with Master Doran. He would open it then, convincing himself the news would be more exciting in the presence of the only family he had.

"You will be late to sparring."

He looked up to see Aari standing in his doorway looking at him expectantly. Had she seen the envelope? She would know just as he did what the red envelope meant.

"Well?" She rolled her eyes and in a flash she was at his side, pulling him off the bunk and towards the door. He'd known Aari for seven years, since she had become an Apprentice at age five, and her ability to mimic his super speed still left him a little unnerved when she used it outside the sparring rings. "Master Zane will not like if you are late."

"I'm not late." He pulled his arm free and followed his young friend out the door. She hadn't seen the envelope after all. At least not yet. Aari always had a way of getting the truth out of Danny, and the minute she found out he was hiding something he'd be done for.

"We should hurry."

He looked at his wrist watch. Aari was right, they were due in formation in the gym in less than a minute.

"You're right. Let's go."

He inhaled deeply and in an instant the dormitory hallway blurred out of existence. He could feel Aari racing along beside him as she used her ability to mimic his super speed. After just a few seconds they had traveled the half mile to the gym and he was slowing down his heart rate and coming to a stop.

They arrived at the sparring gym precisely at 1pm, just as he had every Sunday for as long as he could remember. He lined up with his fellow Apprentices along the east wall of the gym, where they awaited Master Zane's assignment for the day. To his left stood Loch, the 18 year old whose bunk room was across the hall from Danny's. Danny wondered if Loch had received a similar envelope this morning during lessons. He strained his eyes as far to the left as he could without breaking formation.

Loch had joined the Apprentices eight years ago as a gentle giant without much to say. At only ten years old he had already been nearly six feet tall and could easily throw a full grown man across a room. Danny had already been an Apprentice for four years when he arrived. Now he stood at six feet and eleven inches and could throw a full grown man over a quarter mile.

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They'd stood by each other during Master Zane's sparring lessons for eight years. Danny knew that Loch's arms were bent at exactly 90 degrees, his hands were perfectly perpendicular behind his back and his feet were exactly 18 inches apart. With his perfect proprioception, Loch had turned standing at attention into an exact science. He'd stood this way every afternoon for the last eight years. However, something was different about his neighbor this time. Loch was grinding his teeth and clenching and unclenching his jaw, an act that Danny had never seen him do before. It didn't necessarily mean that he had also gotten his letter from the Counsel, but it was a good sign.

â Apprentices, why are you here?â

At once and in perfect unison, twelve voices answered. â To train our bodies for battle, Master Zane.â

â Who do you battle?â

â We battle those that trespass against the Royal Family, Master Zane.â

â What is your goal?â

â To be an Elitist.â Danny faltered slightly, thinking of the unopened envelope in his pocket. He quickly looked to see if the master had noticed. He hadn't. Master Zane was at the far end of the line, his shrewd black eyes scanning the line of Apprentices while he made sparring assignments.

During his years as an Apprentice Danny had learned to use his abilities without much forethought or concentration. He'd come a long way from when he was younger and couldn't control when he went in and out of acceleration. He'd be walking to lessons when one second he'd be just outside his door and the next he'd be standing in the middle of the classroom with no memory of how he'd gotten there. He'd just thought, I need to go to lessons, and then he'd be there.

Many years later Master Doran had taught him to control his superhuman speed so that he could actually perform actions while moving at the speed of sound. This had demanded that he also refine his heightened senses to avoid crashing. Once he'd learned how to use weapons he'd become one of the most intimidating Apprentices in the group. He was skilled with many weapons, but the bow and arrow had quickly become his favorite. With his speed he could empty a quiver of arrows before the first one hit its target. He hadn't missed the irony that Danny Arrows was a master with arrows...

Danny made it through the two hours of sparring heavily relying on instinct. His mind was far from the gym. He was lucky to have been assigned to two of the weaker Apprentices, Grady and Blane. Even with Danny so distracted, Grady's invisibility and Blane's ability to breath life into inanimate objects were no contest to Danny's extraordinary speed and superhuman senses.

Once the two hours were up, Danny raced out of the gym to avoid questions from his fellow Apprentices. He was sure that he wasn't the only one with a red envelope, and he wasn't eager to discuss it with anyone.

He got through his private lessons with Master Doran in much the same way, depending on instinct and past experience. He had wondered if Master Doran knew about the letter, and if he'd say anything to Danny about it, however, he hadn't mentioned it. As soon as lessons were over, he raced towards his uncle's building in the next inner ring. In less than a minute he had arrived at his uncle's building and was walking down the long hallway to his uncle's rooms.

He had walked this hallway hundreds, maybe thousands, of times before. Every Sunday he had been an Apprentice, which was most of his life, he had used the only free hours he had all week to see his uncle. He

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could remember visits when he was just a child, eager to see a friendly face that wasn't shouting at him or pushing his tiny body to its limits. This particular day he needed that friendly face to reassure him that the Counsel's decision to have him test a full two years before his 18th birthday was a good one.

He raised his hand to knock on the door but before his knuckles could make contact it swung open to reveal a tall muscular man with grey eyes the same color as Danny's. Besides the bits of grey that had found their way into his dark hair, he looked exactly as he had the entire 16 years Danny had known him.

Danny jumped, startled. "Uncle Dagher! I hate it when you do that."

His uncle laughed and slapped Danny on the back, "That's why I do it. You should be used to it by now, kid." He pulled Danny inside and shut the door.

He was right, Danny should be used to Dagher's ability to see through walls and doors by reading the vibrations in the floor. It was, after all, Dagher that had helped coach Danny when he was younger on how to hone his senses. Had his mind not been a million miles away, he'd have probably remembered that. He might have even used his own senses and speed to avoid detection.

Uncle Dagher walked into the kitchen, gesturing behind him. "Come on, I've got tea on the stove and I know you need another butt-kicking in cards."

The apartment that the Counsel supplied for his uncle was small, but efficient. He'd soon be moved to one of the upper floors though, where the rest of the judges in the Royal Court lived. His promotion was only a few weeks away and half-packed boxes littered the apartment floor.

Danny didn't know much about Uncle Dagher's past, except that he had once been an Elitist and to Danny's knowledge, he was the only one to ever leave the group. After that he'd served the Counsel as a prosecutor in the Royal Court, bringing charges against those that committed crimes against the Royal Family. That is until recently, when he'd been promoted to Imperial Judge.

"Sit down, kid." Uncle Dagher gestured to a chair at the small kitchen table. Two empty cups and a deck of cards sat on the table, along with piles of papers that Danny assumed were related to a court case. "Sorry about the mess. You wouldn't believe how busy we've been at the court house. This promotion couldn't have come at a worse time. I barely have time to wrap up the cases I'm working on, much less pack and make preparations for the new job."

Danny did as he was told while his uncle poured steaming tea into the two cups. The letter suddenly felt very heavy in his pocket. He knew Dagher would soon pick up on his anxiety. No use beating around the bush. "Uncle, I have news."

Uncle Dagher paused before setting the tea kettle back on the stove and taking the seat opposite Danny at the table. He shoved the piles of papers aside, rested his elbows on the table and crossed his hands under his chin. His sleeves pulled down low enough that Danny could see the black tattoos encircling his wrists. Bound by duty was written around both wrists, permanently marking him as an Elitist. "What news is that?"

Danny drew a deep breath and slowly pulled the red envelope out of his back pocket. He hesitated before meeting his uncle's eyes.

Uncle Dagher's face had frozen. His eyes were locked on the envelope but somehow they seemed a million miles away. The edges of his mouth were drawn tight.

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“It came this morning.” He sat the envelope down on the table so that the black seal keeping it closed was faced up. In the wax was the emblem of the Counsel. “I haven't opened it yet.”

“I can see that. Why not?”

Danny pondered that question. Why had he not opened it? “I don't know.”

His uncle suddenly picked the envelope up and ran his finger under the seal, releasing it from the paper.

“Danny, prolonging the action does not make it go away.” He pulled the letter out and handed it to his nephew. “Read it.”

Danny didn't really need to read the letter to know what its message would be. Every Apprentice knew what the red envelope meant. But he did anyways.

Danny Arrows,

You are summoned to test before the Counsel for admission into the Elitists. Congratulations on this great honor to serve the Royal Family. Starting Monday you will have a revised schedule to prepare you for your test which will take place two weeks from today. Should you succeed, you will be inducted as Elitist Arrows.

Danny finished reading the letter aloud and dropped the paper back to the table. There was a long silence during which he had a hard time tearing his eyes away from the words Elitist Arrows. Knowing what the message would say hadn't prepared him for the reality of receiving it. He knew this day would come. Every Apprentice got the letter eventually. It was the whole point of being an Apprentice, it was why he was chosen by the Counsel and the Talent Seekers all those years ago. He'd been training with his masters for 12 years so that when he got this letter he'd be ready. Finally, Uncle Dagher broke the silence.

“This is a great honor, Danny.”

Danny met his gaze. “I know, Uncle, but I don't understand. I'm only 16. I should still have two years before I'm eligible.”

Uncle Dagher nodded, “You are right. Typically the Apprentice is only eligible for testing after their 18th birthday. But, the Counsel must think you are ready to test, or they would not have ordered it.”

“But I'm not ready! There must be some mistake.”

“Danny, the Counsel does not make mistakes...”

“...they do not falter and they never fail. I know, I know.” Danny ran his hands through his hair, shaking his head. “I don't feel ready for it. I should have more time.”

His uncle sighed heavily, his face softening. He reached across the table and grabbed Danny's shoulder.

“Kid, you are one of the most powerful Apprentices I've ever seen. And remember, I have to include myself in that category. You will be a fearful Elitist.”

Danny sighed, “I hope you are right, Uncle.”

Uncle Dagher stood up suddenly, “I think this calls for something a little stronger than tea! You are a man now and we need a man's drink.” He strode towards the cabinet over the stove and pulled down a clear bottle half full with amber-colored liquid. He sat the bottle down in the middle of the table with a loud thud

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along with two small glasses. "I guess this means I've got to stop calling you kid."

As soon as he uncorked the bottle, the strong scent of the liquor reached Danny's nostrils. Dagher poured the glasses and handed one to Danny. He held his up to the air with a proud grin on his face, "To honor!"

Danny raised his glass to his uncle's, "To servitude."

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