THE BEAST OF TEN

BETH BROWER

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This book is dedicated to all those, who choose hope, no matter how dark the way

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In the bleak midwinter, frosty wind made moan,
Earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone;
Snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow,
In the bleak midwinter, long ago.

Christina Rossetti

The light shineth in darkness;
and the darkness comprehended it not.

John 1:5

I was aware of a radiance emanating from a place I knew nothing about, a place which might as well have been outside me as within.

I found light and joy at the same moment, and I can say without hesitation that from that time on light and joy have never been separated in my experience. I have had them or lost them together.

Jacques Lusseyran

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THE COURTS OF HEAVEN

Ad Atrium Caeli

LINE SANCTUM: One gifted in all forms of healing, primarily called to heal, steady, and flare the ten light lines inside the human body. Susceptible to significant dreams. See: *Healing Order, Offices of*

INTUIT: One given wisdom and an understanding of truth, both past, present and future. Intuits may give warning and interpretation. See: *Healing Order, Offices of*

STEWARD: One assigned guardianship over a place or an object connected to both the Heavens and the Earth. See: *Sapient & Ruling Orders, Offices of*

BINDER: One given the ability to bind two things together. There are two orders: The first binds tangible objects. The second binds intangible elements and emotions. See: *Sapient Order, Offices of*

LIGHT BINDER: One who can bind the tangible and intangible into one. See: *Healing & Sapient Order, Offices of*

THIRD: Last born of triplets, given clarity of vision, stability of presence, and inured to some dark magicks. See: *Sapient Order, Offices of*

LECTUS BORN: One with the capacity to carry great light and power. See: *Ruling Order, Offices of*

VIRTUS THIRD: A Third commissioned of the Lights to accomplish certain tasks of mortal and immortal significance. See: *Healing, Sapient, & Ruling Order, Offices of*
See also*: Ilaria*

THE ORDERS CONTRARY

Contri Sapientia

MALUS SERVUS: Those who serve officers in the dark orders. See: *Dark Orders, Servants of*

SLANT BINDER: A binder who has violated the covenants of the Lights, binding what is of darkness rather than that which is of light. See: *Slant Orders, Counterfeit Officer*

OPAQUE: One who has abandoned the Lights for loss of hope. Their desires are turned towards the dark orders. See: *Dark Orders, Servants of*

WITCH: A crafter of all magicks—slant, patch, and otherwise. One who offers Bewares under the power of counterfeit prophecy. See*: Dark Orders, Magicks of*

THRASHER: A practitioner of violent magicks, dissembling, and sophistry. One who seeks to destroy any connection between the Heavens and the Earth. See: *Dark Orders, Magicks of*

DEATH BLEAK: One who absorbs the blood of the living, building power through theft, desecration of the sacred, and false sacrifice. Practitioner of all magicks. The most dangerous of the slant orders. See: *Dark Orders, Magicks of*
See also*: The Blood Gain*

THE BEAST OF TEN: A being of complete darkness. No more will be discussed of such a creature in the pages of this book.

* * *

Part One

The Death Bleak

I

I endure this darkness, petrified, clinging to the corner of the coach as we travel the frozen roads with a ghost-given speed. The Death Bleak is across from me, groaning, cursing, breathing heavily through his agony. More than once he mutters how he should have killed my father, taken the full blood gain, and been done with the pain.

My own disbelief that he hadn't is enough to keep me quiet, wondering if I could pitch myself from the carriage and be trampled, before he can take me back to his stronghold, the Pyre. Before he makes me a sacrifice and absorbs my blood.

But then he would go back and claim the rest of my father's life, so I stay and keep my eyes closed, ignoring this Bleak's pain and forcing myself to keep silent. It requires slow breathing and a stiff determination not to be overtaken by the fear the Death Bleak moves thick with.

It's such a moaning cold that I can hear the wind catching bitterly on tree branches and rock snags, howling about the carriage as if it will tear us apart and shred the menace inside. The sound of the Bleak's Stone Six on their horses—the outriders on our strange journey—is ever constant, counting out the hollow minutes and endless hours.

The nations have cowered before this Death Bleak more than any other. We simply call him *the* Bleak, tired of the word death, weary of it crossing our tongues. He has brought it so often through our lands.

There had been others with him, creatures who worship the darkness orders, given over to the vile pursuit of power and death. They had come to the Hills of Avaine with the Bleak, feeding in the wake of his chaos. And we had trembled. It is how all the nations suffer: the Bleak and his guard riding through, taking blood gains. And the others finishing any work the Bleak left undone—more casualties, disappearances, burnings, ruin.

And despair.

My eyes open at these thoughts—these images cold as winter. I crave light, I crave the sun. But inside the carriage there is only darkness.

A day passes, a night, another day. Visions of what had happened—of my father's pain, of Hill House burning, of me being dragged away—they

all play in my mind until I think I've gone mad. But each time they return, I let them stay. Just to see my father's face again.

When the Death Bleak is told by the captain of his guard that I am the daughter of the house, he pauses before me. His presence is cold; it is an iron, adamant thing. His expression—some of the clarity lost in shadow—remains impassive, a timeless face measuring my own with indifference.

I grip my arms with my fingers, the bite of sleet against my cheeks. A dangerous wind catches my loose hair and flings it across my face. I welcome it, this inadequate shield, for I can't bring myself to look at him again. I shiver, but, gritting my teeth, imagine myself made of something stronger than his devilry, something he cannot maim. Or destroy. Or kill. Something full of light.

I hear him make a noise, a strange sound, before a burst of commotion steals his attention away—his soldiers are forcing my father down the front stairs of Hill House, and the great house has started to burn.

The Bleak pushes the curtains open, stealing my memory away as I blink my eyes. A rusted, cardinal light seeps into the carriage, revealing his slouching figure. I lift my shaking fingers, protecting my eyes. Every sunset had been as red as blood since the Bleak's entrance into our small nation. I try to think of the sunset as it should be, orange or pink or purple. Something glorious and spangled with clouds and—

"Stop," he snaps, and his voice sounds like nothing I've ever heard. It sounds like metal. Or stone.

My own voice, tired from a night of screaming followed by days of silence, scratches out the words, "What am I to stop?"

"Stop interfering with my sunset."

"I'm not—" But I hesitate. One does not speak freely with a Death Bleak.

"You *are* interfering," he insists. "You are making it pink, strange offensive creature."

I swallow, my mouth dry from lack of water, my head spinning from want of food. Stubbornly, I brave speech. "Only in my thoughts."

"Yes. And I can see it," he hisses.

"Knowing another's thoughts is impossible."

He gives a laugh, a blunt, short thing. "But that is how I knew you wished to bargain with me." He turns his eyes on mine. And though his face is shadowed, I flinch from the nothingness I find there. "Your life for his."

His words bind my tongue. How could he possibly—

"I heard you." The Bleak turns back towards the red sunset and speaks against the glass, "You said, 'Spare him and take me.'"

"Father!" I call out, and the captain of the Bleak's guard is at my side, his fingers gripping my shoulders, warning me into silence. My father twists, looking for my face among the crowd. His eyes are heavy from years of care and this added night of terror. He doesn't see me. Words are exchanged, the Bleak shouting something I cannot hear—for the wind only translates the harshness and the violence, not the meaning. My father mumbles something in return. His words do not appease the Bleak.

As I watch him berate my father and draw his sword—the torches throwing desperate, distorted shadows of the movement—it is all the captain can do to hold me back, covering my mouth with his hand. But my heart screams, 'Take me! Spare him and take me!'

The Bleak stops, his sword raised above the defeated bend of my father. Then he looks straight at me. When his eyes meet mine, his arms lower, his gaze narrowing. He says something through his anger-bound jaw and turns back towards my father, catching his toe against my father's chest and kicking him down the stairs into the mud.

The Bleak follows with a deathly saunter. Then he shouts, and in response my father slowly lifts both of his hands. The Death Bleak raises his own gloved hand, closing his eyes as if he is feeling after something. He looks back towards me as he raises his sword and, in one impossibly strong movement, cuts off my father's right hand.

My heart fails me.

Impervious to my father's screams of pain, the Bleak waits until enough blood has collected on the ground before he removes his glove, bends down, and places his hand in the puddle. Even from this distance, I can see the Bleak's shoulders relax, his head dropping forward in relief.

I close my eyes and pray.

I feel my heart pound and clip at the memory, horrified that the Bleak can follow the words of my mind. What could give him such power? They whisper along the roads of the nations that he has sold himself out of time, that he has not aged in centuries. They say he has stolen the lives of countless and taken the magicks of the blood gain further than any have before him. Whether this is true or not, I don't want this fiend thieving my thoughts.

The red outside the window fades, only the dimmest scarlet now filtering down above the mountains. I shift, despite my complaining muscles, and look towards the last signs of day with an intense hunger for light, any light. In an hour's time, the sky will be filled with stars, but the Bleak will likely have drawn the curtains. To battle my disappointment, I think of all the stars strewn above me, blinking and flame-filled. A counterforce to—

"How vexatious," the Bleak mutters. "Stars of all things. Do try to keep your thoughts to yourself."

Glancing towards his dark grey shape, I frown. As if I would even know how to begin doing such a thing.

"Speaking of lights," he continues, his stonelike presence only disturbed by the flick of his finger in my direction. "What is the one that follows you?"

"What?" He's caught me off guard. I've made such an effort to keep it hidden behind me that not even I can see its glow.

"The light that hovers about you."

I look over my shoulder and there, in the corner of the coach behind my back, hovers my wisp, floating as softly as an errant summer blossom. "It's my—" I shake my head. "How can you see it? Very few can see a wisp."

"I can't see it," he dismisses impatiently before continuing in his tumble-stone voice. "I don't deal in light. But I can feel the persistent discomfort it causes. Wretched thing." He pauses before saying, "That is what you think it is then? Merely a wisp?"

"Yes," I manage, worrying the Death Bleak can steal the soul out of a wisp just as he knows how to empty the body of a person.

"And it follows you around because…?"

It always has, I think, since I was a child. But I keep my mouth closed.

The Bleak is not deterred by my silence. "You are born triplet."

"How did you know?" I say, feeling a cold sweat begin down my back.

"Were you born first, second, or third?"

When I do not answer, I think I see the side of his mouth shift. "Do not make me draw answers from you," he whispers. "Simple conversation is far less painful for both of us."

"I was born second," I answer hastily.

In response to his threat, my wisp rises over my shoulder, flaring its light, as if to protect me in some small way. The Bleak's face comes into

view with his slouching form, and my lips part from surprise. I can see his face, yet it is somehow indefinable. As if someone had placed a very thin sheet of glass between he and I. At Hill House, I'd assumed this was due to the deep night, the shadows from the torches. But now I see that, while I can read his expression—note a frown, mark his hooded eyes watching my assessment—this haze persists about his features, as if the air around him cannot breathe for his poison.

I consider him long enough for me to realize that he no longer appears to be in pain. His breathing is slower, his body still. In contrast to the Bleak's relief, the image of my father's agony shakes across my thoughts.

The Bleak cringes in response, moving his left hand towards his own right wrist, a wrist that is still intact, unlike my father's. He then flings a hand up, and my wisp flees behind me, leaving the coach in darkness once more.

"What you say is not true," the Bleak states, a threatening edge in his voice. "That may be what you were told, but you were born third."

"No, I wasn't," I defend. "I was born second, between two brothers."

"You were born last. Otherwise, you would not have been gifted an—a wisp, as you call it."

I glare in his direction and pull myself tighter into the corner, my wisp moving from behind my shoulder to rest between my arms, close to my heart.

I tell it not to fear.

I ask it not to go out.

* * *

The next morning, I beg the Death Bleak for food and water.

"Please," I whisper. I can see nothing, for the curtains are drawn shut again, and my wisp has buried itself in the folds of my skirt. It is as if the Bleak has a great need to consume the darkness, and the darkness has a desire to consume me.

We stop but rarely. The few times we do, the six guards are impatient, watching me with hollow eyes. The Bleak lets me wander off into the privacy of the gelid woods, repeating a warning that keeps me returning to the black coach: "Return soon, or I'll go back and take your father's miserable life."

Twice I find a small stream and drink my fill, but my stomach cramps against the cold water and I need something more.

"Please," I beg. "May I have food?"

"We have no need of it," he answers. "We arrive at the Pyre in two days' time."

I move my tongue across my lips and fight the swell of exhaustion coming from my chest. Two days feels like an eternity, and I will not make it.

The next time he lets me off in the woods, into the blinding light of midday, I dig in the snow until I can find some roots to chew on. I fill my hands with as much edible plant life as possible and bring it back to the carriage with me. It is not enough to satisfy or make my tumbling headache go away, but it is something.

* * *

On the third night of the journey, I dream of a forest. The ground is as solid as any earth below my feet, the trees stretching towards a cloud-imprisoned sky. All about me is swathed by a despair so thick that to breathe is an act of pain. I try to move forward, to find deliverance, but falter, snagging my foot on a black root, and thudding against the ground. I struggle to stand, only to be held in place by an impossible weight. Even drawing breath is hard. Soon I will no longer have the strength.

Then I see it.

At a great distance, a light is flaring. It is startling in its beauty and confidence. It is consuming. It could burn the entire forest. I blink, yearning to be closer. The light is pure force. And it stirs my heart to courage. Too weary to lift myself and run towards it, I begin to crawl.

* * *

The Bleak now seems to be pulsing with even more iron power than before —as if whatever he stole from my father's blood has settled. It is painful to be in his presence, and I wish my fate already decided. I am so tremendously fatigued.

My wisp comes out from behind my back, staying close to me as I try to keep hold of consciousness. When I think the Bleak is not watching, lost in his own stupor, I hold out my hand and let my wisp land on my fingers, its warmth pulsing against my skin. It is a bold thing, this small light, to keep itself bright despite the darkness. No matter how oppressive the atmosphere of the Bleak, the light of my wisp yet has power to make darkness retreat. Even on the edges of this strange madness, I am determined to take that for a small comfort.

Later, the Bleak speaks to me again. He has pushed away the curtains to greet another bloodred sunset. My head is spinning, my entire body nauseated, and the dim light is hurting my eyes. As the sky turns old and rust colored, he says, moving his fingers in a gesture of recognition, "Your wisp has not dimmed. Unusual."

It never dims, my wisp, but I do not speak this out loud. I keep quiet, my eyes closed, too ill for the exchange of words.

"Wisps are not so powerful as that," he explains. Or baits. I can't tell which. "They need time away in the sun to gather more light. Do you not find yours strange?"

The tone of his question feels like a cold frost, reminding me of his earlier warning. I weakly give an answer, speaking with a strained voice. "My wisp never fades."

"It cannot be the wisp keeping itself alight," he snaps. "It would be against the very nature of the thing."

I open my eyes enough to see the shadows of his face. "What, then, is the source?"

An unpleasant expression is his response, a sneer, but he does not answer my question.

While he watches the scarlet sunset haunting the black, winter woods, I brave a longer glance at him. He seems young, though I can feel the weight of his many stolen years like metal in my mouth. And though he's slouched in the corner, I can see the training of his form was graceful, the hint of his movements betraying him to have once been a man seen at a lord's table. Yet he has no energy or life. He looks saturated by dead things.

I wonder how many years it has been since he has been quickened. Although quickenings are not commonplace, they are frequent enough—some beauty filling your skin and bones, casting you into fresh life and

strength and joy. Very few cease to experience quickenings completely—but, for the Bleak, it looks like death has already come.

As his eyes watch the passing winter sunset, I realize why they are so disturbing. They are completely devoid of color. The shape of the pupil is there, the iris, but they are leached away, faded, his eyes abandoned of life. Blank.

The skin of his face has no mortal flush, just variations of grey. Perhaps it's what one looks like when no light is shining, or what the world looks like at night when the moon makes everything white or black with ten thousand greys in between. I have never seen such emptiness.

He blinks and moves his eyes towards mine.

"Pardon," I murmur, pulling my knees tightly against me, the soiled hem of my dress stiff and hard against my bare feet.

"Tell me what they call you," he orders.

My fear has not yet taken away a willingness to claim my own name, so I answer as strongly as I am able, "Ember."

He tilts his head slightly. "Unusual, I believe."

"My full given name is December."

The Bleak stares a moment, then laughs. It is a biting laugh. "That is ironic."

My face creases in confusion.

"Because *December* means 'the tenth one,'" he supplies impatiently, having read my thoughts rather than waiting for my words. The tenth one. I had always been taught that ten is a number of great power, for both good and ill.

"You are correct," he answers. "It is a number of significant power."

"How is it possible?" I cry out. "How can you possibly hear what I'm thinking?"

He tilts his head, staring at me, but gives no answer. Nor does he explain the significance of the meaning of my name. *The tenth one*. The tenth what?

Long minutes pass, and I let my head fall back against the seat of the coach, my eyes staring at the light from his window with envy. A black velvet curtain shrouds the window near me, and in the blur of these dark days, I've not dared to unsettle it. I lean forward and my body attests to the pain of little use. My wisp, resting behind my shoulder, begins to stir and float about me. I brush it away from my face and dare my fingers to move

towards the black curtain. It is soft to the touch, and when I hear no objection from the Bleak, I push the curtain away from me, creating a small line of light. Purple and blue—rather than old red—compose the evening sky to the east.

Hungry for sight of something other than the inside of the coach, I push the curtain open farther, leaning towards the cold glass. I make a small sound of surprise at the landscape, for it is nothing I recognize. At home, the forests were full of old trees, stretching out and up, their leaves bursting into canopies before changing color come autumn, then falling away.

What I am looking at now, sweeping away down off the high road, is an endless swath of tall, angular, snow-covered trees. This massive forest of evergreens is one of the most elegant panoramas I have ever seen. Ancient, living, statuesque, and steeped in power. I can feel it on my skin. I shiver, and my blood quickens. Closing my eyes, I press my fingers against my beating head.

"The Forest of Naeethe," comes the Bleak's voice as he stirs from within the darkness of the coach. "We will drop off this highway, down onto the forest road. The Pyre is at its center." Then, in a tone that knows nothing of kindness, he asks, "Are you frightened?"

I press my eyes closed tighter before opening them to look at the Bleak, this odd, death-bringing creature whose speech is like shifting stones. He seems to be waiting for an honest answer, and so I reply with an honest question, the words coming out quietly.

"How long will my life last at this Pyre of yours?"

Despite the obscurity, I see his face shift sideways, as if he has not considered the question himself. Moving a hand across his chin, he returns his gaze to the now purpling horizon through my window and says, "Blood gains are not performed inside the Pyre."

Very little of me feels comforted by this admission.

The evening light catches on a bit of metal sewn to his cloak, and I recognize it as a symbol of patch magicks. His clothing is layered with it, this magick, thick and angled, and strange where several pieces of metal have been attached. All of it is grey, stone grey, in differing shades and shadows, bright to dull. I think I know what some of the symbols mean, but I can't be certain.

"What do you know of patch magicks?" he asks gruffly when he sees—or hears—my scrutiny.

“Almost nothing.” I swallow, my mouth dry. “I was training to be a Line Sanctum, so I have heard tales, but my studies were towards the light. I’ve left all other paths clear alone.”

He balks and lifts a hand to his eyes. “Unbelievable.”

“What is?”

The Bleak shakes his head and does not answer, his expression is similar to when he seemed to know more about my wisp than I did. Leaning my head against the side of the coach, fighting the crushing weight of his gaze upon me, as we slip into the darkness of another night.

* * *

I must have fallen unconscious before we arrived at the Pyre, for as I wake to voices in low, strained argument—the scent of pine logs permeating their words—I have no recollection of my arrival.

“You can’t have forgotten a lass must eat. She’s half starved. Nay, she’s full starved. Look at her now, that face. Don’t you remember what it was like to be inside time? You can’t go so many hours without food and drink. I’ve given her a bit of water in a rag and some weak broth, but you delivered her to the Pyre in a bad light, Sperro.”

“Do *not* call me that.”

“‘Tis your name.”

“It is my name no longer. Lock it away from your fool’s tongue before I do it for you.”

Silence, and then comes an answer, “Yes, my lord.”

“See to the creature.”

“Yes, my lord.”

II

Father has always claimed I am created from humors that favor clarity and resilience. “You’ve an instinct, Ember, to see clearly. Follow that. Don’t diminish it by fear. The resilience that twins such clear vision is a grace, for

it will see you through the knocks and twists of life while your clarity leads you right. Hold to it." These are the words in my mind as I claw my way back towards consciousness. I open my eyes, note the silence, and then lift myself up.

My bed lies in a puddle of light and is set against a west-facing wall that, beginning at waist height, is all diamond-paned windows. I sit up fully in bed and look about. I am clean, wearing soft robes the color of pure cream. My hair is braided, my feet bare and rubbed with balm to assuage the difficulty of the strange journey I undertook unshod.

Slipping from the bed, I wrap my arms around myself and spread my aching fingers along the softness of the robe. As I look out the window into the strength of the afternoon, what I see is as glorious as it is beyond imagination. Leagues and leagues of ancient evergreen trees heavy with snow. Wherever the late afternoon sun meets the forest, a shimmer seems to rise, an ethereal shroud presiding over the forest, reaching as far as the distant stretch of mountains.

The sky above it bears its own beauty, blues and purples leaning towards a soft pink. There will be no bloodred sunset in these mountains, above this forest. I wonder why. If this is the lair of the Death Bleak, why does this sky not bear the mark of his work?

I turn. On the other side of the cream and gold room is a tall stone hearth, carved in the patterns of flowering vines. The snap and whip of sound comes from the large pine logs that are burning, warming the chamber. The room smells of the fresh scent of sap. If this is indeed the Pyre, it is appointed unto a beauty I have never before encountered.

"Ah, there you are."

My veins jump about my heart as I look towards the sound. It is a woman—old in years and tired of eye—standing in a doorway at the far side of the room.

"I'm Miranda," she says. "And you are, young one?"

I yawn before I can help it, covering my mouth, feeling the sun from the windows at my back. My shoulders drop as the yawn passes. "I am Ember."

"Ember?" Stepping into the room and closing the door, she asks, "Like a bit of fire?"

"December is my full name."

Miranda frowns, and it is weighed in an old sadness. "December? The tenth one? Well that's just—I'd say you're welcome, but I know not if you

are, just that I was given your charge."

"Am I at the Pyre, then?"

"That you are," Miranda answers. She walks past me and takes a poker resting near the hearth, stabbing it into the fire, moving the wood to stoke the flame.

Miranda, along with everything else, is not what I had expected to find at the Pyre. She is a bit stiff and wrinkled, but her face is clear, the lines of her mouth marked with intelligence. Her eyes look like evening snow in shadow.

"I've taken great care to give you food and water. I am sorry, my girl." She sets the poker back in its place and turns to face me. "He said he didn't forget you needed food—and that very well may be, however cruel—but I've known him since he was a wee bit, and he never remembered to eat a bite himself. No remembering in him at all that a girl must eat." Her eyes cloud over. "Especially as he is now. Had you been another day or two, I expect you would have died in that carriage. Sooner or later, I suppose."

This talk of my death is surreal yet unbelievably close, and I push past the thought with a question. "You've known the Death Bl—" I stop myself, unable to say that name in this noble place. "You've known him since he was a boy?"

"Aye."

"How long ago was that?"

Miranda shakes her head. "Now who is asking questions she ought not? It's been too long since he was a child. Too long. But it is what it is, I suppose. Come on then, I think you should eat and sleep all the more. Look at you. Barely on your feet. There's a copper tub through there"—she points through an arched doorway on the south side of the room—"to bathe each day. We will keep your water warm. With such a view of the trees, you'll be thinking yourself with the angels."

"Thank you."

Miranda tilts her head at my words. "I'll see you comfortable and well while you're here, though I can't say how long that will be. I'm not certain what he's doing, child. Now, sit down here before the fire and eat. I brought the food earlier, but you were sleeping as sweet as spring, and I'd not the heart to wake you from it."

She gives me a bowl of broth, kept warm in a clever stone shelf built into the hearth. The soup is rich with dried herbs and salts, and I sip it

eagerly.

"It's been years since I prepared such a broth," Miranda continues, fussing about the room. "Betimes there are soldiers who march in and out, mercenaries, merchants as well, but they're given rations of a different sort. I insist on giving *you* something proper. The kitchens were ordered cleaned, and we're bringing foodstuffs in, purchased from the merchants bold enough to pay toll through this forest."

I tuck all the details she's giving me into my mind, for if merchants pay toll through the forest, there must be a clear way out.

"Thank you," I say as I lift my bowl again to my mouth. My hands shake, but the broth is settling my stomach.

"Aye, don't be thanking me, child," Miranda answers sadly. "Don't be thanking me at all. I don't want the echo of it in my head when I've learned your fate."

Despite the warmth of the afternoon and the warm honey stone of my chambers, I feel the prick of a cold warning.

"In you go now, sweet." She ushers me back to bed, her hand on my elbow. "I think more sleep and rest is what you need, and in a few days we will get you dressed. Maybe by then the master will have let known why he has brought you here. It's nothing he's ever done before, bringing a girl like you back to the Pyre. He's not done anything so unexpected in well over two hundred years, closer to three hundred, if I've lived a day, and, my child"—she pulls the blanket around my shoulders and moves a lock of hair from my face—"I have lived many days."

"Thank you," I say again, unable to help it.

She accepts this with a time-sweetened resignation. "Pleasure, for as long as you last, child. Nay, not a child but a young woman grown, I suppose." When she is by the door, ready to leave, the shadows in the room already whispering towards evening, she pauses and studies my face. "You're not the usual beauty, spending all her bloom in hardly a handful of years. Some girls are like that, all flimsy flash, set to wear out into plainness as they age. But your loveliness is that of a sage. It is well set and will only increase. You've a steadiness of countenance worthy of the courts three hundred years ago, the courts he knew well." She shakes her head. "He has never brought a girl here before—not since he betrayed the maiden he loved—and so, I find myself wondering, Why now? Why you?"

Miranda does not wait for an answer, closing the door firmly behind her, and I find myself staring at where she stood, my lips parted in amazement.

* * *

I sleep again, only to wake in deep night, a half-moon weakly drawing lines around my chamber. The fire has burned low and is steeped now in coals, and I think my father would have loved their mystery. He would have fretted half the night, trying to capture how to paint such a cipher.

The thought of my father's right hand, now severed, stolen, causes an audible groan, and I lift my fingers to my face in anguish at the thought. He will never paint again, and there will never be a day he does not mourn the loss of his art. What cruelty. I had seen the look on the Death Bleak's face as he had stretched his own hand above my father's. He must have known that my father's right hand held joy and beauty, and he stole it with no thought for the robbed.

I recall that night with a rising panic in my stomach. And when I can no longer dwell on that pain, I cling to the memory of my brothers. We were born near midnight on the shortest day of the year. Hadspen had come first, then myself, then Thry—or so I'd always been told. Now the Death Bleak says I was born third. I have no reason to believe him, but he has no reason to know I was born triplet, unless he had discovered it from my thoughts, so I don't know what to think.

We three—grown tall, grey-eyed, and dark-haired, looking like we belong to each other—and we do. We are our own tribe, contented, with no need of anyone else. Sending them to university while staying home was the hardest thing I had ever done in my life.

How long would it take now for someone to ride to the university, carrying the news of the Bleak's descent upon our small nation? To hear of the villages terrorized, that my father, as lord, had no way of protecting? To hear of how I'd been carried away? Five weeks if a messenger rides fast. Another five for my brothers to return to Hill House. And then would they dare ride farther south to the Pyre? How long would it take a normal man, bound by the laws of time, to travel here?

Thinking of Hadspen and Thry feels like being slowly ripped apart by a beautiful thought—like a butterfly wing torn away—and I close my eyes

tight. They are so much of what my life is made of that I hardly know who I am without them.

A memory flickers across my mind, lighting one conversation among many, and I let it play out, searching my brothers' expressions.

My work as a Line Sanctum—what I am training to become—is slow because most of the knowledge is in the three volumes of the Curatorium, which I cannot read.

"I'll read them to you," Thry says, "now that I'm home for requil. Hadspen will too, I'm sure."

"Will not," Hadspen answers quickly. "I'm behind in mathematics and philosophy as it is. I've no time to muddle through the Curatorium."

"You're such a self-sacrificing soul, Hads," Thry responds, stretching his words out in the way he often does when remarking on Hadspen's actions. Or mine.

"Close your gap, Thry."

"Go bury yourself."

And as it often does, it ends with a good scrap.

"If you'd help read the Curatorium to Ember, she'd have fixed us up better," Thry says after the fight, when I am rubbing a mediocre salve across his bruised cheekbone.

"I'm fine," I answer, nodding to Hadspen. "I don't need either of you to take time away from your own studies to read me mine. Truly. Father can, perhaps, or one of the maids."

Hadspen gives Thry a triumphant look, but later that day, I see Thry watching me as I'm sketching some plants to help me remember the basic balms. He knows —Thry always knows—when there is something my heart really does worry over.

He begins reading to me consistently during the entire requil, and I am hungry for the knowledge.

"It's a bit hard for me to translate from the old language," Thry says, "but this is what I've worked out: Line Sanctums concern themselves with the light and life of all living things. Their work must come through compassion, and the wills of those seeking healing must be respected*." He looks up. "Did that sound right?"*

"Yes. Father already translated this part for me."

"Well." Thry had pushed his hair away from his eyes and taken a long breath. "That's the simplest part. I'll see what I can do about the rest. A

morning ritual of prayer aids—*no, that's* allows—allows the humblest Line Sanctum to become an instrument of the Courts—*um, I mean* Lights*, those two words are similar*—in their work*." Thry looks up at me. "It would have been simpler had you been called to do something less ancient. I'm much better at the more modern texts. Anything beyond the past five hundred years still gives me trouble." He sounds apologetic. "Shall we continue?"*

But by the time he was to return to university, he'd had to spend his days catching up on the language studies he'd been ignoring to read to me.

The next requil was at midsummer, the boys dragging me into the woods far more often than I was dragging them into the library. And then the winter came, and with winter came the Bleak, and with the Bleak came my journey to the Pyre.

* * *

When I sleep again, my dreams are besieged by darkness, a foreign anguish draped in crimson pain. I wake cold and pull the layers of soft blankets over me, my heart fighting terror with all its might. My wisp is floating above my head, a silent sentinel. It is not enough comfort.

The darkness is coming from somewhere inside the Pyre; I can feel it pulsing, writhing. I once again recall my father's words. *You've an instinct, Ember, to see clearly*. *Don't diminish it by fear*. Closing my eyes, I think on what I'd just begun to study not a month earlier, the extending of light beyond the body. Drawing on that thought, I picture a warm afternoon filling my lungs. Then I breathe out, pushing this image out through my skin and against the darkness outside of me. In this way, spending my frail light against an oppressive force far stronger than myself, I slumber until morning and wake tired.

I let my eyes wander over the faint play of color and light coming through the windows, dancing across the honey gold stone of my room. It reminds me of a painting my father did when I was a small child. He had painted the throne of the Most High surrounded by the Angels, all light and color and majesty beyond the dust of our world. It had enchanted me as a child, though some had considered it heresy he had painted the scene at all.

"I don't think They mind a mortal's attempt to paint glory, Ember," Father had said to me. "While we refer to the Court of the Most High as *the Lights*, at the risk of being too familiar with the sacred, I wonder if there is

such a thing as becoming too familiar with our Creator. I don't believe so," he had finished under his breath.

Letting my eyes drift to the ceiling, I note the stone arches crossing above me, carved generously with expressions of nature. It touches the inside regions of my heart, and I close my eyes.

"Why have I been brought to this place?" I say to the stillness around me.

It does not answer.

* * *

I spend a week recovering, my wisp keeping watch. Whereas the first few days I was limited to broths, Miranda has started to feed me stews and bread. I'm stronger. When I wake, I no longer feel I've been walking the night long. As my strength returns, my dread awakens with equal measure. Some nights I have the sweetest dreams of home, and yet, upon waking, I can feel the weight of the Bleak's dark terror somewhere beneath me in this vast building. I know for certain that there are forces about this Pyre that are conflicted, set in a duel between blinding light and blinding darkness. It is a thought that offers me comfort; it is a threat that demands I take warning.

This morning, the seventh day of my being here, snow is falling outside my window. Miranda finds me watching the large flakes.

"A white morning if there ever was one," she says. "Come now. I deem you're strong enough to dress and be about."

She helps me bathe and sets my hair in a long braid that comes around my neck and falls in front of my shoulder. She dresses me in layers of underpinnings finished over with an antiquated gown of dusky rose. It's simple and elegant. There are deep pink geometric patterns stitched into the hem and the sleeves.

"This belonged to another who once lived at the Pyre," Miranda says. "About your height, she was. I'm pleased it fits you so well. There are others. You won't want for clothing at the Pyre, though I do intend to make you some new things. If there's time."

With my mind clearer now, I feel thick with questions. But Miranda, I've discovered, does not always speak freely when asked. And so I try to keep quiet, letting her talk at random, listening as she fills the spaces with hints of knowledge and story. My wisp is floating lightly about my

shoulders as Miranda begins buttoning the back of the dress. I cannot tell if Miranda can see the small light. She does not speak of it, and neither do I. Then she asks me what I think of my rooms.

"The Pyre is not what I had expected," I admit. "It's not at all what I've heard in the stories."

"Oh dear." Miranda gives a sad smile. "The Pyre is strong. It is not as changeable as the desire to do the right thing: glorious one moment, tampered and taken the next. It is an ancient seat, and holy powers run through it just as the river runs far below, strong and clear and good. Which is why the master's struggle is so—well, never you mind. His magicks and courses are his own business now, and I've no place to speak of them. As it is, the Pyre is still the most magnificent place I've ever seen."

"With the winter so beautiful," I venture, "I can scarcely imagine how it is come spring."

Miranda slows her hands as she works the buttons at my back. "Spring does not come to the Pyre anymore."

"What do you mean?" I try to turn, but she puts her hand to my shoulder blade to keep me in place so she can finish the job.

"Spring refuses to come, and winter will not be moved," Miranda replies. "The sun we had this week was a welcome sight, as often we've only snow falling or empty clouds. When the master is away on mischief, we've fierce storms, enough to frighten even those of us who cannot die."

"But why?" I press. "How is any of this possible?"

"My stars." Miranda comes around, straightening my sleeves as she looks at my face. "You ask questions that I've no intention of answering. I will tell you this, though. The old powers cannot abide the stain of the master's ambitions, ambitions he never should have had. They will fight until he has broken them irrevocably. But the Pyre is not yet broken. Its pulse is still of light; its allegiance, the same. And so the master is uneasy in the place he loves the most, in constant war with the Pyre as he is in constant war with his heart."

"Now," Miranda breaks through her own words, "I asked the master this morning what was to be done with you, now that you've your strength back, and he said to let you loose on the grounds."

I look up sharply, revealing all my hidden thoughts in one hopeful expression. "Does that mean I can go?"

Miranda moves her head slowly. “No, it means he wants you out of the way until he’s ready to deal with what he’s done in bringing you here. Don’t try to leave, Miss Ember. You do not understand well enough the consequences if you do.”

The image of my father—bent on the ground, gripping his wrist where the Bleak had severed it—flashes across my mind, and I want to argue that I know plenty of consequences. But I don’t, and she hands me a cloak of deep green that matches the color of the pines.

“I hope it’s warm enough for you to be out the day long,” she mutters as she bundles me with gloves and a scarf. “I made them last night. A body must find something to do. It’ll be a right change sewing clothes for you before the fire, more like old times, when I needed more of them myself. I don’t feel too cold anymore, so it’s a sweet to make you some niceties, poor child.”

I nod, anxious at the thought of leaving this room. As Miranda walks to the door, bidding me follow, I worry over an encounter with the Death Bleak. I can feel him, somehow, and the taste of his terror is on my tongue as the stories of those he has killed creep like poison through my mind. If Miranda sees my hesitation, she gives no notice—just opens the door and steps out.

Having no recollection of how I’d been brought to my rooms, I am not expecting the burst of pine-laced air and the bright sounds of winter that await me on the other side of the door. I blink against the daylight. The far wall of the corridor is open, graced by tall arches of stone with no glass set within.

“Come along, child,” Miranda calls. “No sense in getting caught by the bell tower view when you live but feet away. You can open your door and stare out at the forest any time you like.”

But I step up to the waist-high stone railing and look down, counting windows. My rooms are on the seventh floor of the Pyre. I look upward. There are three more stories, ten in all.

Pulling my cloak tighter around my throat, I follow Miranda. This outside corridor is long, but halfway down, jutting out to the left, is a small passage. It looks like a hallway—held up by great pillars—leading to the center of the courtyard, where it abruptly stops, like it was never meant to reach all the way across. Why anyone would build such a thing seven stories up…?

I pause at this strange entrance, dark save for a few dramatic swaths of winter light and snow coming through open slits in the stone. I can't see what is in the shadows on either side of the passage, and wonder what it's for.

Miranda turns. "Child, my patience—"

But I can't bring myself to move on just yet. My wisp is moving in a lazy circle, illuminating a few feet into the darkness, and I take one step towards it.

"That there is the bell tower," Miranda calls. "'Tis why your chambers are called the bell tower suite."

"A bell tower? But I've not heard anything." I peer again into the darkness. "When do they ring?"

"The bells of the Pyre lay silent," she says, turning away even as she motions for me to follow. "Waiting."

"Waiting for what?" I ask as I rush to catch up, clearly abandoning the notion that fewer questions will bring more answers. When she does not respond, I persist, "Are they not ever played?"

"They are not," Miranda says over her shoulder. "One by one, each bell has stopped making sound, no matter how we ring them. Only the last bell still chimes weakly on the night of a fierce storm, when enough wind makes it clang. The others are bound—by good or bad, I do not know."

"How many bells are there?"

"Ten, my child."

Ten bells.

Ten floors.

I shiver. I look once more over my shoulder at the bell tower and then hurry after Miranda, who has now turned into another passage on our right, one that is fully inside the walls of the Pyre and locked away from the cold.

Ten bells. Ten floors. And December, the tenth one, as they call me. I breathe as deeply as I possibly can, begging myself to find some steady thought.

The Pyre is far greater than I'd ever have imagined. We wind down seven stairways in all, through corridors and galleries, hallways growing in size and elegance. The artistry of this stronghold is of an ancient glory, handsome and rich, with patterns and textures more complex than I've seen among any of the nations to which I've traveled.

I startle when we pass a younger woman. But she does not look at me, rushing past us without so much as a greeting, even to Miranda.

"There are others who live here?" I ask.

Miranda does not answer. She brings me to what appears to be a servants' hall on the ground floor, to a quirked set of stairs leading to a solid wood door.

"This door is the best way in and out of the Pyre," she tells me, straightening my cloak. "It's right off the kitchen, mind you, and if you're slipping into the gardens or the forest, it will suit you well enough. Now,"—she looks at me and presses her lips together—"out you go. Wander a bit. Stick to the trails. I expect the master will find you when he sees fit to confront yet another mess he's brought down upon his own miserable head."

The thought of stepping out into the cold and simply waiting for the Bleak to find me is as disturbing as my dreams, as threatening as being hunted. It seems that Miranda is doing her best not to give me any hope.

"And if he never comes?" I ask.

"Then you come back when you're hungry, and I'll feed you well and set you by a warm fire. For as long as any of this lasts," she adds, like she has a sour taste in her mouth.

With that, I am nudged out the door.

Pulling a face at her subtle but firm dismissal, I shake my arms from the cold and look about. I'm standing in the winter shadows of the Pyre, in what seems to be a formal terrace. The gardens around it consist of layers of low walls, varied in height and covered by drifts of snow. The walls twist and wind about one another, a complex series of what I presume are flowerbeds in the spring and summer months. At some points they cross, creating the stairways one can use when wandering the paths. These walls extend a good distance, the snow giving contrast to the beauty of their lines before they fade away to the edge of the ancient forest.

"Life's blood," I mutter as I look about, stamping my feet to claim whatever warmth I can. The Pyre, I learn as I step away and look up, is even more massive than I had gathered, an unparalleled building, full of towers and windows, dressed in a warm stone that reflects pockets of icelike crystals when the sun hits its surface. There are patterns in the windows, each one like a glass painting—some are geometric, others, depictions of nature or breathtaking displays of both.

It looks like a place where great things have happened, where music and decision and art once came together in power for many, many years. As my eyes travel over the endless windows that line entire wings of the Pyre, I wonder at Miranda's words—that this is a place of such strong power it fights the Bleak's twisted pursuits. Gazing up at the building before me, I don't find it difficult to believe her.

As I blow out the air from my lungs, watching the cloud of my breath dissipate, I figure I may as well understand how vast this building is. Stamping through several large drifts, I begin to walk the perimeter of the Pyre.

Some pathways have been cleared, most have not. As best I can, I try to walk ten or so feet out from the building. Sometimes a drift pushes me away or I have to walk underneath an arch that leads to another set of forlorn and frozen gardens, huddled against the winter walls. Coming around the southeast corner, I find myself standing on the edge of a wall, equal in height to the second-story windows, looking down over a grand courtyard at the entrance of the Pyre.

What an entrance it is. The windows are tall enough to encompass many floors. Wide stairs spread out from the front doors down to the courtyard. There is surely room for fifty, no, closer to one hundred carriages. I walk precariously along the top of the wall until I come to a set of snowbound stairs set into it. I'm careful as I descend, reaching the last stair without slipping on the ice more than once.

Walking to the middle of the courtyard, I'm forced to confess I've yet to see an entrance with half the majesty of what rises before me. There are seven steps from the courtyard to the doors of the Pyre, wide and long, extending the length of the entire front of the building. The doors are carved from beautiful grained wood, rising to an arched point. And above the doors is a massive stained glass window, three stories tall, portraying a line of great trees, heavy with fruit. The southern edge of the courtyard is hemmed in by evergreen trees rising taller than any I've yet seen, and arches flank both the east and the west, but there are no gates. Nothing to keep anyone in. Nothing to keep me here by force. Nothing save the paralyzing fear of what the Death Bleak would do to my father and our nation if I left.

As I take a step towards the west, a wild call splits the air, and I scramble back, slipping on the ice and tumbling to my knees near the wall. A terrifying clatter—horses making sounds no horse should make—and

from under an arch near the southwest corner of the Pyre comes the Bleak's Stone Six. They ride the same black horses, their uniforms grey like their master's. They are metallic and harsh, and as they ride across the courtyard towards the western arch, I feel the vibrations of the hooves through the stones beneath my knees. My gloved hands are searching for something to grip. I'm shaking.

When the company has disappeared into the forest and their ghostly echoes have vanished, I command myself to stand. "These are the prayers of the Line Sanctum," I murmur for comfort, tucking my wet-gloved hands into my cloak, "to lift calmness from chaos. These are the prayers of the Line Sanctum, to flare light in darkness. These are the prayers—"

There is a loud snap, and I spin towards the forest, my words breaking off like a dry twig. Standing on the far side of the courtyard at the edge of the forest is a man. He has a worn face, but he's not old. His head is shaved to the scalp, but he sports a trimmed beard of deep brown. There are hollows beneath his eyes, a blinding white scar across the bridge of his nose, and a metal ring through one of his ears.

"I'd ask who you were, but you're marked by Miranda's work," he says, his voice deep, his hand lifting to indicate my scarf.

Taking a step back, I pull my eyebrows together. "Who are you?" I ask as boldly as I'm able, though my tone proves unfaithful, for he can clearly hear my voice shaking.

"Someone with far more right to be here than yourself," he growls. His eyes don't hold a threat, just long-spent anger that's become a habit. "You must be the girl they've been talking of. I'm right surprised to find you still alive. You've been here, what now, six, seven days?"

When I don't answer, he laughs, and it's not sympathetic. But neither is it harsh. It falls into the cracks between.

"You were right to be frightened of his riders, his Malus Servus," he continues. "No good will come from any of them and you should keep clear." Then he gives me more consideration. "Brave, to wander the Pyre alone."

"Not so very brave," I answer, my words coming out as a whisper.

"Well," his own voice drops, "I'll tell you this: keep your wanderings if you must, but be on high alert for those who would seek your end. There are those who come to this place that you should avoid."

"Are you such a one?" I ask.

“Me?” He shakes his head. “No, lass. I’d seek my own end before I ever sought yours, but I cannot find it.” He lifts his fingers to his beard and scratches the skin beneath, like he’s making a decision. “I’m the woodsman, Sylvain. There are four of us who are not his riders. I’m the fiercest, so you’ve no cause to be frightened of what the rest are. I usually keep the forest.”

“My name is Ember.”

“And what do you keep, Ember?”

“Well,” I draw the winter air into my lungs, “I’ve kept nothing as of yet but the bell tower suite.”

“He put you in the bell tower suite?”

“I—I’m not sure. It may have been Miranda.”

“Why would she have done such a thing?”

“I—”

“What exactly are you, girl?” Sylvain’s expression deepens as he steps towards me. “I heard you muttering your prayers.”

“I’m—” I shake my head. “I’m nothing. I was studying to become a Line Sanctum, is all.”

“A Line Sanctum? A healer?” he says, his eyebrows creasing. “Interesting. So the orders still hold strong outside this forest.”

“Haven’t they always held?”

He snorts. “What is it they say these days? Of the work of a Line Sanctum?”

“What?”

“What do they say of the work of a Line Sanctum?” he repeats, his tone impatient. “Every century craves its own words. What are the words of yours? Does it yet mean what it used to?”

“I—” I falter, still uncertain what he wishes to hear.

“Speak simply,” my brother Thry would have said.

“Tell him it’s none of his broken business,” Hadspen would then have answered. I can’t help the sad half smile that tilts my mouth.

Sylvain is still watching me, waiting.

“Well, through every person runs ten lines composed of light,” I begin. “These are meant for keeping the body and soul together. When these lines are damaged, by accident or injury or malice of any kind”—I wave my hand—“they can become twisted, dimmed; in some cases, torn; in the worst cases, killed.” I pause, feeling a bit foolish for my explanation. “So I work

to stabilize these lines or flare them into greater light. Just as a physician might splint a broken bone and order rest, I do this to the light lines, coaxing them to straighten, to become more stable, to grow brighter. And then, using that light, I am able to direct the healing of injuries in the rest of the body."

Sylvain gives me a bored response. "A rather simple way to speak of something far more complex and elegant than I think you understand. It was said differently in the centuries before. Have none of the ancient texts survived?"

I think I surprise him when my wistful smile is in full agreement. "I am afraid my knowledge comes from limited practice rather than thorough study of the ancient texts."

He grunts. "So you belong then to the Court of the Lights?"

"Yes."

"And you pray?"

"Of course," I answer. "Don't you?"

Sylvain laughs. "There's no Court nor Order here anymore, Ember. Whatever I thought of the Lights before, I've no hope in them now."

I open my mouth to speak, but he's turned on his heel and is moving in the direction the riders had come from. I put my gloved hands up to my mouth, trying to breathe warmth into them. The day is getting colder.

Before Sylvain disappears from my view, he turns and considers me again. "If you're working your way around the Pyre," he calls, "you have to come down past the stables." He looks up at the fading afternoon sky. "I'd do so now, before the Stone Six return."

Nodding, I wait until I can no longer hear his footsteps. When he's entered the stables, I run across the courtyard, almost slipping, until I have come to one of the stable walls. I catch my breath and then move past the door as fast as I am able—not wishing another interview with the woodsman. Putting the stable behind me, I continue following the walls of the Pyre.

This western facade is even more varied and interesting than what I've already seen. More windows, the same illustrious stonework, all created to the highest standards. The drifts of snow aren't as deep here, and it is easier to visually trace the angled faces of the building as I walk.

Hearing a sound in the forest behind me, I turn quickly.

Nothing. Only the sway of a pine bough as a bird takes flight.

I search among the trees a moment more.

Again, nothing.

Breathing slowly, I ball my fists for courage, then let my fingers spread out. It is beautiful, this forest, solid, aged, yet with such detailing: a sprig of green growing boldly out of place; carmine red berries staining a snowdrift; ancient trunks whose bark is defined by veins of ice. And what began as a cloudy day has given way to a complex weaving of light and shadow, the sun reaching through the sky's curtain and glancing off the silver lines of the forest's understory.

Almost my shoulders relax. Almost I give passport to the stillness of the place. But then I feel it. Before I can see anything, a dread, a powerlessness, makes my stomach writhe. I look about, my eyes unable to confirm the fear that chokes my throat. A brave reach of sunlight catches on a gleam of metal. My heart stumbles.

The Death Bleak is walking towards me through the trees.

"Life's blood." The words come before my fear can silence my own tongue.

He is fixated so intently on uttering some incantation that he does not see me until I stumble backwards to get out of his way. I step on a twig in the process, and at the snap of sound, he lifts his head slowly, his blank eyes finding mine: first, in confusion; then, in recognition; and finally, in accusation.

"What are you doing in the forest?"

That voice. I feel a tremendous rush of wild fear and stammer, "I—Miranda said you want—wanted me out of the Pyre."

He quirks his head with an impatience that reminds me of an animal's. "What the hell am I to do with you?"

Let me go back home, I think. And he winces.

"Blood spells," he curses. "I'd forgotten how your thoughts can pierce."

So had I, and it rattles me. I am unable to keep from shivering.

His eyes are still indefinable, but he looks with scrutiny towards my face. "I haven't heard you once since we returned. Why?" When I don't respond, he takes a step closer.

My lungs revolt, filling with the poison that is *him*, and a weak sound comes out as a result. I hate feeling so undone.

"Is it the distance?" he asks, as if I should know. Another step closer. "Is it the bell tower?"

I couldn't tell you, I think.

Another step. He is trying to push me to lose ground, to fall back in retreat.

Flee. I want to flee, to run. But the trees around me remain anchored, and I feel them pressing me to do the same. Trembling, I pull the corners of my mouth tight and brave squaring my weight between my two feet. No matter how my legs are shaking. No matter how the bile rises in my throat.

He slows his approach, his eyelids dropping in consideration, and then his face settles into a hollow stillness. "You are a brave nothing."

Not so very brave, I think—the same words I'd just said to the woodsman. The Bleak raises an eyebrow at that, and I bite my lip in frustration. I hadn't meant him to hear anything.

"Kings have trembled before me," he says. "The strongest of their soldiers have run, encompassed by fear. Yet you stand."

Still shaking, I lift my chin.

"Brave nothing indeed. Do not wander far into this forest," he orders, his voice turning unbearably sharp. "If you run, I will know and send my guards to cut your throat." He steps away from me, adjusting his gloves, his lip curling in menace. The gums around his teeth are black. "That is to say, if I do not do it myself." With that, he steps past me, and before my blood has stopped ringing in my ears, he has crossed the gardens and disappeared into the Pyre.

What havoc the Bleak leaves in his wake.

A breeze sweeps around me, over my shoulders, and against the Pyre, as if it would disperse the stale death of his presence. And I think I can feel the displeasure of the trees at my back. As I calm my own blood, I can almost hear them whispering of the many ways he has trespassed against them.

* * *

I finish stalking the perimeter and push my way in through the back door. Miranda welcomes me into the kitchens—a room half set below ground level, only a line of small windows letting in the natural light. She feeds me a simple meal. I eat but do not speak.

"He's in a bit of a bother today," Miranda says, watching me push most of my food about my plate rather than eating it. "So I'm going to take you up to the bell tower suite before he can remember he has to deal with you. I

don’t like it. Any of it, mind you. But I think it better if he sees you tomorrow, when his own storm has blown over.”

I don’t tell her I’d already encountered him in the forest. Instead, my only answer is a blink and a glance towards one of the small windows in the kitchen. Dusk has come early. I let a sigh escape, and Miranda glances up at me from the dish she’s washing. At home, our winter is reasonable. We have snow, yes, and a few weeks when darkness captures the late afternoon rather than waiting for night. But even knowing it would end in a month’s time did not make it less difficult for me. If winter at the Pyre is endless, I wonder how long I can hold off the melancholy of the cold days.

“Night’s coming on anyway,” Miranda continues, breaking into my thoughts, “and it’s best you be abed and asleep. Things happen in the dark that one should steer clear of.”

III

“My name is Ember,” I mutter to myself.

It is deep night, and I sit before the fire in my room. I am unable to anchor myself to—or find myself in—this fate. My mind has no solid ground. This inability to feel what is real has caught me off my guard. I feel so distant from myself. I’ve been taken out of the familiar, taken away from home and family. The walls and hills that bound my world, the conversations, the roles assumed—all these are now gone, and I find myself scrambling to understand what it is that remains.

And so for an hour I’ve been mumbling things, both plain and nonsensical, as reminders. As a constellation to point me towards home. As a star to point me towards myself.

“My name is Ember,” I repeat. “I pick blackberries along the river and wild strawberries over the hill. Hadspen and I race every summer and”—I lift both eyebrows for honesty—“I always lose.”

I love the beauty of the snow. I do not like the premature dusk. I am braver than I’d supposed. I am more frightened than I would have thought possible. My small work, which I’ve only begun to understand—that of a

simple healer, of a Line Sanctum—seems to catch interest among this strange company of figures stolen from time, but I do not understand why.

I press my fingers to my temple, a small attempt to relieve the ache in my head, and continue to inventory. I despise the darkness of the Bleak and fear the chaos around him. I crave light and believe in its power still. I miss my father. I ache for the companionship of my brothers. For the fortitude of Hadspen. For the wit and wisdom of Thry. They are part of me, no matter what else changes.

Catching in a quick breath, I push such recollections away, fearing that if I don't, these feelings will shred me. But my wisp yet hovers about my shoulders. And earlier in the evening, when I'd looked at my reflection in a window, my face was still the same: curious grey eyes, pale pink lips, and dark brown hair falling to my waist.

My father always said my eyebrows arched just enough to make someone uncertain.

"If you would talk more," he'd say, "people wouldn't have to wonder where they stand with you."

I would always brush my hair behind my right ear and press my lips together before saying, "I find, Father, that most people are content just to have me listen."

He would make a disapproving sound but let it pass.

As I stare into the fire now, I move my hair behind my right ear and press my lips together from habit. My father was right that I preferred to listen. It was the only way to learn as I could not grasp letters. They would never stay still on the page for me, a strange burden I could never understand. I learned every letter, I knew sounds and combinations. My father would ask me how to spell a word, and I would rattle it off. Armed with this knowledge, I would open a book. Nothing. It would all shift, change, denying me entrance. The same when I wished to write. Why could my brothers read and write with ease while I stared helplessly at each page?

"But life does not always offer understanding; it offers a road to continue traveling," I whisper to the fire, one of the things I remember my mother telling me.

The flicker of a thought touches my face and I dare a smile. I do draw. A small talent. My father, with a few deft strokes, could set a horse in full motion. I am not so gifted, but drawing was a way to catalogue a world I

could not capture with words. So I would sketch and scribble most days. I wonder if there is any paper about the Pyre? A bit of charcoal or an ink pen?

Abandoning the fire, I cross my room and disappear beneath the blankets of my bed, trying to shake off the strange feeling that I am exactly where I am supposed to be.

* * *

Come morning, the ritual is the same. Miranda helps me prepare a bath, combs my tangled hair, braids it—as if I were still a child—and helps me dress. She then pats my shoulder before leading me down through the endless Pyre and leaving me at the back door.

I take a western path and walk for hours—careful to keep watch for the Bleak. I try establishing myself among whatever good is rooted in this Forest of Naeethe, but my prayers are unfocused and I'm not certain if it is working. It is a long day, a longer afternoon. Upon my return to the Pyre, Miranda serves me dinner, scolding me for having missed the midday meal and returning near dark.

"I want you in your rooms," she says forcefully.

Soon I sit again before the fire, wide-eyed and restless, watching pine logs consumed by the hungry light. There are noises coming from the corridors, not of the night forest but of movement. I can also hear voices, and for a few minutes, a song is carried on the edge of the wind outside my door. Be it men or ghosts or servants trapped out of time, I know not.

Along with what Father calls my insight and resilience is a rather bad habit of meeting my fate head-on. Days when Hadspen and Thry had accompanied me into some small patch of mischief, it was always I who confronted Father afterwards, anxious for my consequence to be decided. Better to have knowledge of what lies before me than a false hope of lessening the blow by running away from its swing.

So hearing voices and footsteps, seeing a few lights burning in windows of the other wings, I know I cannot sit still. I stand, grabbing my cloak. Moving my fingers through the light of my wisp and telling it to stay in the bell tower suite, I walk towards my door. Bracing myself against the biting cold, I reach for the handle, turn it, and pull the door open, stepping out into the corridor. The wind carries my hair up and flings it about my neck. I

clear the wild strands away with my fingers as I move along the breezeway, towards the inner galleries and rooms of the Pyre.

Inside, most of the corridors are swathed in deep night, but noises still ring up the stones and voices call in conversant tones just beyond each corner. But at every turn, no one is there.

Twice, one of the Bleak's guards passes me in the halls, armed, eyes dangerous. I duck into the shadows of an adjoining hallway, and they never seem to see me. A clock sounds, followed by a single chime—it is one in the morning.

"But I did clean it through, Miranda," I hear a voice say as I slip through a gallery on the second floor. "It's the first place I go after I've seen to his chambers."

"And I'm not saying you neglected the work, Celia," Miranda answers as the two come into my view. Miranda is speaking with a young woman who looks my own age, the same one who had rushed past us the day before. I pull myself deeper into an alcove behind a solitary statue. "But the master raged at me this morning that the library was left unkempt—and so, I am telling you to be more particular about your work. He said there was also a memory set loose that was driving him mad. I know you are not responsible for his dark rages, but even so—" And their voices disappear as they leave the gallery.

I stay crouched, breathing deeply from wariness rather than from exertion, and my thoughts call up the image of my warm bed in the bell tower suite.

"Don't be afraid, Ember," I tell myself. "You can't learn anything hiding away up there. Or," I add, "whispering behind statues."

But what if the Bleak can hear my thoughts from wherever he is now?

The snare of this thought gives me pause. I lean back against a wall, my shoulder blades meeting the stone first, and I clasp my hands together tightly. He hasn't heard me, hasn't *been* hearing me inside the Pyre.

"If we're more than a room's length apart, he might not be able to," I argue against my fears.

And so I continue.

After several turns, my hand touching the beautiful stonework or brushing against a window, I find myself wandering the third floor. I enter a long, dimly lit gallery lined with arched windows, statues, and great portraits. A long bench and a few chairs are set against the wall.

As I walk farther in—the carpets lying over the stone floors soft beneath my feet—I again hear voices. Bringing my breath in close, I look around. But no one is here. The voices are faint; they sound departed from this world. It is as if every night the Pyre dreams through a thousand years of memories.

Standing in the middle of the dark gallery, I'm watching as snow begins to fall outside the long bank of gloriously wrought windows, when I hear a noise at my back. But it doesn't sound like a faded whisper. It sounds like very real footsteps.

Turning around, searching for the deepest shadow I can disappear into, I notice a small stairway behind me. It goes five steps up and leads me to a hallway, dark save for a slender line of firelight pulsing at the far end. It is coming from beneath a set of two large doors. I step towards them cautiously. When I reach the doors, I realize that one of them has been left slightly ajar. Lifting my hand, I place my fingertips against it, and the door gives way without a sound.

Slipping into the room, I nearly run right into the chest of one of the Bleak's guards. Biting my tongue from surprise, I sidestep, lifting my hands to brace myself for an attack. But the soldier does not stop or flinch. He reaches for the door as if he's not seen me and leaves the room. I stay frozen in place, my hands still lifted before me.

The man had looked right through me, as if I'd been invisible.

Bringing my hands slowly to my sides, I step away from the door into the nearest corner. The room is dim—only a fire burning in a hearth on the far wall, flanked by two chairs, illuminating the space. But there is enough light for me to see the room for what it is: an extensive library.

There are thousands upon thousands of books in various shelves, some set in rows, others along the wall, with tall windows stretching floor to ceiling in between. Finding myself pressed against a bookcase, I turn and take a half step away, my fingers reaching reverently towards the spines on the shelf. I try to make out their names. It is no use. Just as I could never make letters do my bidding before, I've no cause to believe they will do it for me now. Pulling my hand reluctantly away from the elusive worlds before me, I turn and step deeper into the room.

It is—amazingly enough—a peaceful place. Filling my lungs with the smell of ancient books, I let myself relax. It feels not only natural…it feels right. Thick rugs of varied color and pattern are overlapping each other on

the floor. The wood of the shelves has dimension and distance in its grains, glowing in its own right. The ceiling is set high, probably reaching up to the floor of the fifth story, but this height does not diminish the intimate peace of the space. And there, sitting beneath a bank of windows, is a long desk littered with papers, black scribbles crossing the pages.

My mouth silently forms the word *paper,* and just as I am moving towards it I hear a restless noise coming from near the fire. I shrink back again into the corner. There, in one of the chairs, a dark shape moves. A swirl of chaos rises around the movement like a gust of wind lifting dust from the road. The Bleak.

I cover my mouth with my hands and drop down, balancing on the balls of my feet. I hold my breath from panic—he must have been hearing all of my thoughts. But—but he does not turn. Nor does not seem to notice.

Crawling backwards, I rise only when I've come to the door left ajar and then slip into the hallway. The bare reality of what it might mean to skulk around an enchanted stronghold rushes through me, and I run down the stairs, through the gallery, and towards any direction that might look familiar. I want the safety of the bell tower suite and nothing else.

Careening around a corner on the third floor, I almost crash right into the young woman Miranda had called Celia.

"Pardon," I say, lifting a hand and trying to balance myself. Celia, having been bent over a bucket of suds, straightens herself, her face white from the startle. She looks right at me, or rather—I hold my breath—right through me.

"Miranda?" Celia calls out, her voice nervous. "Miranda, is that you? Did a memory get out I've not yet sorted?"

I feel my lips part slowly as I step away. Celia can't see me. Just as the Bleak's guard in the library had not seen me. Just like the Bleak had not appeared to hear my thoughts.

Again, as if I am invisible.

I do not wait to test this theory on any of the Bleak's other servants. After a discouraging number of wrong turns, I find my way back up the stairs and into the partially open corridor that leads to the bell tower and my own chambers.

Entering the warm rooms with relief, I close the door behind me and lean against it, catching my breath. Miranda had warned me that strange things happened at night at the Pyre. It now seems that I am one of them.

* * *

Miranda has to wake me when she arrives at the bell tower suite come morning.

"You can wander as you choose," she says in a resigned manner. "The master would say nothing concerning you, only that he'll see to you when the time comes. When he's not distracted, I'd imagine," she adds dryly.

"Distracted by what?"

"Oh"—she tightens her face and her winter-snow eyes shift a shade darker—"whatever evil mischief he's preparing himself for." With those words, Miranda looks even more burdened, like she did the first time I'd seen her. "On second thought, be careful what you're about. Don't wander into anything that doesn't sit right."

I want to laugh. None of this is sitting right.

Miranda sees me into the bath, and I can hear her fussing about the bedroom as I soak in the warm water of the large copper tub. She was right about the view, a full wall of diamond-paned windows overlooking the long stretch of snowbound trees. It does make one feel like they're with the angels. And I amend my previous thought. This bell tower suite does sit right. So right that I remember the whisper of premonition from two nights back, that this is exactly where I am supposed to be.

Within the hour I am outside, bound up against the cold in slightly ill-fitting boots. I try again to understand the nature of my strange captivity—the burden about this place that weighs down on me, the inability to breathe as deeply as I need to feel whole. The strength of the bell tower and the library, and the oppression felt everywhere else. All the trees edging the forest pathways seem to endure a similar struggle, suffering beneath a strain that may someday break the very deep places inside of themselves. It weighs on them, and I suspect that if I remain here too long, I might succumb to a like sickness, my body unable to bear the rot emanating from the presence of the Bleak and his magicks, one day collapsing in on myself.

The shimmer of cold in the air and the subsequent promise of a frigid day lead me to explore the stables, hoping to find a bit of warmth. Listening at the door—I've no interest in encountering the Bleak's soldiers—and hearing no footsteps, I pass through the doorway, surprised to find the stables are indeed occupied, and not only by several horses but also by one very old man, seeing to their hay and oats.

“Ah, good morning,” he says as he’s pitching straw into a stall. “You’re the lass we’ve all been curious about.”

“Am I?” I ask.

“Daresay you are, from the talk.”

Rubbing my cold hands together, I answer, “It’s a rather peculiar place to be, circling the rumor mill of such an ancient seat.”

“Aye.” Then he laughs. “Peculiar indeed. Indeed.”

“You, then, are another servant of the Bleak?”

“My name is Balint.” I note that the man had answered a question I did not ask rather than answering the one I did. “I’ve lived here a good long while. My wife made that cape you’re wearing.”

“Miranda is your wife?” I find a true smile crossing my lips for the first time since being torn away from Hill House.

“Aye. These many years yet.”

“She’s taken good care of me.”

Balint’s face creases in an expression I can’t read. “Always has taken care, Miranda has,” he finally says. “She’ll keep you as best she can, child.”

I step towards one of the horses in the stable and reach my hand out. He doesn’t come to me, just stares, then snorts, then turns his attention elsewhere.

I look back towards the old man, “Balint?”

He wordlessly encourages me to continue.

“I—it doesn’t seem—I don’t suppose there is any safety here.” I press my lips together a moment, then speak more hurriedly. “But I can’t help feel that there is still a deep goodness here, in the forest, as with the Pyre. Miranda has said as much.”

“And do you trust my Miranda?” he asks.

I fold my arms and look over my shoulder towards the Pyre, watching my breath twist in the cold air. “My instincts tell me she’s a good woman.”

“That she is.” Balint sits down, draws the air in through his nose, and then frowns. “Aye, the forest is good, but it’s under siege, as is the Pyre. Whatever spell the young master has worked is counter to the forest, you see.” Balint holds out his left hand and then grips his left wrist with his right hand. His fingers curl, but his hand is captive. “It’s like this,” he says. “The young master has taken the forest and gripped it by a spell so that it can still move its fingers but not its hand. It’s lost much of its ability to act as it would, bound by the master’s pursuits.”

I look at his hand—the wrinkles of his skin, the effort he makes to twist his wrist—and yes, that is how it feels to be here, suffocated and tied.

The woodsman—Sylvain—had said there were four servants at the Pyre beyond the six menacing guards. They would be Miranda and Balint, the maid Celia, and Sylvain. I think of all the voices I'd heard, those Miranda had called memories, and wonder…

"Thank you, Balint, for speaking with me."

"Aye, thank you for visiting, lass. 'Tis a strange thing to have such a young one walking about the place."

"It's a strange place," I answer, half-under my breath. Bidding farewell, I leave the stables and return to the paths surrounding the Pyre.

* * *

Walking the trails about the Pyre, my wisp following at my heels, I debate for hours whether I should venture out again when night comes. I want to return to the library. Despite being unable to read the books, there must be volumes filled with botanical drawings and maps, charts that I can decipher. In a library so big, how can there not be? To say nothing of the paper and charcoal. I could draw. All these hours sitting in my rooms, I could be drawing the Pyre, the people, anything to keep my mind occupied in more than just worry and wonder.

I am too nervous to return during the day, even when I see the Bleak walking out among the distant trees, for during the day I can most assuredly be seen. But my curiosity wants to know if I will be taken invisible every night or if that was just one occurrence among the many uncanny things of the Pyre.

Admittedly, I also wish to return because the library is the only room in the Pyre that has the same sweet undertones as my bell tower suite—*despite* the presence of the Bleak. His darkness had not felt so miserable in that room, as if the books themselves know how to dissipate the concentration of the Bleak's ambitions. I had felt a strong, clear power in that place, and I want—or rather crave—more of it. Strange that the Bleak had chosen to spend part of his night in such a place. I can't imagine it would be a great comfort to him.

After I return to the Pyre, Miranda feeds me and shoos me up to my rooms. I pace for hours. When it's past midnight, I make my choice.

Finding a way through the Pyre is easier tonight, and I move more confidently, taking time to explore the quiet corridors of the many stories. Walking towards a wide spiral staircase on the fifth floor, I hear footsteps sounding up the stairwell. With as much combative determination as I can muster, I resist the temptation to step backwards into the deeper shadows and instead pull my hands into fists and walk straight towards the noise. As I come to the crest of the staircase and begin my descent, I see Balint climbing the stairs with a box in hand. It is filled with something that shimmers, though I can't see it well. He is whistling an old tune and passes me without turning his head, even as I lift my hand to catch his sight. He does not see me. I breathe out, a nervous smile on my face—for I can walk the Pyre at night unseen.

I go to the library.

The Bleak is in the same chair as the night before, sitting still save for when he turns the page of the book he is reading. His darkness is again visible, like the troubled air just above a fire, but it clings only to his person.

I lost my way when trying to find the kitchens, I think very purposefully in his direction, standing against the doors, my hands nervously pressing into their carved patterns.

The Bleak does not respond. Nor does he shift as I step closer.

Over the course of a small eternity, I begin to work my way past him, pausing behind the empty chair that flanks the opposite side of the fire from his own—the chair that's only a few paces from the table scattered with papers. He pauses in his reading and looks in my direction. His gaze holds me hostage. Then he shifts the expression on his face. In confusion? I cannot tell. Seeing nothing and catching none of my thoughts, he returns to his reading.

Sitting not nearly as hunched now as he'd been in the coach, his shoulders are straighter, an elbow on the arm of the chair. He holds his book so confidently. Words must be easy work for him, considering how quickly his eyes move across the page. I feel jealous of this Death Bleak—a thought that strikes me as desperate, and without thinking I make a noise of self-ridicule.

The Bleak looks up again, towards me, and I clap my hands over my mouth. His eyes search the place where I stand, and his features, however

marred by the thin haze, appear curious. He lifts a hand to his face, narrowing his eyes for a moment.

My thoughts. Is he hearing traces of them? I quiet my mind, telling myself I should go, even if it means abandoning the waiting paper.

Then the library door opens.

I duck down behind the chair, wincing as my knee makes a sound, and look towards the shadowed figure who enters. It is an old hag whose hand is wrapped around a staff of warped wood and whose eyes move like a patient snake. While the room's clear undertones may have blunted the Bleak's chaos, this woman spreads her evil out like a serpent in the sun. The library does not like it, and neither do I.

Crouching farther into the shadow of the chair, I wonder if she might, by some twist of her strange magick, be able to see me, while the others have not.

"You choose a singular place to pass your dark nights," she says, and her voice is worn, scratched as a thistle. "This library has far too many Light offerings in its intentions. I don't care for it."

The Bleak has yet to turn his head away from his book, but he looks tremendously uninterested in opening up his actions for discussion.

"Why does a Witch of your interests find herself at the Pyre on a night such as this?" he asks, his voice sounding pebbled and rough, a darker version of the hag's.

The Witch makes a noise, all black as it rolls in her throat. I realize it is her laugh. "You know what I am about; you know why I come at all. But we will get to that errand in my own time." She steps closer to where I am crouching and leans heavily on her staff. "Tell me of this maid you have brought back to the Pyre."

The Bleak turns his head and moves his empty eyes towards hers, and from what I can see in his flat expression, he has no intentions of explaining why he does anything.

"Don't deny it," says the Witch. "I could feel her myself while coming through the forest, a journey much delayed as the trees did not want me here. You really must break this land of its holds and inheritances before long. I know not how you remain here; I would go mad."

"Not such a foreign state for you, Meridaithe," the Bleak answers.

"Witty child," she says dryly.

“You are not so old, Witch.” He smirks. “Now speak your purpose and return to the cold night.”

“I don’t ask this question for amusement and games, fallen one. The taste of her power is troubling.”

I swallow, but my mouth is dry. The Bleak shifts, his eyes never leaving Meridaithe’s face, and brings a hand up, moving his fingers along the line of his mouth in thought.

“She is a Third, then?” Meridaithe asks, seeking confirmation.

“Yes.”

She laughs, and I wince at the sound. “You have a Third sleeping under your roof? You are playing at chances now, aren’t you? And what? Less than a year out from becoming a Beast of Ten?”

“Much sooner than that,” the Bleak responds.

I grip the side of the chair with my fingers and purse my lips. I have only ever heard cautious whispers regarding the Beast of Ten, an evil more mythical than real. I know nothing of what it is save the faint legends spoken of the few who had ever chosen the horrors of that path.

“Where did you find the girl?” the Witch inquires.

“I’ve no intention of telling you anything about her, nor about what I aim to do.”

“The blood of a Third could get you close, but not close enough.”

The Death Bleak tilts his head. “I have already considered that.”

As difficult as it is to decipher the movements of this Meridaithe, so wrinkled and menacing, I can tell she is perplexed.

“Does she sleep?” she asks.

“Yes.”

“You’re certain?”

He does not reply to the hag.

I’m bent closer to the floor now, struggling beneath the weight of their malintent. Combined, it is too overwhelming. Pulling from the strength of the room, I focus on the light of the fire. It flares, the flames roaring several inches taller, enough to turn the eyes of both the Bleak and the Witch towards it.

She takes a step back, her mouth moving in apparent distaste. “Those of us who work the Void will not be pacified if she unsettles your course.”

The Bleak gives a sharp laugh. “Her course will break before it alters mine.”

“A Third turned dark can be very thick in that chasm,” she says, pressing a long-nailed finger against her mouth. “If you want to use her for your own purposes, you must twist her first, make her vile, and put that vileness to work. She could be an Opaque, a nice accent to any Bleak, not to mention a Beast of Ten.”

Whispering a silent prayer to the Lights, I grasp onto my own resilience as best I can and flare the light of the fire once more. The Witch steps back from discomfort, closer to where I’m hiding.

“Perhaps I do not want to twist the Third,” the Bleak says, responding to her suggestion.

The eyes of the Witch dart from the fire to his face. “You speak foolishness. The Pyre fights for too much light as it is. Do not tempt what you cannot conquer.”

He laughs. “Your worries do not trouble me, Witch.”

“Beware,” she says, moving her fingers, stiff like the joints of a dead tree, through the air. “You trifle not with small powers.”

He blows out his breath, amused. Raising an eyebrow, he tilts his face away from the firelight, and I can’t read it for the shadow. “She did not even know she was a Third. I’ve no worry of her coming to understand what that means.”

“The Lights favor the Thirds,” she presses.

“And I have made bargains with those more powerful.”

“Arrogant,” she snorts and waves him off. “You are yet a step away from Beast of Ten and can always fail—”

“I could burn you, Meridaithe,” snaps the Bleak, the sharp edge of his voice cutting her off. “I could burn you in the courtyard and siphon your prophecy. Do not irritate me.”

“My magick is older than you, boy,” Meridaithe spits.

“And mine is more potent.”

“You think so?” she counters. From the layers in her voice, I know she disagrees.

“You’re a split. Your magick could have been used towards good or ill, and you chose ill.”

“While your own magick…?”

He turns towards the fire, and I can see him in profile from where I crouch. “I wasn’t created for darkness. Quite the opposite. I am born of a full rebellion, and you cannot match that. So,” he looks back towards the

Witch, his expression flat and awful, “do not fuss yourself over an ignorant Third.”

Meridaithe makes a noise and rests her hand on the chair above me. I pull back, just a touch, but she stops and her eyes move about the room, her shoulders turning. Then she seems to rest her gaze where I am crouching in the shadows, breathing as quietly as I can.

“And have you considered,” she says slowly, her voice turning almost into a whisper, “that she may be a Virtus Third?”

The Bleak laughs. “As rare as the Beast of Ten are the Virtus Third.”

“And here sits a Death Bleak on the verge of becoming Beast of Ten. Why not find a Virtus Third to counter? The Lights might act in such a way. The Lights will want to stop you.”

“A being of such power requires more training and intelligence than this creature possesses.”

“All the same, do not hold council in the first four hours of the night,” she says.

The side of his mouth twitches. “Those are the strongest hours of the blood gain.”

“And the hours in which a Virtus Third may elude that which is evil,” Meridaithe replies.

My neck pricks and my lungs fight with my efforts to breathe in silence. I do not know what she means, that a Virtus Third can elude evil in the darkest hours of night, but the thought of how I can move about the Pyre undetected grips my mind.

The Bleak moves towards the edge of his chair and waves a dismissive hand. “She thinks her Ilaria is a wisp.” His tone is mocking.

Meridaithe’s strange body shifts. “You must tell me now, why did you bring her here?”

“I am not so much a fool as to count you a confidant, Meridaithe.” The Bleak stands, his forgotten book tumbling to the floor, and he turns his shoulders towards her. The bits of metal on his clothes catch the light of the fire. “As a Beast of Ten, I owe no allegiance to your sour magick. Our bands are separate.”

“You are *nearly* a Beast of Ten,” Meridaithe says, holding up a finger. “Not quite. A Death Bleak you yet be.”

“I am closer than anyone has managed to come in the last two thousand years,” his cold voice answers. “I am not there yet, but you hold no sway

over how I work my course."

"She could be enough to secure your place." Meridaithe makes a motion. "The blood of a Virtus Third would be enough to make you the strongest Beast of Ten we've record of."

The Bleak's eyes are hungry and angry together. He speaks so harshly it hurts my ears, and I close my eyes. "*Never* speak to me of the maid again," he bites. "It is not your business to know what I will do."

"Foolishness," she spits. "You know I come to speak Bewares. That is my course, and now you shall have yours. Beware the Third beneath your roof—she could cause you to fall."

The Bleak looks unimpressed. "Have you ever given me a Beware I have not crushed?"

"You've crushed everything," she concedes, "the Bewares, the prophecy, all of it."

I open my eyes once again and look towards his face. His hazy smile is sickening.

"Yet…?" he asks, expecting a contradiction from the Witch.

"Yet I have another Beware: remember who would keep you from what you've sought this long time."

"So you have warned these last three hundred years."

"Indeed." The Witch shifts her weight. "And again I warn you against yourself. Do not get in your own way."

The Bleak gives no answer to this, moving his hand slowly across his jaw, his blank eyes looking towards the fire. I can feel him pushing his defiant darkness towards her, and she brushes her hand before her face, acting amused, even though I can feel her discomfort.

And then, with a final look about the room, she leaves without speaking further. I say a prayer of thanksgiving to the Lights, hoping to never see that Witch again.

The Bleak sits down again in his chair beside the fire, unmoving. The book he had been reading is left bent on the floor. His face, usually closed to clear interpretation, looks as if it has been left ajar, and I can see a conflict there. Things are weighing on his mind, more so than he shared with Meridaithe, perhaps more so than he has shared with anyone. His breathing is uneven, and he lifts a hand up, flicking his thumb lightly against his fingers. There is dried blood around his fingernails. Whose blood I do not know. But I can almost taste the iron of it on my tongue.

The chime on a clock sounds—half past two—so I pull myself back and stand, moving as quietly as I can across the room and out through the doorway. I wish to never be in the same room with him again. He is a revulsion, his presence laced with every evil, even in the strength of the library.

I race down the hall, through the galleries and corridors of the Pyre, up, up, up to my own bell tower suite—where the sweet air comes off the forest in resistance to the stench of the Bleak's works. I pull the fresh air into my body, clearing the rank air from my lungs.

I must leave here. I must disappear. As I grip the stone banister that looks over the forest, I begin to beg the Lights for this. That I can steal away into the woods and—

No! something cries beneath my feet. The stones are clamoring through my confusion. I lift a hand to my face and focus. Then I can feel it, a soft humming, a tone of question and of pleading.

Do not go. Do not leave. Do not abandon what you were created to save.

"I'm not here by any choice of my own," I cry aloud. "I am not here for any great purpose! I am here by strange accident."

A Virtus Third is always delivered to their task.

"I know nothing of the Virtus Third," I whisper.

IV

I sleep late, my dreams full of struggle. Come morning, I lift myself up onto the wide windowsill behind my bed, pressing my temple against the glass. I know little of Thirds, and the tales of the Virtus Thirds are even rarer. My mind wants to reject the suggestion of me being anything beyond a young Line Sanctum in training, a Line Sanctum who can't even read the Curatorium. But my heart rings like a bell, and I cannot slow my pulse.

It had not been what I was expecting, training to be a Line Sanctum, studying healing and the work of the Lights. The memories of my learning are vivid.

It is spring. My mother has just died—my eleven years now unsteady under my feet. A Seer comes through our nation. Father offers him respite, and he eats his meals with us, spending the intervening hours discussing things of the world and the order of the Courts with Father, while my brothers and I look on.

He spends three days at Hill House then says farewell at dusk. Chill air; the thick spring grass looking almost blue in the evening shadow; a small, misshapen cherry tree by the door, bedecked with blossoms. We stand by the door—Hadspen, Thry, and me—watching my father bidding the Seer farewell. The old man looks back towards us, waving, and I shyly raise my hand. Then the Seer pauses, considering us three again, before he whispers something to my father. Father nods and looks towards us: First at Thry, speaking in a low voice to the Seer, making small motions with his artist's hands. Then they both look at me. The Seer holds me in the consideration of his gaze, then places a hand on Father's shoulder. Father's eyes flick towards me. He makes an answer to an unasked question and bids the Seer farewell.

The next morning, Father tells me I am going to study as a Line Sanctum.

I do not speak, but Thry asks the question in my mind, "You mean Ember is to become a physician.

I nod, and he smiles.

"No one wants Ember as a physician," Hadspen states.

"Shove your face in a wasp's nest, Hads."

"Shove your—"

"Gentlemen," Father warns, quelling any further fraternal contributions with a sharpened look. "To answer Thry's question: Whereas a physician seeks cure for the body, a Line Sanctum finds healing through the light lines. It is holy, from the Courts in the Order of the Lights. To be very skilled takes dedication and diligence."

I swallow and swing my leg, my toes skimming the smooth stones of the floor. "Who will teach me?"

Father sits back in his chair, musing a moment, his eyes conflicted. "There is a university in a nation east of here, where such healing is taught. But our little nation of Avaine cannot afford to pay the reimbursement for such training, without burdening the people. And your reading…"

My cheeks turn pink.

"Let her take my tuition and run for it," Hadspen offers. "I don't want to go to university."

Father ignores him. "We have the complete Curatorium in the library, and Line Sanctums have passed through Avaine from time to time. You will be taught."

Thry pulls me aside after Father leaves. "The Seer told Father that your path would be different, that you should not learn the traditional way, that you weren't to go to study at the university."

"How do you know?" I ask.

But Thry does not give me an answer.

And so my training began. Father sent me to the physician a few times each week, to learn what I could: how to prepare poultices and salves; how to set a bone; and how to sew closed a split in the skin. I did not feel a natural predisposition for the work, but with two brothers, I could not help but have practice and feel useful in it. Only when a practicing Line Sanctum came through the nation last summer did I feel that perhaps my calling had not been given amiss.

She is a tall woman, patient when people are sincere, uninterested when they are not. It is she who draws a map of the body and explains, "Through every person runs tens lines composed of light. These are meant for keeping body and soul together." She shows me how to place my hands over a patient's wound to feel the light lines: if they are straight or tangled, if they are strong or weak, if they are pure or corrupted. "You flare a line like you

would stoke a fire," she instructs, showing me how to harmonize my thoughts. "Pour power into them, thus causing the light to expand and pulse."

Hadspen laughs every time I practice finding—and flaring—his light lines.

Thry is quieter, listening as I feel for the light beneath my fingertips, reaching his own mind towards mine. "You've found it, the light line you're looking for," he says, even before I realize that I have.

Miranda enters the bell tower suite, interrupting my wandering thoughts, tsking when she sees me. "You look like you've not slept two hours together." After her eyes canvass my face, she frowns. "You carry long thoughts, but your eyes are bright. What have you been at, child?"

I shake my head, feeling less certain now of where I stand in this battle than I did before overhearing the Bleak and the Witch. I am the least of the Line Sanctums. That is my calling. I am not a Third. Thry, wise and intuitive, with his undercurrents of strength, he is the Third, is he not?

Perhaps he is not. Perhaps… But I most certainly am not a Virtus Third, storied and revered, a being of great standing before the Lights.

"You've been too much alone," Miranda continues, "as I told the master. 'She needs other people,' I said. 'Can't you remember how you hated too much solitude yourself as a youth?' But by the stars, he cannot remember such things, and he was so forceful about you keeping to yourself and out of the way. Well, I'm going to bring you down into the kitchens anyway and keep you some company…since he's just now ridden out with the guards and won't be back for some days yet."

"He's gone?"

"Aye."

My heart gives a long sigh of utter relief. The Bleak is gone from the Pyre.

"What are you smiling at?"

And I am smiling. Covering my mouth with my hand, feigning a yawn, I shake my head.

"I know what it is, child," Miranda says. "You can feel the Pyre's own alleviation. It's how it always feels when he's ridden away. When the master is gone, even the birds sing louder. Breathe the air, child, and enjoy the light while you may. For be sure he will return soon enough." She

begins to fuss with the blankets I'd twisted in my restless sleep. "With his departure comes pain to others, and with his return comes storm to us."

* * *

After preparing myself for the day, I help Miranda in the kitchen, pushing my worries about the Virtus Third away. She talks of life in the great castle as it was three hundred years ago.

"It was a place known for knowledge and wisdom. Rulers would come, seeking counsel from the master and lady of the Pyre. Artisans would come to create, philosophers to study. The Pyre was a place where those seeking the ancient rites and holy histories could learn of how the Court of Heaven interacted with the courts of men. Ah, child, it was a wonder. Treaties were signed. Wars ended and peace brokered. My stars, it was a sanctuary, a refuge, a temple." She sighs. "And for thousands of years, the bloodlines that ruled the Pyre were kept well, many serving in the Order of the Lights in significant callings. The Pyre was one of the Lights' gifts to the nations."

Miranda has me cutting a few vegetables for the stew that only I will eat, and I pause as she speaks, closing my eyes. I try to picture the Pyre as it once was, amazed that such a place had once been part of these lands. "So there were many people here? Were *all* the rooms filled?" I ask, resting my chin on one of my palms as I lean forward on the table.

"Oh yes. The Pyre had its own court, you see, and there were also many, be they rulers or creators, who took up residence for a time. Thousands of guests flowing in and out, hundreds of servants—it was its own kingdom, its own economy to a great degree.

"Balint and I met here, both servants: me, a woodman's daughter, and he, a merchant's son. All the ways a life can tell you that you should be together were told, and we were quite happy in our days."

"Did you have children?" I ask, pushing the cubed potato aside and cutting a few carrots.

"Aye."

"Where did they go?"

Miranda's face turns towards a long thought. "Fantina married a good man from a few nations up the way—better that she wasn't here to see the fall of this house—and my boy, Philippe was his name, he tried to bring the master back, tried to stop him from taking the path of becoming, well, what

he is now. They quarreled." The last word falls off Miranda's tongue in a way that makes me think of ruins, of something abandoned to moss and time and heartache.

She says no more, and I look away from her face towards my work.

I do not want to know what happened to her boy.

* * *

The Bleak's absence gives me a feeling of such freedom I'm giddy; it goes to my head like sunshine, and I am in my cloak and out of the Pyre as often as I am able, my wisp floating about my shoulders. The forest is a reflection of my own relief, and as I traipse about the wood ways, I hear more life and noise than I have before. Seemingly because no Bleak stalks these woods.

It reminds me of being home last summer. Hadspen had brought an instrument for music back from university. When he settled the long strings just right, they made a sound so well matched that we would sit listening for hours. That is how the tall trees of the forest feel, like each one is releasing a sound in perfect harmony with the others. The Bleak's presence distorts all about him, but for now we are free.

For hours I walk, pressing my hands against the trunks, gathering winterberries and bits of evergreen, claiming swaths of gold grasses from the small breaks of meadow. I create wreaths and put one on my door. I even make one for Miranda to hang in the kitchen and another for a room she uses for her personal pursuits.

A merchant train comes through and stops at the Pyre, trading money and supplies with Balint and Sylvain. I sit, watching the melee from the stairs outside the Pyre's front doors, and dream I can follow them out of the forest.

Each midnight, I slip down through the corridors of the Pyre and into the abandoned library. A fire is often kept burning, as in my own chambers. I have divided my time here between two pursuits: First, now having some paper and a bit of charcoal, I relieve my long hours by drawing the places of the Pyre. Second, when I have put my sketching down, I sort through the endless shelves of books.

Every time I find pictures or see something I recognize from the Curatorium, I stop and try to decipher what I've found. The first few nights, I had come across nothing of interest, but tonight, the fourth night, I

stumble across a worn volume of some age, containing drawings of the Pyre.

Spacing the books on the shelf so that it will not be missed, I tuck the volume under my cloak and disappear back up into my rooms.

The book is full of drawings of floor plans and room placement, of gardens, and of the Pyre's place within the greater Forest of Naeethe. But there are also descriptions and symbols and detailed carvings with long explanations that I cannot read. It feels like a map of the Pyre's holy powers. But the directions are beyond me.

Hours pass, and I have spent almost the entire night poring over the book. Tapping my finger against the yellowed page, I look away listlessly, never more frustrated with my inabilities. When the morning light begins to climb the eastern wall, I slip the book beneath my mattress, tuck my drawings under a cushion, and try to sleep, feeling the strength of the building pulsing beneath my body.

* * *

"What are you doing here?"

I spin around to see the young maid, Celia, watching me. I've been exploring the endless hallways of the Pyre and am standing in a dim corridor on the fifth floor. The beating of my heart stumbles from being startled, and I answer a bit hurriedly, "They call you Celia, do they not?"

She doesn't respond, just stares, silently reiterating her question. Celia has been the most inclined to ignore my presence of the few here at the Pyre.

"I grew tired of the cold outside," I explain, "and thought I would explore more of the Pyre."

"This corridor is not a place for wandering," Celia says, shifting the basket she is carrying onto her hip. Inside of the basket something gives a slight glimmer. "Have you heard anything?"

I actually had heard something. "Yes. There were—well, I thought I heard a voice in the room over there." I point down the corridor. "But when I glanced through the doorway, no one was in the room, as often happens here," I add.

Celia sighs. "Where was it? I must have missed one last night."

"Missed what?"

“A memory,” Celia says as she walks past me. “They get loose or lost or just appear.” She waves her hand in the air. “Which room did you say it was in?”

“The one just before you, on the left.”

Celia enters the dim room and I follow. There’s the sound of a voice again, someone laughing, and then it goes quiet.

“It’s only someone’s laugh,” Celia answers. “Here.” She turns around and hands me the basket, then goes into the dark alcove of the room. “They gather with the dust in the corners,” she says to me, and it sounds like she’s bending over.

Celia comes out of the alcove, shaking something just as she would a small cloth for washing. It glimmers in the darkness as she folds the strange matter and then sets it in the basket.

“I place them inside a wardrobe up on the eighth floor, if you ever see any,” Celia says, taking her basket back, and then, with a disapproving pinch of her lips, she leaves me alone in the room.

My mouth is open as I listen to her footsteps disappearing down the hallway, quite unsure what to think.

* * *

Nine days into our reprieve a storm rises up from the western horizon. Like hell itself is pulling at the currents, it tumbles into the forest and crashes against the Pyre. Lightning and thunder. Heavy clouds. Great gusts of snow. I have never seen anything like it.

I kneel on my bed, wrapped in blankets, staring out the diamond-paned windows of my bell tower rooms, and watch as the forest suffers beneath the weight of the storm’s menace. The lightning trips across itself, reaching towards the Pyre, screaming.

Another crash hits the Pyre, and my whole room shakes. I burrow into my bed and watch the shadows trembling against the walls. There is an endless roll of thunder so deep my entire body shudders. It feels like a death being declared. I shiver just as the wind mounts its rage. Such noise I have never experienced before, and the glass of each window shakes inside its lead casings, as if it is as frightened as I.

As the sound of the storm reaches its zenith, I pull myself into a ball, my eyes closed, feeling like the wildness ripping at the Pyre will tear me

apart before morning can come. I think of the worse storm I'd ever experienced at Hill House. It was when I was a child just turning tall.

The wind had raged, and rain like you never saw away from the coasts battered the land. In the morning, the three of us had tagged along behind our woodsman, who was showing Father a great tree in the north field that had been blown right out of the ground, the roots twisted taut, like the panicked fingers of a dying man.

I remember my father resting his hand on Hadspen's shoulder and saying to all of us, "Do you see how this tree's roots have grown around and around in circles, more concerned with itself than with stretching out into the earth? That is why it could not survive the storm."

I think now about the Bleak, not understanding how to puzzle out what had caused his roots to grow around himself. The lightning crashes again, and I wonder if he will survive the storm he has brought upon himself in this quest to become a Beast of Ten.

And between the cracks between wind and thunder, I think I hear the weak cry of a single bell.

* * *

In the burdened dawn, my hair askew, still in my nightdress, I stare out at the assailed forest. We have lost some of the great trees, though the number is hard to count through the several feet of new snow burying the world of the Pyre. There is a knock at the door and it opens. I study Miranda's face as she enters my room and joins me at the window. She looks no better than I.

"Oh child, I would have come up—"

"But it would not have been safe to cross the open corridor."

"At least your windows held," Miranda says, pressing her fingers against the glass. "We've found broken windows in three of the galleries and two of the towers. Balint is now seeing to setting boards over them. One more way the Pyre will fall into darkness: he'll destroy all the windows."

"He *was* behind the storm, then?"

Miranda sits down in a chair and slumps to the side. "Could you feel it? Just as well." She lays her head back as if she is tired, as if she is begging

the Lights for sleep. “Yes, he was behind the storm. Sometimes nature rages, and sometimes hell.”

The words feel like a proper benediction to the storm, and I let them settle long enough to perform their work of closing out the long night. Then I say, “I’ll dress and come.”

She accepts my offer without any fuss, which is how I know the Pyre has truly suffered.

* * *

The day is spent setting things aright. Miranda, Celia and I sweep and dust and clean up puddles of melted snow that trespassed through the broken windows. Balint is boarding up the damaged stained glass as best he can—I feel sorrowful at the sight.

Sylvain, the woodsman, comes to the Pyre by late morning. He speaks to Balint, asking what needs to be done, and reports on the trees felled in the forest. He sees me and gives a small nod, but that is all.

Soon afterwards Miranda sends Celia—acting silent and sulky—with me to the library. As in my chambers, the windows here have held strong, although the library is cold as ice. Nothing appears disturbed, but the room feels tired and beaten. Celia and I light a large fire, then set to dusting the books and the shelves.

“He likes the books to be clean,” is the only thing Celia says when I ask if we are indeed dusting *all* of them. Each time I take down a volume, I flip through its pages, looking for pictures or diagrams. If I see something of interest, I place the book an inch behind the others, marking what I will come back and search through later tonight.

“Do you ever read?” I ask Celia, trying again for conversation.

She shakes her head wistfully, the brown curls of her hair looking lovely in the afternoon light. “No one reads these books save the master.”

I set the book in my hand back on the shelf and sigh as I press my fingers against the green leather of its spine, unsure why my sigh matches the sadness of Celia’s words.

We finish in the library and are just passing through a long hallway whose windows look over the courtyard when shouts come from outside the Pyre.

Someone screams, and it is a blood-chilling sound.

“No, no, no,” Celia begs, but not to me. She’s wringing her hands as she glances out the window and then groans. “No, please, not again. Not *again*.”

Before I can ask Celia what it is, she is running, disappearing up a spiral staircase in the corner.

I move to the window and place my hands on the cold windowsill, looking down into the courtyard below. I see horses and the Bleak’s guard of six. And there, crawling along the ground, his face lifted in utter agony, is the Bleak.

The sight shakes my core, already rattled from the previous night of terror. His face is mirroring the pain I’d seen on my father’s face, but more desperate. It is a pain racking more than just his body. And I wonder if he is suffering for his bloodlust.

Pressing my forehead to the glass, I close my eyelids. I feel no empathy for him, for this creature. *But a Line Sanctum is to heal all living things*. *Deserving and undeserving*. The words gather round me, and I’m uncertain if it’s the Pyre or something else. My eyes open. I have sworn myself to this oath. And so despite the horror of whatever deeds he has just done, I go down to him. However undeserving.

Miranda is standing stiffly at the open doors when I arrive.

“Aren’t you—aren’t you going to help him?” I ask, seeing the Bleak writhe as he tries to crawl up the stairs like a beast.

“I can’t,” Miranda answers, her voice pulled as tight as it can be. “The last time he swore vengeance on me if I tried.”

His guards are standing about the steps, watching the twisted figure as if they’ve seen this endless times. Yet their eyes still flinch at every scream as he drags himself along.

“Is this how he always returns?” I ask, pulling my eyes away from the horrible sight.

“He used to return walking, confident, reeking with his stolen power,” Miranda answers in a hurried whisper. “It’s just that, after all these years, what’s happening inside him can’t help but consume the outside.”

“So he just crawls on his hands and knees through the Pyre?”

“No one can help. He won’t allow it. No one dares to try.”

“Well,” I say, looking at Miranda from the place of all my determination, “I am *sworn* to try.”

Before she can say aught, I run down the stairs towards the Bleak. I bend down beside him, and as he reaches forward to grip the next stair—his veins and bones articulated by the press of his misery—I reach for his hand, grasping it in my own.

The Bleak throws his head up in surprise, his face dark from struggle, his blank eyes rolling backwards from pain. I grab his wrist with my other hand, kneeling on the stair before him. He screams in agony at my touch. I hiss, flinching at the sound. The chaos surrounding him is so great I'm unsure of what I can do. This is no time for calming lines or calling forth a soft light to ease a pained heart. This is a monster bigger than my knowledge, and I am being dragged into the swirl of his desperation.

But I will not go.

"You will not take me," I say, gritting my teeth as I hold his wrist and push all of my thoughts against the darkness within him. He lifts his head, his blank eyes finding mine, pleading for relief from what he's brought down upon himself.

I hesitate, faltering a moment, and then he twists his fingers around my wrist and yanks, like he's pulling my power away to satiate his pain. I yell, and he tries to rise up, his fingers cutting into my skin, my blood veins burning with pain. Calling on whatever grace I can find, any clarity of thought, I gather whatever light I am able and send it at him. The light hits him, and he buckles forward, releasing my wrist. And I—bracing myself—catch him as he crumples against me. My arms wrap around him, my palms pressing flat against his back to hold him steady, and I call on anything I know to be good. He groans as a rush pours through my fingers. There is a tremendous shock—a snap of light.

The Bleak falls limp.

* * *

Miranda does not speak to me as the Bleak is carried into his chambers. His guards are not gentle, and as they lay him on his bed, they seem so uneasy about what they've seen that they disappear without belligerence.

The door is shut, leaving only Miranda and me with the unconscious Death Bleak. I step away from the bedside, gripping my own arms, ignoring the strange cuts on my wrist, my fingers tingling. I can still feel the weight of his body in my arms.

“Life’s blood,” I mutter, turning away from the bed and, by extension, taking in the rest of the room. It is a dark, empty space, with heavy curtains blocking the windows, hollowed out, forgotten by any sense of life. As I search the dim room for whatever details it offers, it seems that what the Bleak has chosen to become is reflected here. This is the only room in the Pyre that I feel has been fully taken by the Bleak.

Closing my eyes, I murmur a prayer to the Lights, then look about for my almost forgotten wisp. It is floating behind my shoulder. I lift a finger towards it, and it brightens for just a moment.

Miranda sits beside the Bleak, cupping his empty face in one hand and brushing the hair away from his forehead with the other. She is speaking sweet words, and it strikes me as incongruous to whisper such affections to one given up to darkness. I do not see what she sees. Under my gaze, he is a great nothingness, a void.

“Will he be all right?” Miranda asks me, eyeing me in a way she has not before. “Have you done something to him? Have you sent him beyond his mind, child?”

“I can’t—I don’t know,” I answer honestly, my fingers digging deeper into my arms. “I fought his pain. Or rather,” I grimace, reaching for the right words, “I fought the atmosphere of his pain. But I’ve never felt anything like that before. Usually I gather light from my mind, picture it pooling in my fingers, then let it flow into the lines of whomever I am asked to treat. It’s a current, driven first by my thoughts and finished by the response of the injured. I—I’ve only,” I stammer, still bewildered, “I have only actually practiced sending light beyond myself a few dozen times. I am so young in my training. But this—”

I look towards the Bleak. Whatever had just happened, that snap of light, was a power beyond my own, in both experience and capability. A more potent thing I’ve never felt. I lift my hand to set a strand of my hair behind my ear and then press my lips together before continuing.

“I will say this: I have never learned anything that could destroy, only that which would heal. Whatever I have done cannot harm the light inside of him.” I look at the Bleak’s grey face—the colorless expression of his disappearing humanity—and wonder if there is any light left in him at all. “Seeing as how he practices such wickedness,” Miranda flinches when I say the word, “I do not know what effect that rush of light will have on him.”

“Can you do more?”

I swallow, having no answer for that. “I only know I can relieve his immediate pain. But any other effort, any mending along his light lines…I can only do that work if he gives me permission.”

“By the Lights, this day has been too curved for me.” Miranda blows her breath out and moves her hand lovingly across the Bleak’s colorless brow.

At a different time, perhaps in a different place, I would have taken the few lessons I had learned and gone to sit down beside Miranda, resting my hand on her back and imagining a soft, peaceful light in my fingers, and I would have sent it towards her heart. She could have chosen to accept it or not. She might even have said, “Thank you.”

But I am frozen in place. Comforting her would require the price of my coming closer to the desperate tableau of Miranda bending over the Bleak—her hand still gently touching his brow, her eyes fixed on his unconscious face. I watch as she loosens his cloak and settles his clothing. Her devotion to him is clear, yet my heart confirms what I’ve wanted to believe: She is not a creature of the Bleak. Rather she is a force of the Pyre—good, besieged, stubborn, determined not to let the Lights abandon this place. Determined not to abandon him.

“Miranda, what does he do when he leaves the Pyre, to return in such a state?”

“Oh, child.” She brings her hand up to her neck, her winter-snow eyes looking so very tired. “He meddles with magicks that should not be touched. Does things neither you nor I should know about. The lives lost, the lives he has taken—” She gives a haunted shake of her head. “You see, he can’t do very much of his mischief here. The Pyre was made to be holy, and the earth won’t stand for the desecrations of it.”

“And when he becomes a Beast of Ten,” I ask in a low voice, “what happens to the Pyre then?”

Miranda looks up straightaway. “Where did you hear talk of that?”

I set my mouth in an unyielding line.

“Where did you learn anything about the Beast of Ten?” Miranda presses more firmly.

“What happens when he becomes a Beast of Ten?” I repeat.

“Oh, child! You can’t afford to get into such things! You can’t.” She looks towards the unconscious face of the Bleak, then back at me, leaning forward like she bears a dreaded secret. “I can’t tell you anything. The

master, if he were to find out, would not— You must tell me, Ember. Where did you hear about the master becoming a Beast of Ten?"

Her eyes are too focused. And my trust in her too young. "How am I to be certain you won't tell him?"

"You can't be," Miranda answers honestly. "If I thought you were a harm to him, I would warn him so. But once he's become a Beast of Ten there is nothing I can do, and I will leave this place and pray that there might be someone to stop him. Yet while there is still hope of a return, I cannot do him ill, child. I love him with my full heart."

"But what does it *mean* to become a Beast of Ten?"

"You must tell me where you heard of such a thing."

I step farther away from the bed, until my back is against one of the long black curtains. Reaching my hand back, I move my fingers along the fabric and look first at Miranda and then at the Bleak. Then I make a decision. If Miranda is willing to trust my word, I am willing to trust her silence.

"I found my way to the library the other night," I answer. "He was there, reading. I was—I was hiding." Miranda's face creases in curiosity as I continue. "While I was there, a Witch named Meridaithe entered."

"Meridaithe." Miranda's intent expression turns towards fury. "She's a black Witch—all chaos and tangle. She's never brought anything of good with her. What did she want?"

"She came to give the master something called a *Beware*."

"She did, did she?" Miranda looks towards the Bleak's face, attempting to dissipate the passion of her own response. "And what was it she said?"

Lifting my chin, my eyes anchor to hers. "She said that as he is not yet a Beast of Ten, that something can cause him to fail." I am aware of my own heart pounding, aware of how it feels brave, somehow, to say such words in this dismal, smothered room.

Miranda frowns, lifting a hand to her face. After a long moment, her head shaking as she studies the unfocused face of the Bleak, Miranda blinks, then looks towards me. "What was it? What did she say could stop him?"

I give her half of the answer. "She warned him against himself."

"I knew it." The lines deepen in Miranda's face and she slaps her worn hand against her leg. "I knew it." The emotion in her voice causes my own throat to burn. "There was so much goodness in him. For years his core was

repelled by the dark magicks, so confused. And his own heart, it rejected the killing of all—"

The door opens and Miranda breaks her words off abruptly. The captain of the Bleak's guard enters. He gives Miranda a hawkish look, then slides a dangerous glance towards me, his hand lifting to a sword's hilt at his side. My nostrils fill with the stench of blood. Unlike with the Bleak, I can see the guard's face clearly enough, each line a witness of the works he has wrought upon the nations at the Bleak's side.

Miranda clears her throat, raising a hand to the Bleak's brow. "Out," she snaps with a preoccupied tone. "Both of you. The master has no need to wake with an audience."

I nod, grateful for the escape she's offered me. As I step around the guard, he moves a hand in my direction. But I pull away, lifting my face in a fierce glare before leaving the room.

* * *

Later that night, Miranda arrives at my door with a warm mug of tea.

"You and I have words yet unspoken, Ember."

I motion her inside, closing the door behind her.

We sit down on the rug before the fire. She offers me the tea, and I wrap both hands around the mug, my skin absorbing the heat.

"He asked me questions about you, the captain did. Says he doesn't trust you."

In the middle of taking a slow sip of tea, I make a dismissive sound, despite the twist of my stomach. "A reciprocal feeling," I say after I swallow.

"For good reason. Did you know the master has not yet woken?"

Uncertain what to say, I simply look at her.

She does not require an answer of me, but shifts her weight, settling herself with a sigh. "I will tell you of the Beast of Ten." I raise an eyebrow as Miranda adds, "I would spare you if I could."

"I am beyond being spared, I think."

Miranda considers me and finally answers, "You are right. To be honest, I do not understand all the particulars. As a Line Sanctum, you know that there are ten lines of light in every babe that is born, soul and body sewn

together by them, as it were. The good powers, the healing powers, follow the laws of these lines."

I nod.

"Now," Miranda says, "there have been some who have searched the dark magicks for means to break the natural laws and exist outside of them. I don't understand how it works, and I'll not seek the answers, but severe magicks—the ones that can make the world bend to their wills—remove the weakest of the light lines. They maim them; they twist them until the lines are suffocated and become dead. There are rumors of men—and women, yes, don't be fooled—who have managed to kill two or three lines, or, as some legends claim, even four or five, in pursuit of power. The lines that remain are dimmed, and unworthy desires guide them."

I press my fingers against the mug in my hand, uncomfortable contemplating such treachery against one's own light.

"But a Beast of Ten," Miranda continues, "is one who has managed to turn every light line towards an evil purpose. A Beast of Ten is one who has done what some have thought was impossible, by rejecting every speck of purity their bodies ever held. All ten lines of light are murdered by their own actions. It is not in human nature to do so; it is in direct defiance of the Most High and why the act is so grave. That individual becomes a great nothingness, faded and angry yet powerful in ways we cannot understand. They are no longer an agent of darkness, they *are* darkness. They *are* despair. They no longer act on behalf of that which is evil, for they have murdered the light inside of them to become evil incarnate. And there is no way back. There is no Continuancy granted them after death, no means to progress. It is a damnation, utter and complete."

My heart stops—the sharpness of such a violation cutting to its core when it finally starts beating again. The severity of killing even one light line…

"So the Bleak has almost become a Beast of Ten," I say, my words feeling like deadwood.

She looks at me sharply. "Do not call him that. What a horrible thing to say. A *Bleak*."

"He is a Bleak, Miranda. And we have the courage to name him so, all the nations he's brought havoc and death upon."

"Don't *you* say it," Miranda chides. "Not here. The three of us have tried so long to hold bleakness and despair back, and we've lost Sylvain to

the hopelessness already. Do not think yourself wise for inviting it in."

Clamping my lower lip between my teeth a moment, I let my counterargument pass and say instead, "Then what do you call him?"

"By his name, dear child. What did you think?"

I blink, strange to think the creature has a name. "What is it?"

"My master's name is Sperro Magna, in the old tongue meaning: *One born unto hope*. I call him Sperro. We all did once. Oh, how we loved him."

Sperro Magna, the name he was gifted upon his birth. I shake myself free of the ghost of it and ask, "Is that why you all stayed?"

"Six stayed for power and darkness," Miranda states. "His guards became part of the Malus Servus. Sylvain stayed for duty, and, as I said, it was not strong enough for hope."

"But you? Balint? Celia?"

"We stayed for love. We still do."

I feel ashamed, for I cannot hide my incredulity. Even after having seen the care she takes with the Bleak, I do not understand it. To me he is a great antithesis; he has created too much misery, taken too much life.

"For the love of the young man we served," Miranda continues. "Love of what he once was, with hope that he will choose to become such, once again."

"Even as he is on the brink of becoming a Beast of Ten, you still hold this hope?"

Miranda's eyelids close, pressed together as if she is in great physical pain. "Yes."

"He has done great damage in this world," I reply, thinking of all the stories, thinking of my father.

"That he has, child, and I still have hope the Lights can set to rights all he's taken through these centuries past."

"Is it even possible?" I ask, disbelieving. "Can the light lines inside of him be rekindled?"

"I want him to be as glorious and good as he once was and for the powers that hold the Pyre in holiness to thrive under his mastership. Whether that is possible, well, I have not had the courage to ask. But by the Lights, if that Witch stated he might fail yet, who can say what will come of it?"

"Miranda," I set the cup down and tuck my knees under my chin, "have you ever heard of a Third?"

“A Third?”

“Yes.”

“Clearly I have. Though it’s been quite a time since I spoke many of the good callings by name. A Third is the last born of a triplet, endowed with power for sight, strength, and illumination.”

“Meridaithe said there was a Third here, someone who may be even something called a Virtus Third.”

“A Virtus Third! No, no. I would have known. A Virtus Third is to the good powers what a Beast of Ten is to the bad. There’s not been a Virtus Third in generations. Here in the Pyre? Who would it be? Balint?” She laughs at her own joke.

“Meridaithe thinks it’s me.”

Miranda stops. She simply stops moving, stops breathing, stops her fingers from fussing. She narrows her eyes as she peers into my face. “Are you a Virtus Third, child?”

“I don’t know,” I reply quietly, honestly. “But Meridaithe believes I am. And so, I think, does the Bl—I mean, Sperro Magna. Meridaithe said that my blood would be enough to secure his place as a Beast of Ten because he would be stealing enough strength to finish the task.”

Miranda leans forward and grabs my hand. “She said that? When? When exactly did you see her at the Pyre?”

“The night before he rode out. But there were things he said when he brought me here, about me being a Third, about me—about other things. I think he suspected it already.”

Miranda’s knuckles turn white, and when she speaks again it is slowly, moving the argument into the air between us so we can both see it clearly. “You’ve been at the Pyre for days and days with the master knowing you could be his final blood gain, the last step in his quest, and he’s done nothing to you?”

I do not need to make a reply.

“But you said you’d only begun training as a Line Sanctum. A Virtus Third requires great training to match equal power.”

“The very thing plaguing my own mind,” I say, having grappled with the sharp thought of my own inadequacies whenever I had recalled what I’d heard in the library. “Even as a Line Sanctum, I know almost nothing, Miranda. I don’t even know if Meridaithe was right—it is *such* a

preposterous thought—only that it felt right in my heart. And there was something else she had said that made me wonder."

"What?"

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I try to clear away my tiredness. "She mentioned something about a Virtus Third's abilities during the first hours of the night."

Miranda nods. "Those are potent hours for magicks and powers. I would imagine those hours would grant a Virtus Third some boon."

"Yes, well, when I was watching the master and Meridaithe, they could not see me. I was invisible."

"You were invisible," she repeats. I can see I am more of a shock than the old woman has had in well over one hundred years.

"You've not been able to see me either—no one here has. But now," I look towards the windows, "surely it is well past midnight and here we are. Perhaps the Lights have deemed you no threat to me, which is why I can sit before you now, visible as any creature of flesh and blood."

Miranda drops her head. "I am truly astounded, child. He brought you home even before he understood that you could be the one to free him."

"Or the one to secure his place as a Beast of Ten."

"So we've come to it. The end," Miranda continues gravely, her hands still wrapped around mine. "The day will soon come when the master must decide what he will become."

And I am the sacrifice, I admit silently to myself, disconnected from the thought—as if the distance will give what is incomprehensible enough heft to become real.

"I'm glad of it," Miranda mutters. She pulls away and rocks herself back and forth slowly. "I'm too weary of soul to watch him crumble for much longer."

"It does not seem likely that he will change his course now, after so many years," I respond practically.

"No." Miranda is blunt in her agreement. "It does not. But neither does it seem likely that he would choose to bring a maid to the Pyre and that she should be the one powerful enough to challenge his course. I am afraid you will either do a great good or be taken, and then he will be forever in darkness, the Pyre with him. For it will not withstand a Beast of Ten."

"No."

“Are you frightened?” Miranda peers at me with her old eyes. When I make no answer, she sets her mouth. “We must be hopeful now, child. While fear is the enemy of all good, faith gives flame to any endeavor. If you are a Virtus Third, the Lights will not have left you to your course alone. They will send you what you need.”

The snap of the fire draws my eyes away from Miranda and to the diligence of the flames.

“Miranda?”

“Yes.”

“Even if the Lights do send me what I need—”

“Yes?”

I look up, bare directness between us. “What if I don’t want it? To be a Virtus Third. To have the weight of that calling. To be asked—” I bite my bottom lip and wave a hand in the air. “To be asked to intercede for such a creature.”

Miranda honors my openness by relegating her first thought to silence and bowing her head. Time hangs between us. Finally, she says, “A fair question, and one you’re going to have to face.” Then, with more melancholy coming through her words than I suspect she means, she sighs. “The answer may need to come sooner than you might like.”

* * *

That night I wake from the sound of an anguished cry. My room is dark, only the burning coals a reminder of light. I twist in my bed and stare ahead of me. Then I hear the voice again, and I know it. It is the voice of my brother Hadspen. And the silence beneath it is that of my brother Thry. They must have only just discovered what the Death Bleak has done to our nation, to our father. I wonder if they will try to come to me.

I worry they will.

V

Come morning, Miranda stops me before I can slip outside and into the forest.

"He's awake, my lady."

I note the difference, the words she now speaks, rather than simply calling me child. It must be to help her with the notion that I might be a Virtus Third. I'm not sure which makes me more uncomfortable. She waits for me to speak, to make some wise proclamation about what she's just told me. Life's blood, what does she expect me to say? That I'm glad he's regained his consciousness? That I don't feel it a greater threat?

"Does he still have the pain?" I ask.

"He's dazed," Miranda answers, pulling a mended shawl about her shoulders. "I cannot say what he remembers, but he has said nothing of what happened. Brooding mostly. Do you take that as a good sign?"

"That he's not raging?" I press my lips into a cautious line, knowing Miranda wants more certainty than I can give. "Possibly."

Miranda sees past all my efforts and frowns. "Indeed, one would have expected the Lights to have prepared a Virtus Third better."

I laugh so that I might not cry. "As would I, Miranda."

She reaches out and grips my arm, the movement so fast I don't have time to step away. "Will you fight for him?" Miranda asks with sudden words. "If you are a Virtus Third, will you *fight* for him?"

"I—I don't know," I manage to say. "I will do what I must by my promises as a Line Sanctum. But this is not a task I sought."

Miranda says nothing.

* * *

When, after midnight, I cautiously return to the library for more paper, the Bleak is slumped in his chair. But he is not reading. He seems to be on the edge of sleeping, half dead in his stillness. The pulse of his presence feels unsteady, an uncomfortable throb. With a shudder, I slip back out the library doors, leaving him to his solitude.

* * *

At first light I am awake. After eating a hurried breakfast, presided over by a preoccupied Miranda, I slip out the back door.

I walk the forest trails, paper in my hand and a bit of charcoal tucked inside my pocket. The morning sun is clear in its work and I cannot help but feel hope for something, even if it is only for this one day. The snow is fresh, but the pathway is easily seen and traversed. I let my gaze explore the evergreen branches laden with thick snow. My brothers would love this corner of the world.

Away from the complications of the Pyre, I give myself over to the indulgence of sorting through memories of home. We'd lived so wonderfully together: my father, directing his small province as lord, painting and sketching, pointing out patterns on butterfly wings and twists in the stones we would find along our walks; my mother, adding to his observations with her warm intelligence, always stopping her work in Hill House to be with us; Thry, taking time to study the world as our father had; and Hadspen, always running headlong into the fields, scattering birds or rabbits or me, if I'd settled there. With my brothers, days would always begin with shrieks of delight that turned into a squabble and then ended in laughter. That was what we three were made of.

Crinkling my nose against the cold, I begin to walk down the path once more and find myself disturbing—and sending to flight—a large murmuration of starlings. The flaps of their wings, the sound of one thousand small hearts in motion—they rise in perfect, coordinated whispers of black, swooping, pressing their pattern into the air.

I crouch low and balance on my heels, folding my arms about my knees as I watch the display with the first unfettered wonder I've felt since being taken by the Death Bleak. "There you are," I say aloud, to the feeling more than anything else.

After a hasty attempt to sketch the starlings in flight, I turn my eyes back to the sky. I don't want to confront the worrisome consideration I've abandoned all morning, yet it catches up to me—and so, I make myself face it. A Virtus Third. If a Virtus Third has been sent here for a specific task, and if I indeed am one, and this task is mine, then I have to learn how to reconcile the feelings in my heart with the notion that something can be done for this Bleak, stubbornly hovering on the edge of oblivion, else I will certainly fail and the powers of the Pyre will fall with its master.

Still crouching in the snow, I pass a gloved hand over my brow. “And while he holds no value for me,” I tell the forest aloud, “the Pyre does.” Half waiting for an answer, I listen to the sounds of this winter forest.

But no answer comes.

I look again at my drawing of the starlings, wondering at their flight.

“They used to say starlings brought complicated wishes, that each bird could be a different wish, but you could not decide how they all tied together,” Sylvain’s voice says from over my shoulder.

I shift, craning my neck to see the woodsman above me. He’s not looking at me, rather his eyes are tracing the ephemeral swirl of the birds. When their pattern shatters a moment before reforming, he makes a sound and shakes his head, dismissing the starlings with a wave of his hand.

Standing, I brush the snow from the hem of my skirts. As I open my mouth in greeting, he cuts me off, “I wouldn’t walk far today if I were you. I found some markings. The master has been among these trees—the Stone Six with him—and not for a good cause. You should spend time in the stronger places of the Pyre.”

“Like the bell tower?”

In response, Sylvain just shrugs, and continues down the path, leaving me to myself.

* * *

“The master has been long out in the forest,” Miranda fusses. Celia, sitting on the other end of the long table, bites her lip but does not speak. I am just finishing my evening meal and give no indication of the warning Sylvain had offered. After leaving the kitchen, I do not yet have the heart to return to my rooms, having paced there all afternoon, and so I find myself wandering the galleries until it is quite late. The Bleak is yet in the forest, so I convince myself it is as good a time as any to visit the library.

When I enter the library it is empty. A fire is burning and the power of the room wears strong despite the thin patience the rest of the Pyre has exuded since the storm.

Pulling myself into the chair where the Bleak never sits, the one from whose shadow I watched his interview with the Witch, I can’t help but settle in, enjoying the library. Surely it is almost midnight, and if I hear the Bleak, I will be able to slip away.

“A bit of a fool,” I whisper to myself, tempting my own fate. But empty of the Bleak, the library is a comforting place, full of the knowledge of many centuries—unattainable, but comforting nonetheless. I feel there are answers in these books that I need. Yet unless someone agrees to read them aloud, I will never find them. But, I think ruefully as I pick at a stray strand of string coming off the arm of the chair, Celia said that no one reads the books save the Bleak.

The light inside the library begins to cling together, gathering nearer to the hearth as the room falls a shade darker. I glance towards the doorway. The Bleak enters, and I feel pushed back against my chair, a reminder of how utterly painful his presence is. Even the library is too tired to shield itself from the force of it.

He does not come straight to his chair by the hearth, but rather moves along the rows of shelves, stopping to touch the spines with a familiarity that surprises me. It reminds me of watching my father move his fingers through his paint brushes, lingering in affection.

The Bleak selects a volume—small and faded—and comes towards the fire. As he moves closer, it seems not only the light, but the room is trying to distance itself. The shelves and windows feel farther off now than they ever do when I am in the room alone. Even the flames in the fireplace pull back, reaching up towards the flue. The Bleak does not seem to notice. He settles into his chair, the metal of his patch magicks catching the light. It still feels impossible that he can’t see me, and I press my lips together and swallow, quieting my thoughts, uncertain of the parameters for him hearing my voice inside his head. As he opens his book, I try not to shift or breathe too loudly, despite how my muscles are pinched. I lean my head against the back of the chair, watching the Bleak. He reads quickly, faster even than Thry. If the Bleak were to never sleep and spent nearly every night in the library, I suppose he would have read most of the books in the room, if not all, several times.

Before she died, my mother would read to us every night. I picture her now, bidding us be still, reading the words on the page with reverence.

“There is much light in this world, Ember. It can be found in many places. It can be found in the pages of a book.”

“What do you mean?” I’d asked. She smiled and simply said, “Look for that light which illuminates the soul.”

A noise startles me from my thoughts, and I realize it is a laugh. Hollowed out, but a laugh nonetheless. The noise draws my attention to the Bleak's face. Features still strangely unfocused, I almost look away, preparing to slip from the room, but as I shift, something happens. A moment. A flicker. My heart jumps.

Into his eyes comes color, several colors. They are bright, sparked as if by flame: between orange and red, blue and bright yellow, almost white. They are their own fire. Their own beauty. They burn brightly for only a moment, then die out, his eyes returning to blank greyness, to bleakness.

I almost don't believe it.

I lift both of my hands and cover my mouth. According to the lore I know, someone who has eyes capable of such flame was born unto a specific purpose. At some point this Bleak had been a Lectus Born, an elect soul with great capacity for carrying light.

I—I almost don't believe the tragedy of it.

* * *

Sleep is hesitant to interfere with the beating of my heart. But when it does, I dream.

I am standing beside a girl nearly my own age. We are the same height—though her hair is a twist of burnished gold strands, layered together like a sheaf of wild wheat. She is not smiling, but her soft mouth is set in a wise line, and there is a shared recognition of a camaraderie between us. Her blue eyes meet my grey eyes, then she raises her eyebrows and motions with her chin, causing me to look towards the air before us. An image outlines itself lightly in the air. It is of the Bleak and myself, in the library.

I sit on a windowsill where the curtains have been pulled back. The Bleak, leaning against the wall near me, changes his posture and crosses his arms. Then, unexpectedly, a sharp smile splits his face, and he laughs. I feel like it's at my expense.

"No need to be rude, Sperro," I say, yet I can't help but smile. "You didn't answer my question. Do you have a favorite of all these books?"

Sperro lets the edges of his mouth soften and sits beside me. His eyes peruse the shelves of his library as if he's having a personal conversation with the room.

"I used to pore over the epics," he says out loud, "the great poems of conquest and valor. But I set those aside, for I only wanted to understand the magicks and how I could manipulate them." After taking a pause, he says, "Lately I've had more patience for the old tales." Sperro moves his hand along the edge of the stone windowsill, his eyes still tracing the high shelves of the room.

"What are the old tales about?" I ask, curious if they are the same tales I'd been told as a child.

"Various things."

"And the one I've seen you reading, that you keep by your chair? Bound in red leather?"

His eyes again catch color, and when he looks at me—for only a moment—even the dullness of his face is changed.

The scene disappears, and I look towards the young woman at my side, confused. There had been no fear between the two of us. I open my mouth to ask about it, when another scene appears.

I try to lift myself from the floor. But I cannot. Blood is puddled on the stone around me, a fire burning across my face. I lift my fingers to my cheek, and they are soon wet with blood. Numb from the shock, I explore the gash extending from cheekbone to jaw. My lips part in pain.

A dark shadow shifts above me. The Bleak. His face twisted in anger. He's almost kneeling, balancing on the balls of his feet as he reaches out and touches my face. As reflective as any gem, the blood on his fingers catches the light filtering through the shards of the shattered window above us. His eyes meet mine.

I siphon the breath back into my lungs as the vision is ripped away from before me. Trembling, I grip the neck of my gown, protecting myself from the Bleak.

"Steady yourself," says the young woman beside me. "Sperro Magna is at the point of decision. It is the end, and his choice must be made. This is your part in his tale."

I look towards her calm face, almost blind with panic.

She considers me with compassion. "You do not yet know the meaning of these things."

"The meaning is fear!" My eyes fly open at these words. I had spoken them aloud into the near darkness of my room. There is no one beside me save my wisp near the window. I am alone.

I push myself up onto my elbows, my heart racing with the terror of the image of him crouching above me. The blood on his fingers. The searing pain across my face. Then the image from the library muddies the fear, and I glimpse again his sharp smile, feel my comfort in his presence. Feel the enjoyment of being with him. I fall onto my back, my eyes wide.

* * *

In the morning I wander far into the Naeethe Forest, uphill and away from the Pyre, still sorting out the residue of my dreams and the revelation from the library of who this Sperro Magna had once been—a Lectus Born. I cannot reconcile either of them.

I pull at Miranda's scarf around my neck, and the movement unsettles my wisp. "It makes no sense at all," I tell the trees around me. Though now I understand why the process is such a painful one for the Bleak. He started from a place of *such* life—

Pausing, I look back in the direction of the Pyre and find that I can see the golden towers rising with the trees above the low mist of the day. As I stare across the miles between us, I think I can see him in my mind's eye, half sitting in his library chair, wasted in his own misery.

"And you gave up all that history," I say, "to become *that*!" I let the words hang between me and him as if, across the forest and tucked in his shadows, he can hear them. "If you were truly a Lectus Born," I continue, raising my voice, shouting at him from the freedom of the forest, "it's little wonder they loved you—and still believe you could return, beyond *any* hope I can validate. But I do not have such a love!" I hit my chest so hard with my open palm that I hear a hollow thud. The nightmare of him kneeling above me, my blood on his hands, floods my mind. "So say nothing of hope! You are a *miserable* wretch!" I lean forward, towards the words I've flung into the forest. I despise him.

My wisp settles itself at my shoulder. It is brighter than my own mood, and though I know I shouldn't fault it, I feel irritated nonetheless. The wisp has thrived at the Pyre, and something tells me that if the darkness wasn't so oppressing, so would I.

I would thrive here.

And I realize that I am beginning to love the Pyre, and am angry with the Death Bleak for seeking to desecrate its holy powers. Frustrated, I snap

a twig from a low hanging branch, the smell of pine catching on my skin as I grip it between my fingers.

I close my eyes and force words out of my mouth with a calm I do not feel. “These are the prayers of the Line Sanctum: *Give me virtue to do what task is asked of me, give me love for those in pain, and give me hope that the Lights will grant this prayer. And I will offer my hands for healing, my heart for understanding, and my light for—*”

My eyes open, the words coming to a stubborn halt. I have never uttered this prayer falsely, and my heart knows I cannot offer it now. I do not *want* to give this Bleak strength or love or hope. So I turn my back on the distant towers and continue to stomp up the sloped trail.

As my wisp follows, a thought spins with it, whispering that perhaps I *did* wish to give such things to the Pyre.

“That very well may be true,” I confess stubbornly as I again snap the twig between my fingers and then toss it into the snow. If that were all the Lights asked of me—to save the Pyre—I would say yes.

And the Bleak could answer for his own devices.

* * *

I am standing in a peculiar passage on the eighth floor, a hallway that spans the space between two wings of the Pyre. The floor is solid stone, but its walls are filled with stained glass windows that continue along both sides of the corridor, a rose and thorn pattern running through the golden glass. I press my fingers to the petals and stare out over the winterbound courtyard below me. Afternoon is almost over, the sharp cold of the day having driven me inside.

A coldness runs up my back, and as I lift my fingers towards the forming goose bumps on my skin, a movement steals my attention towards the end of the corridor. Standing in the shadows is the Bleak. It is too dark to read any expression through the haze around his face.

When he speaks, it is the coldest sound I have ever heard.

“The next time you wish to yell at me from across the forest, it would be wise to remember that this *miserable wretch* could take out your tongue and hold you against the floor until you have choked on your own blood.”

I swallow, instinctively aware of my tongue in my mouth.

He glowers. "*Yes, my lord. I understand your words*, would be the appropriate response."

"Yes," I say.

"My lord."

"Yes," I repeat. "I understand your words." *But I will not call you my lord*, I think in his direction.

One side of his mouth smiles, a discomforting thing. "You will not recognize my right in this place?"

Feeling the back of my lower lip with my tongue, I think about not answering at all. But he shifts his weight from one foot to the other, his head tilting towards the side, then slightly forward in warning.

"My first lord is in the Court of Heaven," I answer. "The second is the leader of Avaine, my own father. I do not serve you, and you offer me no protection. And so I repeat: Yes, I understand. But I will offer you no allegiance."

He closes his eyes, and I almost hear…something. A whisper. A shadow of words. The echo of a hiss. But then the Bleak's face is trespassed upon as a hazy smile creeps through the line of his mouth. "*Kings*. *Soldiers*," he hisses. "And one day, Ember will also run in fear, be it *with* or *without* her tongue."

He takes a step backwards and then disappears into the darkness beyond where I stand.

Saliva has filled my mouth, and as I swallow, I am aware of how tight the muscles in my throat have become.

* * *

"Only the horses that the master and his guards ride are stolen from time. A good thing too, or they'd not carry them," Balint explains as he's sewing a torn harness. I'm perched on the gate of an empty stall, watching the old man do his work.

"But these others are still in time?" I motion towards the half dozen horses eating in their stalls, watching me as I watch them. "They live a normal life then die?"

"Aye."

"Who uses them?" I ask, wishing I could ride away on one myself.

“We do, on occasion,” Balint answers. “Sylvain uses them to haul wood, clear fallen trees, and the like. Betimes, when a merchant train passes through, they’ve a horse that’s taken lame and needs to be replaced.”

“That’s right,” says a deep voice, and I look quickly towards the door. It’s Sylvain, watching me with his blue eyes. “Strange as it is,” Sylvain continues, “these beasts are the only form of humanity we have in this forest.”

I try to give him an expression of greeting, but he’s already taken his attention from me and is giving it to Balint’s work.

“How’s it coming along?”

“It’s coming,” Balint responds. “Though I think it best if we send the others with the West Country merchants. That young artisan will fix it better for you. The saddles too.”

Sylvain grunts, then his eyes return to mine. I feel as if I should protect myself against his glare. He’s so angry. It courses through him like the air before a lightning storm, and I can feel it more strongly than I did before. I don’t think I can fault him. For if I were trapped out of time in this forest with such a creature as the Bleak, would not my own vexation put me on a similar course? Although the others have not grown as bitter.

“I don’t need your pity,” he says to me, interpreting my silence.

“I wasn’t pitying you,” I answer defensively, my eyebrows knit together. “But,”—I let my eyes narrow slightly for thought—“I do wonder why you’re so angry, while the others are not.”

Something moves across his eyes, some ghost, and his stare takes on a dismissive twist. “By all means, lady,” he makes a grand bow, “take my place and I will take yours. To die within the next fortnight would be pure bliss. And we all know you’re not going to live beyond that. The guards have already taken bets on it—something to keep them entertained while they wait out their endless days, serving a broken forest and a rotten master.”

“Sylvain,” Balint chides strongly.

But the eyes of the woodsman don’t leave mine. “And now there are rumors that you are no simple-minded girl, but rather something more powerful, something from the High Courts of the Lights”—he spits on the ground—“the Lights that abandoned us long ago. Do not speak of anger when you know nothing of suffering, chit. You’re ill qualified for it.”

* * *

After Sylvain leaves and Balint offers a tired apology, I drift away from the stables and into the edge of the forest. I try to sketch the trees, to brush Sylvain's bitter words from my mind—to recall nothing of the Bleak's—but I can't.

It is only when I turn my attention to capturing the woodsman's face on paper that I find any sense of release from his words' sting: His straight nose, with the scar across the bridge, his deep eyes, his shaved head. The metal ring through his ear. And the set of his mouth inside his beard. He couldn't have been more than thirty-five or thirty-six when his future was stolen. I wonder if he had a wife—or children?—and, if so, what had happened to them.

My fingers hover above my rendering—poor enough in skill, yet a recognizable face. He's right. I don't understand what his life is. Endless days in endless question. But he's wrong to think that a lifetime—even a small lifetime such as mine—does not bring with it the knowledge of what it means to suffer.

"We are all given pain," my mother had said when she was dying of an insidious infection. "It is our great gift. And none are spared in the giving. The Lights see to that."

I'd been too young—and perhaps too whole—to question this or argue. But now, tossing the drawing aside, watching it float as light as snow towards the ground, I question if pain is a gift at all.

VI

When the Bleak goes out again, he and his Stone Six pass me in the Great Hall as they are leaving. Faint recognition is all he gives as he shoulders past me, his guards following behind him, their own shoulders hitting mine simply for the menace of it.

I grip my hands into fists. *Where are* you *going?* I think in his direction.

The Bleak stops, then shifts his footing so he's angled partly in my direction. His face twitches, his eyes traveling to mine as he adjusts the cloak over his shoulders. Where he is going, his dead face tells me, is none of my business.

I lift an eyebrow in disagreement, though it doesn't quite hold firm.

Noting my fear, he tilts his head in self-satisfaction and then looks away.

I don't know why I've started doing it—this challenging him, forcing his hand to reveal my fate—but it's been happening for days. We have crossed each other's path three times since he'd threatened me in the rose-and-thorn passage.

The first time, I'd begun to form the words of a question—Why do you keep me here?—but he'd seen the very act of opening my mouth as a provocation and had cut the words off before I could speak them, his silencing paired with an appropriately formed scowl. But I had seen my willingness to question him as a refusal to embrace the fear he carries about him, and so I did not retreat.

After that, I'd simply spoken directly into his head. *Have you yet decided my fate?* I'd asked. He'd only sneered and said I wasn't important enough to have a fate.

On the third encounter, I'd entered the Mirror Gallery and had seen him standing still in the opposite end of the room, his head bent, arms behind his back. I had pressed my lips for courage, then thought, *A full sun has actually broken through the clouds today, which I recommend you avoid if you wish to maintain your ashen complexion*. He had turned around and just stared at me, not angry—though certainly irritated.

Then he'd said, "The last several people who attempted humor with me are dead."

The servants here say my fate will also be death, I'd answered with an even thought.

"Prophets," he'd stated aloud. "Every one."

Yet he still had not taken me for his final blood gain—or removed my tongue—though I have felt the gravity of his pendulum-swing considerations.

And now, days later, those words are still my companions as he and his Stone Six are leaving the Great Hall. He is approaching the tall front doors,

and Celia is there to swing them open, eyes wide with trepidation as her master and his guards pass. I follow slowly.

The clouds have broken, but a strange whirl of snow is beginning to fall, white flakes turning gold in the waning afternoon light. And the air is colder now than it has seemed in many days. The Bleak and his guards go down the stairs, to where Balint is standing in the courtyard with their horses.

Stopping on the threshold, I watch as the guards mount, their eyes eager for mischief. The Bleak—standing beside his horse—is focused, his arrogance an affront to the world around him. To my dismay, I see Meridaithe the Witch waiting at the edge of the courtyard, near the forest, bent over her staff, bedraggled and ugly and mean. The Bleak mounts, bringing his horse around to face the Witch, and then leans down, exchanging a word with her before calling something back to one of his men.

I feel dread of whatever premeditated mischief they are about. Folding my arms, I glare first at the Bleak and then at the Witch. She must feel the weight of my gaze—the pressure of my disapproval—for she turns, her eyes meeting mine. We stand for a long moment appraising one another.

Even when the sun breaks out fully from behind the clouds and gives the courtyard an ethereal effect, of snow and sun and late winter, I keep my eyes on her. She tries to smile—a haughty thing of poison—and lifts her hand in a motion, sending a billowing serpent twisting through the air towards me. Lifting my hands from instinct, I send more than just a healing light towards her, but something stronger, with force, something I've never done.

The shimmering image of sunlight rushes at her like a wave, and her serpent begins to lose form and then turns to smoke. I blink, resisting the temptation to stare at my own hands as her face changes—a flick of uncertainty, then a wider look of scorn. The Bleak calls at her before riding out of the courtyard through the western arch, and she looks at me a moment longer before turning away and disappearing into a shroud-like mass that dissipates in the air. The guards spur their horses and ride out after the Bleak.

Only then do I lift my hands and stare at the hint of shimmering light still floating in the air. I take a step back. "These are the prayers of the Line Sanctum—" I murmur, waiting for the rhythm of my own heart to match the relief I can feel from the stones of the Pyre.

It is many long moments before it does.

* * *

Celia finds me later that afternoon. She's biting her nails, a strange habit to carry around for a few hundred years.

"Can you help me with something?" she asks.

Admittedly, I'm surprised she's bothering to acknowledge me at all, let alone ask a favor.

"I would be happy to help," I answer, setting aside a rather rough sketch of the Great Hall. Her eyes follow my movement with interest, and she raises a discerning eyebrow in disapproval at my efforts. I remind myself that I was raised to be gracious and say, "What do you need?"

She flits her hand—like a leaf blown off its tree—in the direction of a servants' corridor. "I need help finding a few things."

With a single candle, Celia's hand cupping the flame from drafts, we go down a staircase and into a long storage hall.

"What are we looking for?"

"Oh, an old chest of kitchen things that has been put somewhere hereabouts. I can't rightly say where. Miranda asked me to fetch it as she's opened the kitchens again to feed you, but…" She turns and looks towards the stacks of cases and chests, piles of drapes and forgotten chairs. "I hate this place. I don't like coming alone."

Fingering a chest of drawers, I look at her. "Is it so dreadful? I don't see many mice and bats. Now, ghosts? I can't say. We had a room in Hill House that my brother Hadspen always said was filled with the spirit of a disquieted maid. But I think that was rather more to frighten me than anything."

Celia pauses, moving her hand along the fold of a drapery piled on top of a table. "No bats," she says. "And all the ghosts but from happier days."

"Why is all this down here?" I move my hand through the dust on a turned over bowl. "Those drapes are surely ruined now, but they would have been magnificent."

"Oh," Celia sighs, "he ordered them all down when he—after he took his first blood gain. The Pyre, he said, was going to bend beneath his will. It was a terrible day, him yelling, railing at all of us, ordering so much of the beauty away."

I involuntarily shudder. “What was he like before?”

Celia sets her mouth in a practiced line and sits down on a bench, lifting her candle in a token effort for her search. “When Master Sperro came into the room, everyone was happier. He would laugh and speak with just about anyone, even the likes of me.”

“So you would have considered him a sort of friend, not just your master?”

Celia nods, her expression looking like it should carry a blush.

“When you look at his face,” I ask, my curiosity forming the words, “do you see him as he is now or as he was then?”

“I can’t look at him.”

I don’t need Miranda’s words to explain why Celia stayed here at the Pyre. By the way Celia’s face falls, anyone would know she has stayed for love.

* * *

The next day Celia and I are helping Miranda clean the kitchen when Sylvain comes through the back door. His face is tight, his eyes carrying a weight behind them.

“He hasn’t left the forest, Miranda.”

Miranda, just coming out of a pantry, looks over towards him. “Do you mean the master?”

“He never stays in the forest,” Celia dismisses, unhappy in the work Miranda has asked her to do.

“Besides, he only left yesterday. Perhaps he’s leaving today,” Miranda says and then tuts.

Sylvain is crossing the room towards us, his gaze traveling to me then back to Miranda. “I repeat,” he argues firmly, “he’s still in the forest. All of them are. The master, the Stone Six, the Witch, and two or three more who have joined their company. I saw them inside a circle of dead trees, preparing their rituals.”

This gives Miranda pause.

Sylvain shakes his head and rubs a hand across his eyes. “They have killed a full ring of trees—all dry and brittle, the color of dull flame—sucking the very life out of them.”

“He can’t practice certain crafts inside the forest,” Miranda insists.

“He’s attempting something, and it will be tonight,” Sylvain states. “I think they are trying to break the Pyre. I’m going to find Balint.”

Miranda leans against the counter. “Right. You go find Balint, and we will secure the doors. Then we will meet in the Great Hall, to decide what we must do.”

“I think Balint’s in the stables,” Celia says, her brown eyes looking resigned.

“Celia, you go and make certain the master hasn’t left a window in his personal chambers ajar. My lady, you come help me with the doors. If the master means to do something to strike at the heart of the Pyre, we best get ourselves ready.”

It takes longer than I’d imagined, for there are so many doors into this grand building. We work silently, until I can’t help but say as I’m forcing a stubborn lock into place, “I’m still trying to understand the contradiction. He persists in forcing the Pyre towards destruction, but he spends his nights in the library, a place where the powers for good are still so strong. It seems a comfort to him, rather than a vexation. Shouldn’t it be the opposite?”

Miranda double checks that my door is locked, then turns and walks back up the stairway. I follow.

“And now you see why he’s not yet managed to become a Beast of Ten,” she comments over her shoulder. “The Pyre was to be his heritage, and I surmise that ties in to it all somehow—why he still has one speck of something good inside his rotting core. To destroy himself, he must destroy the Pyre first because it is an extension of who he would have been. As to why he chooses the library,” Miranda fusses her fingers in the air as she walks, “it is all part of that unflagging connection, I imagine. Those books were more loved by him than by anyone.”

“But he’s willing to destroy it tonight?”

“Some form of destruction, yes.”

“Then we will find a way to strengthen the Pyre,” I say with more authority than I feel.

Miranda nods, peering at me over her shoulder as if she’s waiting for a powerful Virtus Third to burst forth and counter every wrong of the last three hundred years. Well, we can all be disappointed together, for that will not be. My wisp, following along with the hem of my dress, sparks as if it disapproves of my defeatist thinking.

I ignore it.

“Well?” Miranda says.

“Well what?”

“I just asked you what a Virtus Third would do for the Pyre?”

“Sorry, I didn’t hear you. I can’t really—” But then I have a thought; it flickers across my mind like a candle as I follow Miranda through the Mirror Gallery. “I do have something that might help us, but I must retrieve it from my rooms first.”

Miranda doesn’t look very hopeful, but she says, “Find us in the Great Hall.”

I run up the stairs and through the corridors, until I break out into the exposed architecture near the bell tower suite. I am about to open my door—my mind set on what I’ve come to fetch—when I hesitate, fully registering the peculiar tension growing around me. The wind isn’t increasing, neither the sound of storm, but rather a stillness. Born not of peace but from the feeling of disquiet, foreboding—the forest knowing and waiting, each living thing holding its breath.

I go to the overlook and press my hands against the frozen stone. Not a bird or a squirrel can be seen. The trees feel frightened, knowing something of the terror waiting to happen. There is only one sound as I stand gripping the wall—the sound of my own breathing, shaken but determined.

This silence will not do. It is an atmosphere too near surrender.

And so I yell.

I yell down into the forest. I yell to keep the silence broken, to say that there is still one creature in these woods not frightened of the devilry to come. I yell until my voice grows hoarse, until my heart seems to extend out into the trees and around the stone walls of the magnificent Pyre. Then something happens—a rush in the trees—and a murmuration of starlings sweeps upwards in the distance, the steady sounds of their wings traveling the miles back towards the Pyre.

As if I’ve just proven something I needed to know, I nod, then go into my room to fetch the book I had found in the library, the one about the Pyre that must tell us something, anything, of protecting this stronghold.

* * *

All four of the others are waiting when I come down the spiral staircase into the Great Hall. Sylvain’s hands are on his hips, and he’s staring at the

ground. Balint is looking towards the door in a resigned manner.

"Was that you shouting?" Sylvain asks.

I slow my steps and force my hair behind my right ear. "Yes," I say, and my voice is rough. When they all look at me without speaking, I add, "The forest felt like it needed a good shout."

Sylvain snorts, but I note that the look he exchanges with Celia isn't hostile.

"This is what I went to fetch." I hold the book out to Miranda. "I found it weeks ago, in the library."

Miranda frowns and holds it open, turning the pages towards the fading light of the afternoon. Balint looks over her shoulder.

"It appears to be a detailed map of the entire building," I explain, "and of its powers and offerings, but I can't know for sure what it means because I'm unable to make out the words myself."

All four of them look at me, then towards each other, a rather uncomfortable exclusion.

"What does it say?" I ask. "Surely there is something we might learn."

"And there may be at that," Balint replies as Miranda closes the book, "but it's no use to any of us."

I frown. "But why?"

"Because none of us can read it either," Sylvain states. "Simple as that."

"What? But," I stammer, "I thought— You've all served in this great house for hundreds of years, and *none* of you can read?"

"We all know how to read," Celia challenges. "That isn't the matter."

Miranda gives Celia a look and picks up the tale. "Not ten years into his path, the master saw that having reading servants who didn't agree with him would make his way more difficult. So he took it from us, our letters. As long as we remain at the Pyre, we cannot see a word. The letters move all fuzzy-like beneath our eyes, and we can't quite make them out clearly."

"As they always have for me," I answer blankly.

The lines on the sides of Miranda's mouth deepen, and she hands me the book without comment.

I feel my bones sink, my heart with them. "I know the answer for protecting the Pyre is in this book," I say.

"But you cannot read it either, so what does it matter?" Sylvain asks sharply.

I snap the book shut. “Both my brothers learned with ease, but for me, the words would never reveal themselves. It’s always been that way. Strange,” I add a touch despondently, “that no one here has their reading either.”

“Perhaps you have always been bound to this work, then, my lady. And so you’ve suffered under the same curse as we,” Miranda says, looking at the book in my hand in thought. “I think you’ve done us a good turn, by whatever fate. For the master raged yesterday, raged hard, because he said there was a book missing from the library. He searched a good deal, upsetting more books than I’ve had time to pick up this morning, but I wonder if this is the one he had wanted.”

“She thinks the book tells how to protect the Pyre,” Celia huffs, “not destroy it. It’s not what he was looking for.”

Balint speaks up then, looking towards a brilliantly colored window. “When you know how to protect something, you can figure out how to destroy it.”

“Well”—I grip the book—“I’ll keep it hidden in the bell tower suite. But what can we do for the Pyre?”

“We’re closing it away from the storm,” Balint answers, “by boarding up the windows to protect the glass—”

“No,” I say before I know why. Turning around and looking at the tall stretches of glass, I shake my head as a tremendous feeling comes over me. “I don’t think the answer is in closing the Pyre away. You can’t fight darkness by creating more darkness, don’t you see? You can’t fight despair with the fear of being broken. What we need is a hope.”

Sylvain grunts.

“That’s silly. I’m going to go draw the curtains,” Celia responds.

“No,” I counter. “Don’t pull the curtains!”

“Child!” Miranda snaps. “You don’t understand. I have *never* felt the forest in such dread before. I have never heard silence so strong. In all my three hundred years. He’s joined with the other dark forces, and they’re bent on making the Pyre fall.”

“And you’ve never had a Virtus Third here either,” I answer, gritting my teeth as I look about, owning some small part of the elusive calling. “The answer won’t be found in hiding, in skulking, or boarding things up. Instead of aiding the darkness, we need to burn with light. This is, after all, the

Pyre. And what is a pyre? A pyre is a thing that burns; it burns away the death."

The words are coming faster than I can even think them, but they ring true. So I keep speaking as I look about the Great Hall. I feel like a prophetess. I feel like I am declaring truths that I'm leaning only in this moment. "A pyre burns away death for more life, and that is what we are going to do. We are going to keep it safe by burning."

"But—" Celia begins.

I turn around to face them and set my shoulders straight.

"Balint, Sylvain, light a fire in every hearth and keep them burning strong throughout the night. Celia, follow me. We need candles."

"What for?"

"We will burn a candle in as many windows as we can. Miranda, find any lantern, any lamp, any wick. Pull all the curtains open. Every room in the Pyre will be reminded of its old strength, and the forest will see the windows burning."

What I've said must be enough, for the men head towards the front doors and Celia follows me. She takes me to the storeroom, and we hunt without speaking through the crates for candles, carrying them in our skirts to set them up throughout the Pyre. We open the curtains, take down the boards, and set up our lights. Balint and Sylvain haul wood to every grand room with a hearth.

The afternoon carries on. As we work—as one fire is lit and another candle is placed—we are pushing back against the nothingness. The Pyre will shine out into this ancient forest; it will not hide; it will not crouch and wait; it will burn.

Afternoon falls entirely, and then evening. The darkness of night seeps beyond the windows, thick as pitch. I feel a slant craft silently working for entrance—invisible, noiseless, feeling its way along the exterior of the Pyre, looking for any weakness, any unattended place. The hairs on my neck rise with a feeling of needing to look over my shoulder. But I—we, all of us—work endlessly to keep the blackness of the spell-steeped night burned away. Fires are continually stoked and prodded, roaring as high as we dare send the flames. No one else feels the heat, not in the way I do. And so I wear the most delicate dress I can find, my feet bare.

The Pyre is blazing. It beacons. Even Sylvain occasionally pauses to lift his eyes.

* * *

Despite his willingness to work, Balint refuses to light a fire in the master's room.

"Every time I've tried before, it's gone right out and has taken my own courage with it. I'll not meddle with the dark crafts of that room for all the world."

"There has to be a way to light a fire," I argue, wiping the sweat from my face. "Perhaps you had bad wood, too wet for burning."

"My lady," he says, his eyes disapproving, "I've been lighting fires for longer than your ancestors, seven generations back, have been lighting fires. Don't tell me what I know far better than yourself."

"Fair enough," I answer, justly corrected. "I will go with a candle and see what I might do."

Upon touching the doorknob of his chambers, I feel foreboding in my fingers and warning at my feet where the heaviness of the room seeps out along the stone floor. Gripping my candle in my hand, despite the hot wax folding into a puddle along my skin, I push open the door.

My candle goes out.

I return to the hallway, where a candle sits in a window, and relight the wick. Gripping my fingers about the candle, I hold up my other hand to protect the flame as I cross the threshold.

The candle goes out again.

"Life's blood," I mutter, unwrapping my hand from the candle and setting it on a nearby table. I survey the dark room while I pick the cooled wax from my hand, feeling the tender red of a light burn on my skin.

Pushing my own thoughts out, I imagine myself covered in light, no chink for the Bleak's darkness to enter. With this image in mind, I set to work. First, I pull open every curtain. Heavy, several fabrics deep, they are difficult to move and secure by their dust-covered ties. Coughing, I finish the job and then allow myself a look out into the night. I can see nothing, not even the white, snow-cut silhouettes of the trees for the immense gloom that surrounds the Pyre. But I *can* see one of the south wings, its candles lit, windows flinging light out into the oppressive darkness. I shiver, both for the beauty and for the weight of the silent fight.

Three more times I try to light a candle in the Bleak's rooms, but they only sputter out. Finally, I light the candle one last time, speaking a prayer

to the Lights, and then set it on the floor before the threshold of his open door.

* * *

Everyone can see me still, even well past midnight—a sign we fight the same cause, I presume—and we greet each other as we pass, torches or candles in hand, ready to relight anything that's gone out. It is late when Celia and I have time to set the library aright.

Miranda had said that the Bleak was angry before he left, but when I first went in to light the candles and check the fire, I did not anticipate that I would find hundreds of books crashed to the floor: bent, abandoned. And so Celia and I now return and begin to place the books back on the shelves. With no notion of their order, I simply put them where they might fit, Celia occasionally following behind me, placing the books where they ought to go.

There is one volume of purple leather whose pages are severely bent. I straighten them as best I can, gazing at all the illustrations on the page as I do. It appears to be a book of callings and slant ways and of the practitioners of both light and darkness. There are symbols of the Court of Heaven, and symbols of the backwards roads of the world. I wonder if there is anything of the Virtus Third or the Beast of Ten inside its pages. Celia recognizes the book.

"I think that's a volume of the *Orbis Terrarum Explicative*."

"It looks informative. Did you ever read it?"

Her laugh is propped up by amusement. "There were far better things to read," she answers.

The side of my mouth twists in smile and, swearing her to secrecy, I send Celia to hide it in my room with the book about the Pyre.

An hour into the task of sorting the library, I come across the small red book that I'd seen the Bleak reading when his eyes had sparked, confirming him to be a Lectus Born now fallen. Its spine is cracked, the cover keeping touch with the binding only by a few threads.

Seeking out Miranda, I ask where I might find a matching thread, and then return to the library, sitting as far as I might from the heat of the fire while still being able to see. I stitch the book back together as best I can and

then, instead of setting it back on the shelf, I place it on the small table beside the Bleak's chair.

* * *

By dawn I am soot-bound and footsore, the red edges of my fingers burning, my hair smelling of smoke and ash. With the light of the morning sun bursting through the winter clouds, we bank our fires and touch out the candles. I am beginning to feel the winter chill in my feet.

Miranda mutters about cleaning up all the wax, but then she squeezes my hand with affection. "I felt it, my lady. We kept his works at bay the night long. The Pyre fought hard, pushed back. Rest now. Let the sun and the Lights that be take the day watch. You sleep."

Instead, I continue sweeping the Great Hall, which is filled with slivers and pieces of bark from the night's firewood.

"I will—I only—"

"You go now." Miranda takes the broom and sets me in motion with a soft shove. "Sleep. You're the only one among us inside time; you wear differently than we do. Lie down, and I'll come prepare a bath in good measure."

Weary, I make the long journey towards my bell tower. Once I come to the open corridor, the lonely morning breeze pulls at my hair and I stop, for I think I hear a sound.

A bell is letting out the echo of a solitary ring. It is a small measure of courage.

I take hope, push open my door, and tumble onto my bed.

* * *

It is the screaming that wakes me. I sit up too fast, my head spinning as I cover my ears.

"Miranda!" I yell. "Miranda!" But she can't hear me. I am too far away.

Hands to my head, I trip out of my bed and look out the window, then I stumble to the door. It sounds like the Bleak, yelling like hell, and I swing open my door, expecting him to rage into my room.

He does not. There is no one there.

Pressing my hands to my eyes, I close the door with the weight of my body. I try to call out again, above the maddening sound, but then I realize what is happening. The screaming—it is inside my own mind. Covering my ears does not help, neither does burying myself beneath my covers. It's such a piercing pain that I'm nauseous from it. I stumble to the washroom and throw up, retching until my body holds nothing more. Still the screaming persists. I writhe, daring to open my eyes only once in a desperate search for my wisp.

It is not here.

* * *

Miranda finds me later, curled up on my bed, my hands in my hair, eyes swollen from the endless screaming. She takes me into the washroom, bathes away the soot, and attempts to do the same with the pain. I cry, sobbing as she lifts me out of the water and wraps a robe about my body.

Nothing changes the sounds of agony ringing in my mind. I've said every prayer of the Line Sanctum, for I do not know those of the Virtus Third. I plead with the Lights. I feel forsaken by my wisp, still not returned. I cry for my father, beg up images of my brothers, and try to hold their faces between me and the noise. It seems as if Thry is trying to say something, but I cannot hear what for the piercing cries.

Finally, when the sun is going down, the screams begin to ebb. I almost don't notice it quieting, as every sound, even Miranda's feet on the floor, causes me such pain that I beg her not to move.

"Has it passed, my lady?" she whispers. What thunder! Her words on my ears.

"It's passing," I hiss, pressing the words as carefully from my lungs as I can manage. "He's quieting."

"The master?"

"The Bleak," I say, sinking farther into the feeling of my bed.

Miranda wants me to eat, but my stomach can't abide the food. I drink what water I can, but end up bending over, heaving—and so I take nothing else.

"Night is falling again," Miranda frets. "What do we do, my lady?"

"I think—" I whisper, struggling to speak. "It feels like he has lost too much strength to assault the powers of the Pyre again," I whisper. "Tell

Balint to light a fire in the Long Hall and in the library, and tell Celia to light more candles in all the windows and to keep them lit through the night. That should be enough. Enough."

I close my eyes and fall into sleep, where my own memories seem to mingle with those of another. I see a young woman, the one from my dream, laughing, her blond hair pulled away from her face, her lovely eyes bright. Beside her is another, a young man. He's looking away from her, grinning, doing all in his power to not laugh. But he fails, and his shoulder touches hers as he tries to keep himself aright. I think I know him, the young man, although I do not think I've ever seen him before.

VII

"The master is come home," Miranda is saying, waking me just as the cold light of early dawn touches my windows. "The Stone Six have brought him back. All of them look bad, but the master is in so much pain he can't walk…or crawl, even. We carried him into his rooms, and I know not what to do. I thought maybe you—?"

The question curves between us, like the thread of a spider's web, so easily broken.

I lift my fingers to the swollen skin around my eyes and lie still for many minutes. The Bleak had spent all night assaulting the Pyre and then all day breaking my own mind. I have no desire to lift myself from my bed, let alone for such a one as him.

"I'll come," I answer nevertheless.

Not bothering to change from the robe Miranda had wrapped around my body the night before, I drag myself out of bed and walk on unsteady legs down through the Pyre. When I arrive in the small hallway that leads to the Bleak's chambers, it is crowded. The Stone Six are gathered silently around the door. Balint is among them, standing nearest to the closed door, looking nervously at the floor. Following his eyes, I take note that the candle I set there two nights previous is still burning, the wax not having melted down at all.

When they see me, the eyes of the captain narrow. A guard sneers.

“Go on now,” Miranda says to them, though I know it takes a good deal of her courage. “We’re going to see to the master.”

“We will not let her through,” says the captain.

“Come now, off with you,” Balint replies. “Let the women pass. For the first one the master sees when he comes out of this will be in sore trouble, by any measure.”

“We will stay,” the captain repeats.

I take a step backwards, as does Miranda.

“They’re angry at you, mistress,” Miranda whispers in my ear.

I wince from the noise. “Why?”

“When they brought the master up, none of them could get past that bit of candle—can’t touch it either. One tried, and he screamed something terrible.”

I look back down the hallway. Balint hovers apprehensively by the door, and the soldiers look suspicious, angry.

“Good,” I say, uncertain how I’d accomplished such a thing.

“Is it your light? The little touch of flame that usually floats about your shoulders?”

“My wisp?” I give a sharp look to Miranda, considering her anew. “You can see that?”

“I could until I found you yesterday morning. It’s gone from you. And now this candle won’t stop burning. I was thinking you’d set it in the candle for some,” she hesitates, “some purpose of the Virtus Third.”

Looking down the dim hallway, I watch the candle whose wick is bright with an improbable flame. I note the familiar movement of its unfettered pulse. This carries both a comfort and the slight taste of melancholy abandonment.

“You may be right,” I answer quietly.

“Well,” Miranda sighs, “let us go in and see the master. We are coming through,” she says, raising her voice as she lifts her hand to my elbow and leads me down the hallway, weaving us through the waiting men. Be it her dogged determination or my swollen, bloodshot eyes, the men part. I can feel everyone’s curiosity at my back, interested whether or not I will be able to pass the unequivocal light.

Putting my hand on the doorknob, I twist my wrist, and the door gives way. Stepping around the light—there is noise at my back from this—I

enter the Bleak's chambers, followed quickly by Miranda before I shut the door.

The atmosphere of the room slams into my chest and I stumble backwards, my entire body hurting. Miranda grabs my upper arm to steady me as I gasp for breath. Pure chaos reigns in this space, a fathomless murk around the Bleak's form as he lies on his bed. He does not groan or rage—rather he shakes, his face twisted and worn. Reaching his fingers towards the air, his hand is tight, every bone drawn out in his silent agony.

Brushing my hair away from my face, I pull my robe tighter and walk slowly towards his bedside. I stare down at his writhing form, this revelation of a ruined soul. And my fingers lift in response to his own still grasping at the air from pain. Then, under the threat of my own fading courage, I put my hand forward and take his in mine.

His eyes open and his head turns. When he sees me, his fingers close around mine and his lips begin to move soundlessly.

"Sperro?" I say, his old name passing my lips for the first time, and it feels familiar on my tongue. "Sperro." His hand grips mine too firmly. Yet despite the strength of his body, his pain makes him pitiable, a pathetic entity. As I lean over his form, I utter the words of my fledgling profession: "I can help you, if you so choose."

He closes his eyes and makes a noise, his frame twisting. He's never looked so like a creature or a beast of unknown places as he does now. He gasps, his struggle for air the only sound in the room.

"Sperro," I repeat. "Do you want my help? Do you want me to soothe your lines?"

My hand feels like it will snap. But as I grab his wrist with my other hand, some of the vaporous fog about his figure shifts away from my touch.

"Please let me offer you some relief, Sperro. It would mean my reaching into your tenth line, and seeing what could be done. It should relieve your pain." His fingers grip my hand harder. "Don't you wish that?" I ask desperately.

"Why is it so bad this time, my lady?" Miranda whispers, hovering behind me. "I've never seen him so."

I feel the answer before I even know it. "Because things that were not built for darkness cannot contain it without great pain."

The Bleak breaks away from his silence by making a sound, cutting the air between us. Another cry comes, then another. Excruciating as it is to

hear any noise, I keep my hands around his.

"Sperro, I need to know."

Finally, he opens his eyes and nods. *Yes*. His mouth forms the word several times before he takes a breath and screams with a blinding might, "Yes! Help me!"

I go to work immediately.

Pulling my hands free, I bend over the Bleak and place my hands on his body. He writhes, screams out, and tries to knock my hands away. But I hold them firm despite the chaos beneath my fingers. Whereas a light line should feel straight, clear, his are maimed beyond recognition. At first I cannot separate them out, cannot feel past the mess of dead things, but then I stumble upon the twisted ruins of his tenth line. It is severely mangled. All around it I can feel a great chasm. I search in these depths, among unrecognizable remains. The confusion within his body tries to enter my hands. I block it off, countering the Bleak's madness as best I can. Miranda is muttering a prayer to the Lights as I keep searching for any spark along his tenth line, any warmth or light, forcing my mind past the Bleak's pain. Then I find something, a beleaguered fleck—just beside his heart—gasping for its own survival. I picture light spreading from my hands towards it.

"Aaahhh!" He jerks beneath my hands, his jaw clenching, his eyes wide.

Be still, I think. *Be still.*

But his movement has stirred the darkness, and I've lost the fleck of light. The storm inside of him fights harder against my hands as I search again.

Be still, I repeat to the Bleak, ordering the malefic swirl beneath my fingers to stand down. *Clear away! Give the light air*, I command.

There is a glint, like coin in a dark river, and it catches my attention. I've found it. Pressing my hands firmer against the Bleak's chest, I give all my focus to that fleck of light.

It twists and almost goes out.

Hold on, I think, spreading my hands out farther against his body and envisioning myself lighting the small ember. "Take hold," I mutter aloud, drowning in this work so beyond my own depths. "Take hold!"

But the mangled tenth line feels dry, as if I might snap it and cause irreparable damage. So I think carefully around the ember and give it all the protection I can envision in my mind.

“These are the prayers of the Line Sanctum,” I whisper, “to ask the Lights for grace. These are the prayers of the Line Sanctum—”

The suffocating darkness inside him crashes against my work, and the pathetic fleck all but collapses beneath my fingers. “Light!” I challenge his tenth line aloud. “Catch light!”

But the Bleak’s resistance is too much; inside of him abides the same sticky weight we’d felt pressing against the Pyre. It revolts against me now and I almost pull my hands away. Crying out once more to the beleaguered fleck, I pour all the hope I can muster out through my fingers. My muscles lose their strength, my knees buckle. It takes all my determination to keep my hands in place. And then it catches. The light beside his heart shifts, and then flares.

I gasp. It’s the most wondrous thing I have ever felt.

One of the twists in his tenth line uncurls, and the light flares again, unimaginably beautiful.

But I am empty, beyond strength. Just as the light beside his heart steadies itself into a flame, I fall backwards, Miranda catching me in her arms.

* * *

How the Bleak spends the following day, I do not know, but I am retching again and miserable. What has been required is too much for my body. Miranda sees to my care as I move in and out of a nauseated daze, crawling about my room and falling asleep in unlikely places, for I can no longer stand the confines of my bed. She also tries to help me eat, but I have no appetite. My body is reeling, and I can consume no food.

As I lie on the stone seat that runs beneath my windows, my face pressed to the cold surface of the stone, my eyes closed to the forest below, I know I cannot do this task. It is too big for me. Lighting one small flare along the Bleak’s final light line had sent me reeling, and even now—Hours afterwards? Days afterwards?—my fingers wrap around the stone beneath me, in a desperate search for solace. The chaos inside the Bleak is as massive as the storms that rage against the Pyre, and I cannot battle it. I don’t want to have to touch that darkness ever again.

But the memory of feeling his last remaining light will not leave me. This final sliver of the glory he had been gifted by the Court of the Most

High is as clear as a bird's song, as mighty as the rolling clouds, as ardent as a prayer.

* * *

I am jolted awake for the yelling at my door.

Another voice answers anxiously. Miranda's voice. The door is thrown open, and the Bleak stalks into my room. A swell of darkness sweeps into my chambers with him, pushing against me like an unseen current of the sea as I try to pull myself up.

"Master—" Miranda begins.

"Out!" the Bleak rages. "Leave us or I will be done with you—and, so help me, Balint will suffer for your meddling."

Miranda freezes, her eyes finding mine. They look as if they are struggling with every question she's ever asked about the strangeness of her life. "Yes, my lord," she answers humbly. "I don't mean impertinence." Miranda backs away and steps out the door as the sweet smell of the winter forest comes into my room.

The Bleak closes the door with an angry swing of his arm and turns his face towards mine. I flinch.

"You have been interfering with things that you should not," he growls, stepping towards me, his finger pointing in accusation.

My head is still spinning, but I pull myself up and slide off the bed, gripping my robe around my shoulders and standing on shaking legs, my back towards the late afternoon sun coming in through the windows.

"That applies to both of us, then," I say, but my words are lost underneath the thunder of his next sentence.

"What did you do to me?" He demands the answer of himself as much as of me and turns away violently. His fingers curve like talons, and, after making a torn sound, it takes several minutes of turbulent threats for him to quiet down. When he does, his chest heaves, and he circles back, pacing, before gripping the mantle of the tall hearth, standing just outside the puddle of light coming in through the windows.

"What did you do to me?" he asks again. And as he looks at me, a worn frustration seeps into the air between us.

I push back against it, imagining the sun as a barricade between us. His darkness is not welcome here in the bell tower suite.

"Don't do that," he hisses. "Just answer my question."

Lifting my chin, I grip my own arms with my fingers and say as evenly as I can muster, "I began to clear your tenth line."

I am expecting him to rage. Instead, his eyes narrow and he mutters something, lifting a tired hand again to his face.

"You were in such great pain," I continue. "You returned to the Pyre in a worse state than—well, I asked if you wanted me to relieve the pain. And you did."

Now he glares in my direction.

"You said yes," I finish quietly. "Otherwise, I would never have presumed."

"*What* exactly did you do to my tenth line?"

"I straightened a tangle near your heart and flared your last fading light."

"Damn you!" He slams his fist on the stone mantle. "I cannot believe—do you know what it takes to twist a tenth line!" His hard voice sounds desperate as his eyes meet mine. "Do you even *comprehend* what I have given to this?"

My shoulders sag, bending beneath the weight of his presence as he fights his own heart. "I'm too tired for anything more," I mutter. "Take your final blood gain from me and become a Beast of Ten. I can't do this."

He blinks, the first time I have seen surprise register on his empty face. "What do you know of such things?"

I pull my robe closer around my arms and sit down on the edge of my bed—too tired to straighten the defeated curve of my back—and then lift my head enough to raise my eyes to his face.

"I know that it will destroy you," I assert without hesitation. "I know that your selfishly seeking to become a Beast of Ten has brought misery to the nations. I know that you are guilty of *much* death and that it makes the very air around you shudder and want to flee."

I lift a hand to my brow, my fingers trembling. "I know that you have one last chance to revive your smothered lines, to restore some bit of light, before you will have forever chosen your fate. You are at the decision point. The Lights are granting you one last choice. It will soon be made, and then you must fight with everything inside you to accomplish what you decide." I pause and then say, "You have taken it so far."

He stares at me, and with each of his breaths, I can feel the room scattering in defense.

"This end," he begins, his slatelike voice cold and sharp, "is what I have desired for three hundred years. Why do you think I would change my course now?"

I sigh and look towards the bright sun through the diamond-paned windows. My fatigue is too immense for this conversation; my stamina, too weak for his presence.

"I think the light within you," I begin, "will fight as long as any part of you wants illumination more than darkness. That instinct is not easily killed, for it is guided by the compass the Lights placed inside your own heart."

"I have been wanting this for almost three hundred years," he repeats.

"And I wager that your light will burn for three thousand more, rather than lose you forever to darkness."

He releases a long breath and steps away from the hearth, the small bits of metal in his grey attire catching the reflection of the firelight as he moves in front of it. Slumping into one of the chairs against the wall, he groans audibly. His anger is dissipating, but his confusion is rising like a dust storm, and with it comes a flat, depressing energy.

"So you already know that if I take your life it will serve as my final blood gain?" he says.

"Yes."

"How?"

I lift a tired shoulder, then bring my feet up onto the bed under me, curling back against the headboard, my eyes heavy. I look at the Bleak before me and give an honest answer.

"I was in the library when the Witch came to offer your Bewares."

"In the library?"

"You couldn't see me."

He shifts his entire body and lifts his chin until his eyes meet my face. "Then Meridaithe was right, you are a Virtus Third."

"Which I think you'd already suspected."

"I suspected your blood would be enough to achieve Beast of Ten. I knew you channeled great power, for your wisp—as you call it—never seemed to dim. Though," he pauses, "it is not with you now."

"No," I say.

“I wonder why it’s left you. Perhaps such is the devilry you’ve performed.”

I tug the corner of my mouth down. “It is not *I* that am performing the devilry. But it does seem to require all my power to keep *yours* at bay.”

He sneers. “As if you could stop my course.”

“That makes two of us who don’t think I’m up for the task,” I reply.

He makes a derisive sound and looks away. “What the Lights were thinking when they sent such an unprepared whelp to counter me, I do not know—for you are all that stands between me and my power. The final fall will be the easiest part of my journey.” A rough laugh escapes his throat. “Counter to what everyone—both light and dark—has ever said.”

“Then why haven’t you killed me?”

His gaze returns to me with such concentration that I half close my eyes to withstand the force of it. After half a moment, he says, “I don’t know.”

And I know from the way he says it that he really doesn’t understand his hesitation at all.

VIII

There is now a strange bond between us that neither of us is settled with. Since working on the Bleak’s tenth line, and confronting one another with whatever honesty we were willing to give, our separate worlds have shifted into the same one.

Whereas before he had been a force in some other part of the Pyre, our encounters fraught but uncommon, our days have now become entwined. We do not seek each other out—if the facts are to be told scrupulously, I would argue that we make every effort to avoid one another. Yet despite the many hallways and gardens and an endless forest for the wandering, we keep crossing each other’s path.

When he is pacing in the garden, thinking, distant, I find myself coming upon him, weary of his darkness but unable to leave without sitting awhile. I stay as far away as the pull of this bond will allow, waiting, sending whatever light I can in his direction. More often than not, his chaos snaps at me, like a forest wolf, and then he looks towards me, his face mirroring the

same. Sometimes we fall into step and he makes a strange sound, one of tormented relief. All the while, I try to keep his endlessness away, still wondering if I will ever again touch the spark of light struggling for breath beside his heart. When we are not together, I can sense him as he moves about the Pyre, suffering in a manner I never would wish on anybody.

Weeks pass. Whatever binds us together does not.

My strength comes back in portion and piece, Miranda fussing over me with food and care, all the while staying shy of the Bleak herself.

"He can catch me out and I'll not bother with a complaint, but when he threatens my husband—" She shakes her head, and the faith that I'd seen so often in her face falters from the fear of what feels more inevitable than ever.

The Bleak does not ride out from the Pyre, neither are any of his strange companions welcomed by him. The Stone Six stalk the halls and courtyards, riding out through the forest at unearthly times, discontented with their master's refusal to leave.

A few tributes of the wealthier nations are sent, and the merchant trains continue to pass through the forest. The staff of the Pyre go about their jobs more quietly than before, as if waiting for another storm to break or waiting for the next time the Bleak tears himself apart by his own deeds. They also watch me, his last blood gain, ready for the taking.

He's only to decide.

* * *

It continues. Every day, an interaction with the Bleak; every night, whatever refuge I can seek in the bell tower suite. And that refuge is filled with thoughts of home.

The clearest memory I have of my mother is of her coming to my room just before bed to braid my hair. She would take care to comb out the snags and talk with me about the day, asking what I and my brothers had been up to while she'd been occupied with the tasks of running a grand house. Evidence, more often than not, would be found in my hair: a twig, a bit of a leaf, sap which would have to be washed or cut out. One particular night she had sighed and worried over me.

"I suppose I should make you stay closer to the house," she says once with a sigh.

“But they would leave me behind.”

“Who?”

“Hadspen and Thry.”

Mother is long silent. “The time may come, Ember, when Hadspen and Thry will have to leave you behind for them to do what they are meant to do in this life.”

“No,” I shake my head. “We will go together.”

“You will live in the male dormitories at university?”

“I’ll dress like a boy. No one would know.”

Mother laughs. “Ember, dear.”

“What am I to do?”

She gets strangely quiet then, and I close my eyes to feel the pattern of her braiding my long hair, her knuckles brushing against my back. “I do not understand what you will yet do, Ember. I pray the Lights knew what they were doing when they set you on your path. I fear there may be a time where it is you who will leave your brothers behind.”

I’d never understood what she had meant, but I do now, curled up in the darkness of the bell tower suite. Clearly, she had known I was born third. She had known I had been given an Ilaria, as the Bleak calls it—my wisp. What else she had known, I could not guess.

It is one of the darker nights, and I think on this memory of my mother over and over. I can feel the Pyre drowning in the rage of the Bleak beneath my rooms. It is not without the confusion of guilt, for I know I have done very little in weeks to counter his dark course. But what exactly am I *to* do? And he being still undecided about the timing of my own fate…

I close my eyes and feel a tear slide down my cheek. I sniff, which makes it worse, for a cry tries to come through the sound. I let it come, feeling shattered by the great task that I don’t know how to accomplish. That I do not *wish* to accomplish.

Perhaps it is through the Lights, but somehow Miranda knows, for she arrives at my door and lets herself in. Sitting beside my bed in the dark, she rubs my back until the crying has limped into a whimper. She can’t have known, but she soon begins combing my long hair with her fingers, and then she begins to braid.

“Tell me of your afternoon, my lady. What were you about after you helped me in the kitchens.”

I sniff and don’t answer.

“Ah, look at that,” Miranda says, and I feel her pull at my hair. “You were in the forest. Here’s a pine needle for proof.”

In the darkness, noise always seems to travel with more clarity. I hear her snap the pine needle between her fingers, and she inhales. “Ah, now that smells right fresh, lady. That is a good smell. She would make candles that would make the whole of the Pyre smell like the trees of the forest. Winters were always lovely for it.”

“She?” I ask quietly.

“Ederra,” Miranda says wistfully. “The girl Sperro was to marry. How he loved her once—oh, he was consumed by it. He burned for Ederra. And she for him, I suppose.”

“What happened?” I ask in a broken voice. “Why did they not marry?”

“Sperro became distracted, then curious, then allured. There was a man, an acquaintance of his father, who came around after the old master and mistress had died. He was—well, there was always something unsettling about Callidus and his ways. His eyes. Flat like. He came around, and it was he that first whispered about the twisted magicks into Sperro’s ear.”

“Did Sperro not see it? He was a Lectus Born, after all.”

She makes a surprised sound. “How beneath the Lights did you discover that, child?”

Sniffing, I answer vaguely, “I saw it once—for only a moment—the most amazing color in his eyes, and I knew he had been Lectus Born.”

“Tis true,” she confirms with a sigh, “though it’s rare now to see a token of it in his eyes. They are beautiful, are they not? The eyes of the Lectus Born?”

“Very.”

“His were like no other’s, all dance and color, beautiful as they were brave,” she continues sadly. “And I saw more than one Lectus Born pass through this place. Oh my handsome boy.”

“It surprised me,” I admit, “to realize just how far he’d truly fallen.”

“You must understand the picture of it, Ember. Both Sperro’s father and his mother passed away in one year. The master was young; he was passionate, and confident in himself, yet shaken at the responsibility before him. But my stars, he refused to show it. He was uncertain at first. Made a few mistakes by giving too much emotion and not enough reason to his efforts. But then he settled down, and we all thought, here now, the young master will be very wise, and Ederra will become his wife, mistress of the

Pyre, and all will be well. But then Callidus came. He not only saw the strength of Sperro's passion, he ignited it. He praised Sperro and his work. Spent hours in discourse on philosophy and science and the Orders of the Lights. And then he spoke of the counterfeit orders, of dark magicks, that Sperro might know.

"A Lectus Born is capable of great power, a double-edged sword, child, for power reined is a mighty force, and power curious and unbound, well, it can be dangerous. But Sperro did not see what the others of us did. His father had not been overly warm to Callidus in the years preceding his death, and we thought Sperro welcomed him into the Pyre too often.

"He visited several times that first year, and several more the next. He taught Sperro the runes and a few slant magicks. 'Aren't you curious?' Callidus would ask, when Sperro proved hesitant. 'To know what else is in this world? Aren't you committed to *all* knowledge?' The Pyre Council warned Sperro, demanded he send Callidus away, but the young master refused. Stubborn and foolish, Ederra called him.

"And so Sperro, led by curiosity, began to touch the false, and so the course continued until he fell into the ways of the blood gain. No matter what any of us said."

"How tragic," I reply, thinking of Sperro Magna as if he were a person from a tale of long ago, not someone tied at all to my own days and time. "Even from the one taste of his remaining light, I know what he could have been."

"Yes, my lady. But no matter what's inside you, no matter what you're meant for, if you take counsel from the dark, there it is that you will be led."

"And Callidus?"

"He still visits from time to time. He was here just before Sperro traveled into the North countries, bringing you home with him. A grace. For you do not want to know a creature such as he."

She finishes braiding my hair and then, unexpectedly, lies down behind me and gathers me into her arms as if I were a child. "It is not a night for dark tales, my lady. How about I tell you of my own childhood, on the edges of this very forest over three hundred and fifty years ago?"

I nod, so she pulls a wisp of hair away from my face and begins her story. She'd grown up "barefoot and half wild," a childhood unmarked by sorrow. The last thing I hear before I fall asleep is Miranda saying, "And Balint could hardly believe it when I agreed to marry him."

* * *

The next afternoon the Bleak and I reluctantly fall into step beside one another while walking a wide forest path. My thoughts are filled with Miranda's tale.

He speaks directly to me—well, sneers at me, really. "My *curiosity*—as Miranda calls it—has been aroused, and I've asked myself, 'What does my Virtus Third make of this strange binding?'"

I look towards him—trying not to flinch. "Binding?"

"Don't pretend to be daft," he answers with his slatelike voice, though he does not look at me. "We've been bound, you and I, for good or ill. As to why?" He shrugs. "Perhaps it is the Sanctum work you had no business doing. Although I was already catching your inane thoughts inside my head—which is worse now, by the way," he adds, looking in my direction as if I am to blame. "Or perhaps," he continues, "it may have something to do with that bit of candle I can't move or touch, outside my chamber door."

"The candle is still burning?" Neither Miranda nor Celia has mentioned this. I'm not surprised, for my wisp has still not returned to me—a lonely thing, like losing one's shadow.

"None of my guards can pass it," he growls. "A damned nuisance each time I cross the threshold." A buoyancy fills my chest at the thought, and he grimaces. "Do you have to be so bright? My head still feels—"

I lift my hand between us, interrupting. "I know what's inside of your head and have no wish to recall any part of it."

He shifts his mouth, watching me for a beat before he speaks again. "Regardless, our fates are twisted together now. It seems either you end me or"—he slows his words—"I end you." His tone clarifies the ending he foresees.

I stop walking and so does he, his patch-magick cloak catching the light as he turns to face me. His blank eyes rest on mine, and—for the briefest whisper—I think I see a grain of gold in them. Then it is gone, swept away by his wonted emptiness. A prickling sensation rises on my skin as I consider this creature so close to Beast of Ten.

"What?" he snaps.

"Well," I answer, "since we've both begun being honest with each other, I still can't fathom why—"

“Yes, dammit. I know.” He begins walking farther up the trail, expecting me to follow like his lackey. “I’ve heard your relentless line of stupid questioning,” he says over his shoulder. “You can’t fathom *why* I’ve not yet taken my final blood gain.”

Hesitating, I look back over my shoulder towards the Pyre, before giving in to the pull of our bond and following, keeping a pace behind him.

“Only you—” He pauses, as if adjusting his words, and I could swear, for the briefest moment, he looks disoriented. “It seems you remind me of someone. Something in— Almost all my memories of her had been killed— until I saw you.”

I glance up at his shoulders as I trudge through the snow behind him. Was this Ederra, the girl Miranda had spoken of? The one he was to marry long ago?

He shoots a look of anger over his shoulder at me, a warning to take care in my thoughts. “You know nothing,” he snaps. “And to be clear, we haven’t even begun being honest with one another.”

“Have we not?” I retort, weary of his company.

“Most certainly not. You can’t even be honest with yourself.”

I pull myself up short. “I am always honest with myself.”

The Bleak slows his step, turns to partially face me, and blinks. It is not a human movement. It looks predatory, reptilian. I take a step backwards.

“According to the theologies, every Virtus Third has a calling.” He’s looking directly at me, his eyes drilling mine with a focus not usually there, his words sliding over one another like ice. “You might believe yours is to convince me away from my path. Let us suppose, for the sake my argument, that it is.” Here he pauses, his head tilting arrogantly. “But you *despise* what I am. You wish to have nothing to do with me. You *hate* what you see, and hate has no place in the work of a Virtus Third.” His eyes narrow, and he makes the sound of a crippled laugh. “How do you expect to accomplish *anything*, when you are so full of fear yourself? You see? Nothing is more consuming than fear. It has already hindered you, and you will fail. But you cannot admit it,” the Bleak finishes with obvious contempt.

I look away, my toe kicking the snow, my face burning. Of course I think him a wretch, hell-bent and evil. But my feelings are more complicated than this, for I know that when searching for his tenth line I’d fought for him. I know something else as well.

“Now you’re the one not being honest,” I counter.

He twists his mouth as he raises an eyebrow. “How am *I* not being honest with the likes of you?” he asks.

I swallow, however dry my mouth. “If you can hear my thoughts so clearly, then you know I’ve rarely felt *anything* so astonishing as your light, this birthright you forfeit. But you want to feel my distrust of you, my hatred even. You *want* me to despise you.”

He gives an abrupt laugh but does not contradict me.

I straighten my shoulders. “Perhaps that makes it easier to live with what you despise about yourself.”

He breathes out, amused, but I notice a strange look in his eyes as he shifts. “You, my brave nothing, hold no threat for me.”

I don’t reply as most of me is in perfect agreement.

“And your indecision leaves the way unopposed before me,” he continues. “A divided Virtus Third cannot accomplish the work they are called to do, for the work of a Virtus Third is the work of the soul. And yes, you fought for me in that moment.” He turns his eyes back to mine, and I feel the assault of some dark thought as he adds, “And it almost crushed you.” Then he turns away and begins walking. “I’m going in deeper. You need not follow.”

“I’ve no intention of following,” I reply, knowing full well that he is speaking of the forest while I am still speaking of something else.

* * *

Upon returning to the grounds of the Pyre, I find Balint in the stables, sharpening the tools.

“Have you been out wandering the day long?” he asks as I settle on an old bench along the wall.

“Yes,” I answer. “For most of it.”

“Miranda worries when she doesn’t see you. Especially now that you and the master seem to cross through each other’s days.”

“She doesn’t need to,” I breathe out in a single breath.

Balint looks up at me, but his hands keep working.

I shrug. “Meaning it’s going to end at some point. Most likely with my blood. That’s got to be understood—and accepted—by myself, at the very least.”

Balint offers a troubled grunt. He's oiling an ax, having sharpened it before I'd arrived. It's a beautiful piece, the ax, the solid wood helve waxed, with a well-kept edge on the head. Balint's care is flawless, knowing perfectly the skills for keeping it strong. I wish I understood the same for the Pyre.

"They say it's confirmed, then, my lady, that you are a Virtus Third."

"So it seems."

Balint keeps his eyes on his work, but his mouth is pulled downward, like he's holding back things he doesn't wish to speak aloud. I'm not going to press him.

The words of the Bleak crowd around me. He is right: I do despise him and all he has practiced upon others, and I cannot find any part of my heart willing to continue working in his behalf. I worry the memory of his light will not be enough, that it will fade.

"The Bleak said—" I halt and rephrase my words, "Sperro said that the work of a Virtus Third is of the soul, that one cannot be divided." Balint has stopped moving, and he's listening, though he's staring at the tools before him. "What will it require? This task? The saving of the Pyre?" I force the next words out of me. "And must I pull him back from Beast of Ten to do it?"

Balint returns to his work, and I listen to the repetitive sound of his sharpening until he decides to break the silence with slow words. "I don't know much about that, my lady. Strange as it sounds, the master would know more than any of us the work of the Virtus Third, for one passed through the Pyre when the master was a young man, and they sat in long conference together, discussing the Lights. But I do wonder—"

"Yes?" I say when he seems hesitant to continue.

"It does seem you may be a bit muddled about what is clearly before you."

I look up sharply. "What do you mean?" Balint doesn't answer, he simply sets the ax aside and picks up a saw that's been sharpened. He adds a touch of oil to a rag, then, with a thoughtful frown on his face, leans forward and hands me both the saw and the rag. I take them and begin to wipe, covering the blade with oil.

"You and the master are the ones set in this duel of fate," Balint says, "a fight that feels beyond the rest of us here. We've the power to change naught. Yet everything that happens will affect us, child, don't you see?

Dare we hope the Lights have sent a way for things to change? Dare we wonder if this frozen life will end? Dare we believe that you could be strong enough to challenge the master and keep him from becoming a Beast of Ten? Has the very God of heaven heard all the prayers we assumed were sent up in vain?" He lifts his eyes to mine. "I'm saying to you now, young soul, I'm not sure what to do with this hope I'm feeling. It's tangled inside of my chest with more feeling than I've had this century past. I'm worried about the disappointment. Especially if you don't fully grasp the challenge that is set before you yourself."

"But I don't understand!" I answer helplessly. "I've had no instruction, and he is so—" I don't verbally finish the thought, but my expression does so for me.

"Yes, he is. I've been contemplating on that," Balint answers. "You see, I think that when you look at the master—*the Bleak*, as you call him—you only see what he has become."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning"—Balint pulls a face as he sorts his tools—"that you were sent here to do the work of a soul, but you know nothing of the soul you were sent to help."

I realize I've stopped rubbing the oil across Balint's saw and am not moving, fearful his words will settle on me in a way that I cannot shake them. I pick up the chore again, an easy excuse to look away.

"So you think I should become *familiar* with a Death Bleak?" I make a sound that is more reminiscent of Sylvain than myself.

"If you were supposed to help the master remain a Bleak, then you would need to learn more of that Bleak. But it seems to me you were sent here to help pull the young man who became the Bleak out of the mess he's gotten himself into, before it is no longer possible."

I set the saw aside and look at Balint. "You mean I should know more about Sperro Magna?"

"Isn't that who the Lights have sent you to give one last chance at redemption to?" Balint lifts his ax and carries it over to the wall, setting it in place. "But you can't stand the thought of him. You despise him."

My silence confirms Balint's assertions, and I am irritated to have the Bleak's words echoed a second time. Balint shuffles a few more tools into their places. Then he turns towards me, lifting one hand to his hip while flattening the other around the curve of the stable's pillar.

"You're justified in abhorring the creature." He looks at me a long moment. "But you're not here to save a creature; you're here to save a boy." I feel a stirring in my chest at his words as he continues. "My eyes, child, they're old. I see this Death Bleak as clear as morning, and he's an awful shadow of what he once was. But I'm still looking for that boy. I'm still looking for the young man with the golden voice and the set brow: strong and burning and godlike. I'm saying, I think *that* is who you should be looking for. Cut the darkness away, and every path becomes clear. Even the impossible."

* * *

I think about Balint's words all day, arguing with them as I eat dinner, carrying them around with me as I walk the stairs of the Pyre. Each time I begin to believe Balint may be right, my instincts wish to put up a cold wall against the idea. I don't know if it is my pride or my caution or my disbelief, but it stays my hand from wishing to ask the others too many questions. They have been willing to speak of him a time or two. Only it always makes them sad, wistful. Even Balint, who suggested the idea, did not volunteer to teach me more of Sperro Magna himself.

But the Pyre is full of its own memories, comes the thought from the back of my mind. I tuck a lose strand of hair behind my ear and force myself to consider the idea. Celia has told me that most of the memories found loose about the Pyre are stored in a room on the eighth floor.

"Little good they'll do me if I never look at them," I mutter.

So after midday meal, I wait until I know Celia is at the other end of the Pyre, and then take myself up through eight flights of twisting staircases. The room where she stores the memories is empty save for a large bank of wardrobes against the north wall, and windows on the east. I've never opened them before, and it takes me a moment comprised of three long breaths before I step forward and pull on the handles of the wardrobe in the center.

Both doors swing wide open and I let my arms drop to my sides. Piles of shimmering memories, neatly folded, are tucked in tight stacks several rows deep. I reach my hand out towards them, and the memories feel less like fabric and more like static and energy, glittering faintly in the quiet room.

Reaching towards a silver slip of light, I pull it out while supporting the surrounding memories with my other hand so they might not tumble forward. The silver memory weighs no more than a handkerchief, and I spread it out between my hands, not seeing anything but the shimmer. I turn it one way, then the other. Nothing. Neither a sound nor an image.

I hold it up towards the candle I've brought with me and see the light pouring through. It looks like a gossamer curtain, but still there is nothing more. Dropping my hands, I sigh, turning back towards the wardrobe, scrutinizing the other memories before me: Some bright; others almost faded. Some gold; others silver. All pulsating like stars in an endless galaxy of antiquity.

Putting the first memory back, I take another from the wardrobe…then another, and another. They are each slightly different in size and weight, but equal in their silence. After several attempts, I have to admit that I've no idea what I am doing.

Holding one of the elusive memories in my hands, I rub it between my fingers and thumbs, feeling the immortal texture and wishing I could flare a memory in the same way I call to a light line inside of a human being. It would be a simpler process—

There is a flash, and I hear someone calling out a name. I jump and look over my shoulder. Breathing hard but seeing no one, I look down at the memory in my hands. There is a watery image of two young women walking down a hallway. It stills like the top of a pond, and the picture clarifies.

I hear their footsteps and their laughter. One is Celia.

"But Francis said you'd kissed him after the bonfire," the other young woman is saying.

"I did no such thing!" Celia whispers as loudly as one can. "Certainly you didn't think—Francis! Of all the fools."

The other young woman giggles and Celia laughs.

Then the image begins to sparkle until I can see nothing but the light itself, glittering like the night's sky. My mouth is open. Celia had looked so happy. I press my lips together, feeling the invader, and fold the memory, replacing it.

Reaching in for another memory that is tucked back behind others and forgotten, I crouch, spreading it out on the ground before me. Focusing on

thoughts of light pouring from my fingers, I am once again graced with an image of the Pyre.

It is in the Great Hall. Light pours through the stained glass windows. There are richly hued banners. An impressive assembly has gathered to welcome a host from a distant land. The front doors have been flung wide open with what appears to be the master and the mistress of the Pyre standing at the top of the stairs as their guests approach them. There are interpreters, fine horses, and noise—what noise!

It is an old scene, worn thin by centuries now past, a memory from long before Sperro Magna's time. I fold it up as the vision fades.

I sort through several more memories, rolling them out on the floor and crouching before them. Whatever the season or occasion, they all radiate a different world than this winterbound reality I find myself in.

And finally, when I'm almost done searching for the day, I come across an image of the Pyre in Sperro Magna's time. I can tell it is he, for Miranda is standing in the background, a younger woman than she is now. Also, his eyes are those of a Lectus Born.

He is a boy here, on a balcony with his father and a handful of others. The boy is golden from hours in the sun, no more than nine or ten, his eyes full of wonder, hair wind rumpled, clothing disheveled from a good dash. There is something particularly arresting in him as a child, and it makes me smile when I realize he is attempting to mimic his father's posture.

A woman comes out onto the balcony, and Sperro's father and the company turn to greet her. But Sperro does not. Rather, he looks over his shoulder directly at—

I look up and blink.

Me. He is looking directly at me, as if I am a part of the scene.

His face shifts in a perplexed way.

I gasp and pull my hands away from the memory, but the scene persists. "Of course he doesn't see me," I say aloud, but my heart is racing. Sperro Magna continues looking towards me, his eyebrows draw together, his eyes —those fire-filled eyes of the Lectus Born—too wise for his age. They study the exact place from which my vantage point is set.

Someone calls his name, and he looks earnestly towards the sound. I want to reach out and tousle his hair the way I would tease the boys who worked in the orchards of Hill House.

As the memory fades, I let myself sit back on the floor, staring at the quiet room ahead of me. Still the sweetness and boyish tang of the memory persists. It makes me want to weep.

* * *

I seek out that balcony the following day. It is off of the ninth floor, near the Pyre's southwest corner. No one seems to have been here for ages, and there is snow and leaves and all of nature's weary detritus lying about in a forlorn way.

Sitting down against one of the exterior walls, where the snow has been blown away, I wrap my cloak around my shoulders. There is a bit of paper and some charcoal in a deep inside pocket of my cloak, but I leave them untouched, just staring at the blank balcony that had once been filled with summer and voices and—

The Bleak steps out onto the balcony.

It is with no warning and my muscles tighten. He knows I am here, I'm certain he does, but it is several long moments before he addresses me. First, he walks across the balcony, paying little heed to the wind, his cloak fighting and twisting about him. His eyes are sorting through the emptiness of the place. There is a vaporous darkness in the air around him, twisting like the shreds of an abandoned flag. It is as if his abyss consumes the air and I can feel myself falling into the edge of it.

"I knew you were here because I can hear your chattering thoughts through all the floors of the Pyre now," he says in a tone of cold accusation coupled with dismissal. "You were on the eighth floor last night, looking at memories."

I don't answer.

He takes another three steps to the stone balustrade—to the same place where he had stood as a child—and, pausing only a moment to consider the place where his father had once stood, the Bleak turns to face me.

I realize I am in the same spot from where I had watched the memory, a disconcerting parallel. He stares at me without blinking, without moving, his great emptiness unaffected by the wind. He's created the parallel on purpose, a signal that his past will have no sway over what he will become. I pull my cloak closer around me, my hands trembling.

"Do not enter that room again."

IX

"I think we need to keep candles burning," I tell Miranda a few days later. We are in the kitchens—a place the Bleak avoids religiously. I'm sitting at the table, my chin propped up by my hand. "As many nights as we're able."

I have been feeling more adrift since the glimpse of both the Pyre and the Bleak as they once were. Confusion about what I am to do with this knowledge, and an indecision about whether I wish to know it, follow me around. The full splendor of the Pyre is easy to understand. But the precocious boy? The Lectus Born? I cannot reconcile any part of him with the Bleak. A thing he clearly wishes.

I flatten my hand on the table, tapping a pattern along the wood with my fingers. This morning I went through my prayers as I did yesterday and the day before. And each evening I have lifted my thoughts towards the Lights for answers. No clarity has come.

Except for one thought.

It has felt as if someone were leaning down and whispering over my shoulder, saying that just as candlelight and fire had kept the work of the Bleak at bay during his long, silent invasion, the light would help me know how to burn away the smoke of his work now. "Anyone can light a candle," I had replied to the empty air. But as for understanding my calling as a Virtus Third, I have heard nothing and felt little. Sensed only that I must decide—soon—if I will accept it.

I sigh, bringing a response from Miranda about the candles.

"We can't burn many more until the West Country merchants come again. They're due soon enough. You can speak with them then."

I had usually not seen the merchant trains that had come to the Pyre and would not know how to tell one from the other. "West Country merchants?"

"Yes," Miranda says, pounding her fist into the bread dough. "We buy our candles from a merchant who lives in one of the villages on the western edge of the forest. Once we had stores and stores of candles, slowly added to, but we burned most of them in those few days we fought to keep the Pyre alight."

"And what of the boxes of candles in Balint's stable," I inquire.

“Tallow candles. But inside the Pyre, we can only burn those made from beeswax.” Miranda pauses and looks towards the foggy grey light outside the kitchen windows. “It’s always been so. We used to make them ourselves. There were scores and scores of hives kept in the meadow just up the river path. But the winter came with Sperro’s downfall, and the bees died.”

* * *

And so I sit in the cold on the front stairway of the Pyre the next day. I return to the kitchens come evening, sketch Miranda with a bit of charcoal and paper, then sleep in my bell tower suite, only to wake and find myself sitting on the stairway once more.

On this second morning, two of the Bleak’s Stone Six are keeping watch: one at the east arch and one at the west. They glance towards me, wondering what I am about. Avoiding eye contact, I look past them, up into the forest, noting the slow advance of light wrapping itself from one horizon to the other.

In the afternoon, a merchant party comes from the east. They unload and pay tribute—wariness echoed in their movements—before stopping to rest in the rooms above the stables. They travel with animals and, because I now reside at the Pyre, Balint buys a cow so I can have milk. Miranda buys fabrics to make me more clothes.

But the West Country merchants are not among them, so I continue to wait for my candles.

At the end of the day, just after the afternoon sun has hit the doors of the Pyre before it disappeared behind the distant mountains, I feel the Bleak at my back.

I turn.

The tall doors are open, and he is standing there watching me, his arms crossed—a posture so deceptively human.

Our eyes meet, and he considers me. “You are waiting for someone?”

“I’m waiting for something,” I say, turning back towards the empty courtyard.

“Something the merchants bring?”

“You know very well I wait for candles,” I answer curtly, certain he’d found the answer already in my thoughts. “We’re nearly out.”

He makes a noise of disinterest, and then I hear the sound of his footsteps as he walks away. Good riddance.

Night is doing its best to fall, and I think that if there weren't so many clouds I would like to watch the stars rise in a place such as this. I let out a long breath and hug my knees against my chest, quieting my thoughts—stars are not something the Bleak wishes forced into his head. Spending one last glance on the clouded night sky, I go back inside the Pyre.

* * *

The next day as I wait, the Bleak comes across the courtyard with one of his guards. He does not acknowledge my presence until he has sent his guard away on some errand.

"Still waiting for your candles?"

"Yes."

Though his face is blank, it entertains the idea of an expression. "You are more dangerous than I realized," he says. When I don't inquire what makes him think so, he continues, "The candle outside my room still burns, interrupting my work, no matter what black runes I try to smoother it with."

"And yet you keep me alive," I say as calmly as possible, "as dangerous as I am."

"Perhaps I enjoy tempting fate," he replies offhand. Then he lifts his gaze towards mine with a sticky bravado. "It also affords me some *small* amusement to watch you struggle beneath a weight that will most assuredly crush you. Desperation reveals every weakness." Then he opens his palms and looks up towards the sky, as if challenging the Lights in their efforts to foil his path. "Even in the gods."

My stomach quivers at the irreverence of his pose. Yet he does not leave, and the tether that connects our fates quivers like a living thing, a life that must be fed, a life I've been ignoring.

He looks at me sharply—overhearing the thought—then grunts. "I'm going into the forest," he says. "Will you follow?" It is neither an order nor an invitation, rather a test to see if I can indeed ignore our bond.

Crossing my arms, I lean forward, determined, my elbows on my knees, my breath causing a cloud of air in the cold. "I can't miss the merchants," I answer, fighting the pull of our linked fates and feeling safer for it, however uncomfortable.

With a noise that can only be described as snide—he laughs tightly as I think this—the Bleak turns away. As he disappears in the direction of the stables, I move my gaze again towards the west road, ignoring the bond that would have me follow.

* * *

On the fourth day of my watch, I almost give up. I had walked through the forest that morning—alone—as the sun was rising but have been waiting on the stairs, wrapped in my cloak, ever since.

The Bleak comes in through the east gate from the paths south of the Pyre. Then he stops and settles his weight. "There's no purpose in you waiting!" he calls from across the courtyard, his voice breaking the winter quiet.

I set my chin and don't answer.

"There's no purpose in it because the West Country merchants are yet three days out from the Pyre. Unless," he waves a hand as he walks closer to me, "you enjoy sitting the day long in the cold, waiting for nothing and cursing my existence."

"How do you know?"

"That you curse my existence?"

I press my lips together, but a strange smile fights its way upward. "No. How do you know that the West Country merchants are three days out?"

"I can sense everything that moves in the forest. No creature is kept hidden from me."

"How do you know it isn't another merchant train? Many travel these roads."

The Bleak scowls. "How do you know the color of the cloak you are wearing?"

"I—" I lift my shoulder and look down. "Because I've seen it before, so I recognize it."

"And so it is for me with anyone who has entered my forest."

"I see," I say, not certain I understand his full meaning.

Still I sit here, despite knowing the merchants won't come soon, waiting to move until the Bleak has disappeared into the Pyre. But he doesn't. He settles on the steps some distance from me and looks in my direction. I tense.

“What color is it?” he asks.

“What?”

“Your cloak,” he answers impatiently.

“Oh,” I reply, thinking it an odd question. “Green. The same green as the needles on the trees.”

He gives a single nod.

“You don’t see color?”

“I once did,” he answers.

“But—?”

The general expression of his face seems to be one of pity for my ignorance. “Certain powers can only be achieved through a sacrifice. I paid the price of color to gain something else.”

I blink and look away from his figure, seeing the courtyard in a different way: Chinks of shadow and color. The warmth of the Pyre’s honey-gold stone against the cool colors of the forest. The trees rising in their noble green, their rough brown trunks turning black against the sky. Shades of blue and grey and white. The bright gold of dry, dead grasses. The timeless grey in the low storm clouds. The red flit of an errant cardinal, from branch to branch.

All this makes me wonder if my father would have chosen to lose his hand over losing his ability to see color. “What a pity,” I say aloud. “Do you remember what the colors look like?”

The Bleak speaks only after a long wait. “Not all of them. A remembrance usually comes only if you’ve put them into my head. Most of my own memories are all but gone now.” There is a longer pause. “Red,” he says more quietly than I am expecting, “is what I remember the most.”

“Is that why you manufacture red sunsets among the nations?”

He doesn’t answer me, his eyes touching lightly on the trees before us, then looking into a distance beyond my time and experience.

I pull my cloak tighter about me as a featherlight snow begins to fall. “Well,” I stand up, “if the merchants are three days out, there is no use in me sitting here any longer. I shall do something else with my time until they arrive.”

The Bleak just stares ahead.

I leave him sitting alone, wondering to myself if he is lost in an effort to remember all that he has given up.

* * *

I am in the stables with Balint when the West Country merchants finally come.

"They're here," Sylvain says from the doorway. He'd hauled in a wagon full of uncut wood and has been chopping it all morning long. His hand still grips the ax. "Forty-six horses, seventeen dogs, sixty-three men."

My head shoots up. "The West Country merchants?"

Sylvain nods. "Aye. They're among them."

I rush past Balint and Sylvain, out of the stables, under an arch, and up into the courtyard, where noise and men and animals are mingling in the mess of a travel's end. Large wagons of goods are being unloaded or rearranged. Tomorrow, they will also carry out with them some of Sylvain's wood.

Winding between the shouts and the calls, I try and keep my distance, finding it strange to be among people—living, blood-pulsing people—and as I catch the eyes of the men, I can't remember if these particular merchants have seen me before.

"Excuse me," I say to an older man who is giving directions. "Excuse me. I'm wondering if the candle merchant is here?"

He keeps yelling, then turns an expression of annoyance towards me.

"The candle seller? Who travels with the West Country merchants?" I try again.

"I don't know who you mean."

"Yes. But, I was told—"

My words are stopped by another shout ripping from his mouth as he orders his men about. I wince and slide through a knot of men, still searching.

"Do you need help, Miss?"

I turn to see a rather unkempt man winding a rope between his hands. His appearance is unsavory, but his eyes are kind.

"Yes," I say. "I'm looking for the candle merchant who travels among those from the West Country."

"West Country?" The man scratches his stubbled chin. "Astrick sells candles. He's the one you want, I'd imagine. Tall? Brown hair?"

I shake my head. "I wouldn't know, sir."

"*Sir*, is it?"—every unkempt thing about him turning upward in smile. "I'll be tickled, Miss. No one in my life has ever called me the like. Let me help you find Astrick for your pains."

"Thank you," I say, cringing a bit from the entire exchange.

I follow the merchant through the maze of tired travelers—at one point hearing Balint calling out instructions—and soon find myself near a wagon where two men are unloading crates.

"Massel, you got Astrick here?"

Massel looks up, first at my guide, then at me. "He's around the back."

I tilt my head to look past Massel and see a figure behind the wagon. "That must be him," I say to my guide. "Thank you for your help."

Before they can say anything else, I wrap my cloak closer about myself and step around the wagon. The young man behind it is just lifting a crate.

I clear my throat. "Excuse me?"

He spins around as if I've stung him, almost dropping the crate in his hands. "Life's blood," he mutters as he shifts the crate into balance again.

"Forgive me." I hold up a hand and take a step back. "I didn't mean to startle you."

Yet when he looks at me it is I who am startled, for it is like encountering the beginning and the end of a day, wrapped together. Or like the smell of a summer rain before it falls, unexpected, but welcome. The lines around his green eyes crease in question. Then his gaze travels up to the Pyre at my back, and he says, "It's no kindness to sneak up on someone when they're in their own head. Especially in a place such as this."

And at these very human words, I remember I am here to negotiate for candles.

"I couldn't tell that you were in your own head," I answer, focusing on the business at hand. "Are you Astrick?"

My knowing his name does not seem to settle well. He pulls his mouth to the side as he pushes the crate back onto the wagon with a confident movement. His green eyes turn into a fortress, revealing nothing. Astrick is taller than me, closer to Hadspen's height, and tanned from his time on the merchant road.

He says, "Excuse my caution if I wish to know what you want with me before I tell you my name."

"What I want with you?" I pull my eyebrows together.

"Yes," he answers.

“Why, candles.”

His face remains impassive. “Candles?”

“Yes. You are the candle merchant from the West Country, are you not?”

“I am.” His eyes move again towards the Pyre. “And you are?”

“I’m Ember.”

“Ember.”

“Yes.”

He pulls his mouth to the side again. “What are you doing here, Ember? I’ve not seen you before.”

Not expecting questions, I steel my patience a moment before saying, “I’m a guest at the Pyre.”

“A guest?” he repeats dubiously.

“A guest,” I state unequivocally. “What are *you* doing here?”

He takes a half step closer to the wagon, lifting a hand to the crate in an attempt to look more comfortable than he clearly is. “I travel the merchant line.”

“The merchant line?”

“Yes,” he states impatiently, not any more pleased with this game of repetition than I am. “The merchant line through this forest.”

“Good,” I say, nodding my head. “We now understand quite clearly what the other person is about. Now, regarding your candles—”

“They aren’t my candles.”

“Aren’t your ca— But you just said you were the candle merchant.”

“They’re my sister’s candles,” he says.

I stare at him blankly. Is he trying to tease me? “Are you not Astrick?”

“I am,” he answers, “but I work with leather and glass. It’s my sister who makes the candles, and she would have my head if she knew I was gaining credit for her craft.” He smiles, and a dimple comes out on the right side of his face like a wishing star at dusk. “I don’t make them half so well.”

His smile disarms me, and I’m struck by how very alive he feels in comparison to—well, everyone else at the Pyre.

“I’ll be sure to remember they are her work, then.”

“So, candles?” he says, lifting his hand to the back of his neck.

“Yes. You, and your sister,” I add, “supply the Pyre with candles.”

Astrick nods. “We do.”

“From beeswax, not tallow?”

Eyebrows knitting, he almost looks affronted. “Does the Pyre smell like a rotting barn? Of course we only sell you beeswax candles.”

“I was just making certain,” I respond. Goodness. “I’m afraid we need to increase our order. Miranda said you usually leave five crates each time you come through.”

“Usually, depending on what else we have to bring.”

“And each crate would hold how many?”

“The thick columns? Fifteen a crate. The tapered? Fifty-five. I have two crates of each for you today.”

“We most certainly need to increase the order.”

“By how many?”

I look back up towards the Pyre and confirm that my count is not outrageous. “How often do you come through the forest?”

Astrick shifts his face, uneager to be answering more questions. “We come through every four to six weeks or so.”

I nod, mapping his journey in my mind. “Would it be possible for you to bring closer to five thousand?”

He stares at me a long moment. “Five thousand?”

“Five thousand.”

“*Five* thousand?”

“Yes.”

“Thousand?”

I cross my arms. “Yes.”

“A month?”

I press my lips together in frustration before saying, “Yes.”

“What in the name of the Lights do you plan to do with five *thousand* candles each month.”

“Burn them.”

He raises an eyebrow.

“You’ll be compensated.”

This brings a strange expression to his face. “Oh, I’ll be *compensated*?”

“Yes.”

“I’m hardly compensated as it is.” He sharpens his words against me like I am a whetstone.

I don’t reply.

Miranda had told me the merchants come through and pay a tribute just like the nations, to keep their villages free of the Death Bleak’s blood gains.

The question of whether Astrick has lost anyone he cared about to the Bleak flickers across my mind.

"You would be paid well for your additional candles," I say, promising a payment that is not mine to authorize. "I am certain the coffers of the Pyre can handle the expense. You could become quite wealthy for it."

Shaking his head, he looks away from me and reaches with both hands for the crate waiting on the wagon. "As grand as that sounds, Ember, *guest* of the Pyre, there is no way my sister could produce so many candles, let alone in a month's time. The wax for such an amount would be—" He shakes his head in wonder. "It would be far beyond the capacity of our hives." He hefts the crate from the edge of the wagon and walks around me, then sets it on the ground, calling to one of the men nearby. Coming back to the wagon, Astrick pulls out another crate.

"They don't need to be large candles," I counter, trying again.

"Impossible."

"Does anyone else in your village make candles?"

"One or two others, on a smaller scale, but their candles are tallow. I bring them for your woodsman on occasion."

When I breathe out with disappointment, he looks as if he might say something more. But then his gaze drifts back towards the towers of the Pyre, and he holds his silence.

"Well," I say, brushing a loose strand of hair behind my right ear, "thank you for answering my questions."

Turning, I scuff my boot against the stone in frustration and work my way back through the busy courtyard. I should have asked Astrick if he could bring even one more crate. Really, any more would help.

* * *

"It's insufferable, feeling I must search you out," the Bleak says as he sinks into a chair across the Portrait Gallery from me. "I prefer the days you find me."

Looking down at the sketch in my hand, I try to ignore him as I would a foul smell.

He laughs, and it is not kind.

"You don't *have to* come and find me," I snap in response.

The Bleak groans and sinks further into his chair. “Yes, I do—you know I do. Something compels these meetings. I could almost feel happiness were I not bound by whatever tether you’ve set in place. I should just kill you today. I would do it now”—he sounds like he’s trying to convince himself —“if your fear weren’t so amusing. Not many things amuse a Death Bleak, not after so long.”

“It is certainly not I that bound us together,” I answer as I focus on the lines on my page.

I know he is right, though, about whatever is binding our fates. It’s only getting worse. If a day passes where I haven’t been in his company, offering him light against all his black forces, I feel like I can’t breathe.

“As if breathing were comfortable for me when you meddle,” he mutters in answer.

I bite my tongue and deny him a response. Today the presence of the Death Bleak is razor sharp. I want him to leave me in peace, but instead I close my eyes, take a long breath, and push the thought of light in his direction.

“There it is,” he says, slouching further into his chair. “You just couldn’t resist, could you? It’s damn uncomfortable.”

“You’re uncomfortable for me,” I reply, returning to my sketch. I am drawing one of the faces from a portrait across the gallery from me.

“Are you any good?” he asks.

“Middling,” I reply. “Nothing like my father’s talent.”

“He draws?”

“He painted,” I answer, my words slouching down in sadness. My inability to control my voice is frustrating, and so I look directly at him and speak with enough force that I hope he winces. “You ended that when you took his right hand for a blood gain. You stole what he loved most.”

Instead of shame or regret, a smile of longing spreads across his face. “A blood gain,” he says with twisted reverence. “I’ve not taken a blood gain since the last time I rode out. It has been too long, and I am parched. Your father’s blood was exceptional.” He looks saturated with the memory of it. “I have thought of how it would be, to require a full gain from him.”

My emotions rise like a tempest. “I wouldn’t let you.”

He gives me a sharp grin then moves his tongue along his bottom lip. “You couldn’t stop me.”

I grip my chair as my sketch falls to the floor, followed by the charcoal. Pulling myself up, steadying my legs and my heart, I focus on nothing but the open door at the end of the Gallery. I think I'm walking. But when I'm almost gone from the room, I realize I am running. I am running from this blood-steeped creature that I do not wish to save.

X

Days pass. Every morning I wake to an increasing weight around my neck. It never leaves; it is the uncomfortable end to my every thought, a mystery beyond myself. It is as if all the courts of heaven and hell are watching to see if this Virtus Third will accept her calling before she is crushed by it. The cosmic scale, so precariously set, is waiting for the last grain of sand to fall on either side and determine the fate of my existence—and his.

I have become aware that the forest is also holding its breath, waiting, and wondering. Sometimes I wake feeling more hope than I had before I'd slept—such is the strength of the bell tower suite—and I rise and dress and move through the prayers of a Line Sanctum, my mind searching for anything I can find regarding the Virtus Third. As I have never studied those offerings and powers, I can only learn by whatever grace I believe will come through a ministration of the Lights. On the Death Bleak's hard days, it proves more difficult.

Yet my choice still hangs before me.

Choosing to protect the Pyre feels inborn; choosing to help reclaim the Death Bleak from becoming a Beast of Ten is clearly greater than what I know how to do. It is overwhelming. It is paralyzing.

I do not want to do it.

The Bleak seems fully recovered from his assault on the Pyre and is building his dark strength through magicks I know nothing of while nursing his own menace. On his worst days, when he's all vile thunder, I refuse his presence for more than the few moments required, only to sense the stench of his twisted magicks coming from his chambers the day long, and then, by nightfall, I am filled with discouragement so palpable I curl up in bed,

burying my face in my hands, wondering what the Lights were thinking when they'd given me this task.

Though the Lights are powerful enough, I am not.

I am lost.

* * *

I dream of my brothers. They are traveling and arguing, and their disagreement is about me. The shadow of the Death Bleak rises before them, and both Hadspen and Thry stop, powerless against him. I see his unclear face, the flecks of metal on his cloak, and my brothers both disappear.

I wake up almost screaming, arching my back from the pain. The entire Pyre feels as if it is trembling. *I am going to fall,* the room whispers around me. *His trespass is too great*. I claim a deep breath and roll over, my eyes staring at the cloud-filled night sky outside my windows.

Someone has to save it, this place.

I sit up. The fire has gone out. My room is cold. Pulling my knees up to my chest, I try to slow the loud throbbing of my heart. I murmur the prayers of the Line Sanctum. I try to speak to Hadspen, then to Thry. I think of our small nation, of its fields, and the wide elm trees spreading out for endless climbing. I think of my father teaching me that the best painters understand how to use light to separate things from shadow.

Bent, as broken as I've ever felt, I lay my heart open to the honesty that resides there. I want the Lights to know that I want nothing to do with the master of this place. He is enough to deter me from fighting for The Pyre. He is enough to shake me into fear.

I need light. I need wisdom.

I need to understand if—how—an untrained Virtus Third can accomplish such a task.

Releasing a desperate sound, I pull myself to my knees. And in that human place between prayer and sleep, I see again the image of that young boy, staring at me from across a balcony.

And because of it, I find I am willing—I squeeze my eyes closed tighter—to consider.

* * *

At dawn, I steal three thick slices of brown bread and some cheese Miranda has made. Wrapping them in a cloth, I set them inside a pouch. The day is young, and I have the kitchen to myself as I work.

Before the quiet around me can be disturbed by Miranda—or anyone else—I slip through the kitchen's back door and set off into the winter forest, intending to be gone for the entire day, to walk pathways I've never taken, to avoid the Death Bleak. I cannot bear him today, no matter how we are bound. Besides, there are questions I must confront.

Walking around to the front of the Pyre, I leave through the courtyard. Two of the Bleak's guards are there, stalking along the staircase before the entrance. Refusing to give them even a pause of consideration, I stride towards the southern forest beyond the road without looking back.

When I'm certain they can no longer see me, I stop beside an ancient pine, resting my hand against its aggressive bark a moment. I've spent little time here in the south forest, but it does not take me long to find the path Sylvain uses to bring wood to the Pyre. It is wide, and the snow is trampled down by wagon wheels, so my boots have little trouble navigating. The sun has not come out this morning, as if the forest had felt the weight of my long night and then woke in the same way I did: Despondent. Almost defeated. Perhaps, conquered.

But willing to give it one final consideration.

* * *

After several hours of walking, thinking, and fruitless suppositions, I find myself standing before a meadow that dips down towards a frozen pond. There are starlings here. They rise through the air like a heartbeat. I closed my eyes at the sound and find I'm willing to let the wonder of it touch the uncertainty inside of me.

I head down towards the pond, stepping around brambles of red winterberry, before I settle on the decomposing log of a tall pine tree that has fallen along the banks. For a long time I sit before the frozen water. Birds move around me. Clouds carry forth above. Still no sun finds the forest.

Leaning forward, the toes of my boots crunching the ice on the pond's edge, I press my fingers to the delicate patterns on the frozen sheet before

me. It is frosted with perfectly formed snowflakes. What a thing to notice, snowflakes, some form of perfection in this mess of a world.

We did not have snow so deep at home. Frigid rain? Sleet? Yes. Winters were bone cold and windblown. And there was some snow. Storms and drifts frosting the landscape to the wonder of us all. But nothing so deep as what lies in this forest.

I'm not certain how much time has passed—my thoughts wandering between the will of winter and warmer memories from home—but it is a twist of my stomach that brings me back to where I am, sitting beside a frozen pond in a waiting forest. Pulling my pouch onto my lap, I fish out a slice of bread, breaking it between my fingers before placing the first bite into my mouth.

A bird swoops near my shoulder, and it draws my eyes northward, in the direction of the Pyre.

The Pyre. I frown, chewing slowly, flicking crumbs off my fingers into the snow.

The longer I sit, the colder I become. But I don't mind. It is a cleansing cold, one that will purify the iron stench of the long night. When I have finished most of my food, I reach my trembling hands into the pouch and pull out the one other item I've brought with me—a half-burnt candle, reclaimed from one of the Pyre's windowsills. It is only four or five inches tall, the wick black, the sides uneven from the melt of its previous burning. I brought it as a reminder of light holding back the darkness.

Wrapping my fingers around it, I close my eyes and confront my reason for being in the forest: I have come to my decision point. Either I am going to keep fighting for the Pyre or I am going to stop and stay hidden in the bell tower suite until I am taken for a blood gain. I press the soles of my boots further into the snow, moving my feet just enough to create solid footprints.

I force myself to acknowledge the thought that has been ringing through my mind: I have always trusted the Lights.

Is this the moment I stop doing so? Here, in this besieged place, surrounded by the suffocating quest of a Death Bleak? Is this where I no longer believe? I drop my chin. I have never doubted the illumination the Lights have brought into my life before.

"And what if I choose to do it?" I ask, my breath pillowing in the cold air.

A sound escapes my lungs as I fear the acceptance waiting on my lips. My fingers wrap tighter around the candle in my hand, and I close my eyes. I've no idea how the task could be accomplished, but I do know that one candle can dispel an entire room of darkness. I have seen it. Every night of my life, I have seen it. If the task the Lights have given me is to restore the Pyre and stop this Death Bleak—reclaim this Death Bleak? No, too impossible a thought. But if it were possible? I take a long breath, scraping together my thin courage.

I will do it.

I *will* do it.

Slowly, I release the air in my lungs. I will. I will do it. I will try. And if the Pyre is reclaimed and the Death Bleak is pulled back from becoming a Beast of Ten, I will keep every dark thing outside the walls of that holy building, outside this entire forest, for as long as I am alive.

Something inside my chest settles, an off-kilter emotion put right in its place, a wholeness. Then I feel a splatter of hot wax on my hand, and my eyes fly open. Wrapped between my cold fingers, the half-spent candle is burning, a small banner of bright flame on its wick.

* * *

The candle does not go out the entire journey back to the Pyre, but neither does it drop any more wax. It simply burns. Deep evening has come by the time I step into the courtyard. Celia has placed no candles in the front windows, and with very little light shining out from the torches inside the building, the candle in my hand is my only true source to see by.

The night is quiet, the snow settled, undisturbed. And the clouds above me are grey ribbons woven through the sky. Neither the light of the moon nor the light of the stars pushes through them, but I feel as if I can see the gibbous moon waiting for these grey bindings of the sky to fall away so that it might illuminate the forest.

Before me, beyond the sleeping stones, I see in a new way the workings of the Pyre: trails of tired light following the servants; Miranda fussing in the kitchen; Balint lighting a fire in the library; Celia walking up towards the eighth floor, where she will put away a parcel of memories; and Sylvain, out beyond in the forest, watching the night from his woodsman's hut.

There are also six dim forms: two in a room on the first floor, the other four standing outside the Bleak's chambers. And within his dark bedchamber, I can feel the Bleak himself, huddled in a mass of smoke, raw, pulsing like an uneven heartbeat.

I feel our connection more strongly than I ever have. So real I almost cannot bear it. And just as I am about to falter, an unexpected courage rises up and wraps itself around my heart. It steadies me, and I breathe deeply through this double heartbeat, gripping the candle harder now between my two hands.

You must not be afraid of him. For he is unable to touch the flame, but it is your gift.

I start, and look about me. But no one is there. And the voice, as familiar yet distant as the voice of my own mother, has left no impression in the darkness around me. Only the candle's unearthly flame disrupts the night. *You must not be afraid*. With careful thought, I lift the fingers of my right hand towards its light.

Nothing.

At first, I feel nothing. And then I feel a pressure against my skin. I watch as the flame burns itself along my fingers, flaring brightly for one sharp moment before it settles into a bright band around my ring finger, and cools into gold-and-silver glass.

Dropping the spent candle, a string of smoke rises before me. I lift my unsteady hand, pressing my thumb along the glass around my finger. I have promised the Lights I will try, and they, in return, have given me a token of my promise. An exchange almost as frightening as the Bleak himself.

* * *

"Ember!" Miranda throws her flour-covered arms around my neck as I appear. "You have not been seen all the day long. I fretted and fretted!"

The strain of my day causes me to laugh, and I hide my hand with the unearthly ring inside my cloak. "What happened to the woman who kept insisting I would meet my dismal fate soon enough?" I answer.

"Do not say such a thing, my lady," she scolds, stepping back. "I was ever so worried, and then the master came screaming through the Pyre like I'd never heard before, swearing and cursing every good and evil thing he could find. He shouted for you again and again."

“What was he raging over?”

“Something happened today that I’ve not seen in over two hundred and fifty years,” Miranda says, adding heft to the words as if asking me to remember their significance. “I wouldn’t have believed it if I hadn’t gone myself to look.”

“What happened?” I persist.

“The hearth in the master’s bedroom—” Miranda pauses from her own disbelief. “It’s alight.”

I frown. “You mean someone started a fire in his room?”

“A fire has started, but no hand here set the blaze.”

I pull at my breath and begin walking towards his chambers.

Miranda’s next words follow at my heels. “There’s no wood, my lady. Not a stick. And there seems to be no way to put it out. Believe me, the master has tried.”

When I reach his chambers, I find the candle no longer burning at the threshold—it is knocked over and rolled away against the wall—and I walk past it into his room, looking about. The black velvet curtains are pulled together, once again covering the windows. I can see the shadow of his four-poster bed yet no figure lying there.

Light emanates from the direction of the black hearth to my left. Turning, I step closer and drop down before the fire. Just as Miranda had said, there is neither kindling nor wood nor fuel of any kind. The fire is luminescent, fluid, lapping at the air in waves with a bright, pleasing viscosity. It’s— I think it’s born of my wisp. My Ilaria.

I reach my fingers towards it, watching the light reflecting through the ring on my finger. Considering the ring a moment, I tentatively move my hand into the flames—it feels marvelous. Familiar. I stick both of my hands into the light and make a sound I’ve only ever heard from the greatly relieved.

“I’ve missed you,” I murmur to the light.

“It burns,” the Bleak says from behind me. “That fire sears to black.”

Turning my head, my eyes find him slouching in the far corner, nursing —from what I can see—both of his hands. His blank eyes are leveled on mine.

Ignoring the chaos swirling about his crouched figure, I speak steadily. “Are you in great pain?”

He shifts his shoulders, his eyes still on mine, angry. “What did you do?”

“I hardly know.” I look back towards the hearth. “That’s the beauty of it. I don’t think I could extinguish the flame if I tried. Which I won’t,” I add, looking back towards him, too surprised not to find humor—and irony—in this happening. The corner of my mouth tips upward. “I’m counting it a small victory.”

“I’m counting it a damn nuisance.”

I laugh.

The Death Bleak winces as the fire in the hearth flares up in response. He stands up slowly, protecting his hands, and then leans into the corner.

“And so we have it,” he states, the words seeming to scratch along the top of his pain. “You dare challenge me after all. You have made your decision. Otherwise, your Ilaria would not have transformed.”

His appraisal—those blank eyes wandering from my face down to my feet and back—is meant to make me feel hopeless.

“It is meant to make you feel like nothing,” he snaps, contradicting my thought. He pushes himself away from the wall and takes a step towards me, tilting his head to the side. “One does not start with denying hope,” he instructs, taking another step, then another, a predator approaching its prey. “You begin by denying value to whomever you wish to destroy. For once they doubt their value, hope simply drains away through their cracked worth. A much simpler way to claim souls.” His eyes flick wider just before they narrow—unnatural and strange—and he takes another step towards me. “Human beings are easily persuaded they are nothing,” he adds.

I take an abrupt step backwards, feeling the sway of my skirt around my ankles. His words move across my mind like smoke. And I remember the Witch telling this Bleak that he could twist me, could turn me towards his pursuits. A warning sounds like a clear trumpet, and I push his words aside like a cobweb, and picture them burning away.

He flinches, then smiles, but there is an unease in his eyes. He flexes his burned fingers and smiles—as if he is feeding off the pain. Then he looks down at the palms of his hands—trying to check me with a reminder that he will absorb my blood through those very hands and seal his fate as a Beast of Ten with my death. “Indeed,” he mutters. And then something crosses his face as he looks up towards me, almost as if—I frown—he is coming out from under some strange daze. “Why are you here in my rooms?”

“I was—” I’d come to see the flame, but I give him another answer: “To inquire if you want me to do any restoration on your tenth light line.”

He makes a strangled noise.

“Is that a no?”

I feel not only the weight of his glare but also a wave of his anger rushing towards me. Closing my eyes, I lift my hands and picture it hitting a flame about my person and dissipating, like a wash of dirty water hitting coals and turning into steam. He makes an angry sound, but I just feel relief, freer of the Bleak’s atmosphere now than ever before. Opening my eyes, I consider him. It is still there, his pulsing threat, catching the world around it off-balance, hollowing it out, but I don’t feel as susceptible to it. Decisions, it seems, are acts of power in themselves.

“Get out,” he hisses, turning away from me. “Get out of my presence.”

“Good night, then,” I venture, feeling stronger for a second victory. “I’ll ask again tomorrow.”

I push a wave of soft light in his direction, and he jerks away with a warning hiss. Silently, I disappear from the room.

* * *

When Miranda knocks softly on my door and comes in, an hour later, I sit up in my bed. Sleep is still miles away, as distant as my thoughts, which have been reaching towards a home I might never return to. In the unsteady firelight, I can see that Miranda’s face is troubled. She closes the door behind her and leans back against it, watching my face as I turn to see her better.

“Things are already happening, my lady. Moving and the like. The nature of our struggle here is changing.”

I don’t respond, only keep my grey eyes on hers. There’s something else she’s come to say, and I wait with patience for her words.

After several moments, Miranda says, “So you will fight for him, then? It seems we’ve at least got one now—a fight, I mean—it’s a chance.”

Her question makes my heart beat harder. I shift and pull myself up, sitting against the headboard, my blanket pulled around me, the ring on my finger catching the light of the fire.

“Yes,” I answer.

Miranda's eyes narrow, like her hope can't afford belief. "Forgive the question, but I need to know; I need an oak's understanding of this. Why would you fight for this hell-bent boy? It cannot have just been my pleadings."

"It wasn't your words—though they did give me pause—or Balint's or even the Bleak's," I answer. "After my mother died, my father said something I've not thought about until now, until tonight." I look towards the fire and pull my blanket closer to my chin. "He told me that, at some point, each one of us would have to wrestle with the Lights, our hearts naked and exposed, and come away with the painfully honest understanding of where we stand before the Court of Heaven and whether we will do what we are called upon to do."

Miranda lifts her eyebrows in a heartbreaking way. "Many people are called to do things that never come to be. They don't bother. Or they're too scared. Or they try and fail."

"I might fail," I respond quietly, not wanting to disappoint her. I pull myself forward so I'm resting against a pillow. "I have been thinking about that night in the library, when I saw that he was a Lectus Born. Knowing that did not convince me to fight for him. It just made me feel angry, more conflicted about what he had walked away from. Then I managed to see a memory, one of him as a child—precocious, interested—" I pinch the sides of my mouth in sadness, "a child whose curiosity probably led him into scrape after scrape. And that memory has stayed with me, though it alone did not make me decide either. It was today that I found the courage. Despite the darkness. Despite the fear."

"You had your first wrestle before the Lights."

I press my eyes together only a moment, then open them with resignation. "Only my first?"

"Oh, child, there are many." Miranda smiles and moves a finger beneath her eye, her face filled with tired emotion. She settles herself in a nearby chair and then looks at me with concern. "How many times have you watched him in his library?"

"Only a few times. It was before I worked on his tenth line. Since then, our fates have been affixed in some way, and I no longer think I can move undetected by him, regardless of the hour. I think he now always knows exactly where I am, and can always hear the clamour of my thoughts. Such is the nature of the thing that binds us together."

“We know too well that he is still your enemy,” Miranda says. “Beware and be strong. I will do what I can of my own simple powers, to aid you in your task.” She takes in a long breath through her nostrils. “It will be to the rejoicing of many nations, my lady, if you manage to bring him through this labyrinth of his own making.”

Part Two

The Virtus Third

XI

I am helping Miranda prepare food in the kitchen when the Bleak seeks me out.

"I need to speak with you now," he orders.

Without a word I give my carrot an extra chop, and—after exchanging a look with Miranda—I follow him up the small staircase, through a wide corridor, and into the Mirror Gallery. Here he stops, and as he turns to face me, his reflection is repeated in more than one mirror, woven through the reflection of the fires in the many hearths. This contrast of grey and gold plays out again and again and again.

"I'm going out," he says.

I know this, having watched his preparations for days, having come upon him performing unknown rituals in slant tongues, but I wait for him to give a reason for telling me. He doesn't, rather he begins to pull a black glove onto one hand, covering his burns. Against his grey attire, the glove can't help but call stark attention.

Fine. If he will not speak, I will. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because I want to warn you that if I feel one bit of meddling in my affairs, one thought, one"—his face grows even darker—"*press* of light in my direction, I will return and end it all. I will take your blood gain." He grimaces as he finishes securing the first glove and then attends to the second. "And we will have an end to this business."

"If that's what you wish," I answer, folding my arms across my chest, "but you'll not prevent me from strengthening the Pyre while you're gone."

“I do not go to assail the Pyre,” he states.

“No,” I answer with a sigh. “I suspect you go away to satisfy your own bloodlust.”

He stops fiddling with his gloves and pulls his head up straight. A smile smears his face. “Many of us go, in fact. I’ll save you part of the carnage, if you would like.”

With that pronouncement, he turns, the lines of his metal-bound cloak following his movement. I don’t send one thought, one wave of light in his direction, but before he can leave the gallery, I flare the fires, causing an echo of light in all the mirrors. He glances over his shoulder at me in challenge, then disappears through the doorway.

* * *

Having the run of the Pyre again is blissful. Since I’m not countering any of his wearisome magicks, I have space to focus on fortifying the great building and its grounds. The first few days, I wander the floors, studying, marveling at the elegant windows, collecting whatever memories I come across, and gazing at them before putting them away or giving them to Celia. I find nothing significant to my cause, but I am more impressed upon by the former majesty of the Pyre.

On the morning of the third day, I sit on the stone windowsill in my bell tower rooms, sorting out my problem of candles. I’ve burned most of what the Pyre had kept in storage, and if the West Country merchants can’t replenish our stock beyond a few cases a month…

My eyes wander towards the glass ring. It fits well on my finger, and I’ve slept better since it was gifted me of the Lights. My dreams have been sweeter, filled with my family and other beautiful things. The color of the ring reminds me of the same effervescent fire that now quietly persists in the Bleak’s chambers. I had tried to light some candles with that fire created from my wisp, after the Bleak had gone, but the wicks would not burn, the flame would not catch. So it is to be real candles and mortal flames that must help strengthen the Pyre in the deep nights, when the Bleak plots against it.

As for the fires, Balint has asked Sylvain to increase the amount of wood under the grand stairway, and Sylvain is keeping up, though he complains a little for the added chore of it. The library, the Great Hall, the

galleries, the Long Hall, and any of the larger chambers have fires that are kept burning as much as the staff can tend to them.

"The fires are important," I tell myself, tracing a diamond-shaped pane of glass with my finger. But I know that burning candles in the windows is vital somehow. Although I can't understand all the reasons why. But the Pyre knows they're important.

"Ember?"

I glance up. Standing in my doorway is Celia. I hadn't even heard her open the door.

"Yes?"

She moves her head to the side. "There's someone asking after you. A young man."

My heart slams. Hadspen? Thry?

"What's his name?"

"I don't know," Celia shakes her head. "But he knows your name well enough. Handsome is and does, too. Not much older than us—than you—I'd guess."

"He knows my name?" I drop down from the windowsill, my feet slamming the floor, and rush out, passing Celia without bothering to find my shoes. "Did you bother to ask his name? Did you invite him in?" I call back.

"I did," she answers, "but he would neither give it nor come into the Pyre. He seemed superstitious about the place."

I drop my heels and stop, turning my shoulders with my feet still in place on the cold stone floor. "Superstitious?" That doesn't sound like either of my brothers. Still. It has to be one of them.

I run through the corridors and the galleries, down the staircases, and into the Great Hall. Then I come to the large doors and, gripping the handles, pull them open.

Claiming a long breath, I look around. The courtyard is full of merchants—double what I've usually seen. Lifting my hands to my waist, I steal another breath, my eyes searching the press of people. It would be brilliant of my brothers to join a merchant company. Surely it's one of them.

A figure moves in the shadows at my side, but his movements are unfamiliar, outside of myself.

It is not Hadspen.

It is not Thry.

The hope I'd dared let surface on my face stalls, then begins to fade.

"I take it you were expecting someone else," he says, trying his best to hide his concern for the disappointments of a girl he does not know.

I can't answer, my smile turning stale, my cheeks twitching as I try to keep my composure.

He doesn't say anything else, but rather waits for me to speak, his arms crossed, leaning against the stone of the Pyre, his green eyes looking unoffended.

When I can speak without losing countenance, I say with a thick voice, "Astrick, isn't it? That is your name?"

"Yes."

"Your sister makes the candles."

Astrick's smile meets his eyes. "She does."

"Celia said you asked for me?"

Astrick presses his lips into a flat line, looking uncertainly towards the Pyre. "You wanted more candles."

"Five thousand more."

"Five thousand," he confirms. "As I told you before, my sister can't supply such amounts. But—" He moves his head to the side in a way that betrays a confidence despite his hesitance to enter the Pyre. "When I was dealing in the East Country, where there are bigger markets and a warmer climate, I located three candlemakers who could give additional supply to fill our order. I brought back nearly three hundred candles in good faith that you would purchase them from me."

"Three hundred more?"

"Yes."

"Beeswax?"

Astrick sets his mouth in consternation, but his eyes are amused. "I've spoken with you twice now, Ember, guest of the Pyre, but already I feel we've talked in more circles than I thought possible. Of course they're beeswax."

"I had to make certain," I say, feeling embarrassed. "And will you continue to bring whatever candles you can, from both the east and the west?"

"As long as you need them."

"That would be how many each month?"

“Between four and five hundred. If I can contract with more vendors, I could perhaps even double what I’m bringing now. I realize it’s not your five thousand.”

“Well,” I catch a single-syllable laugh in my throat, “it’s still more than I have now. Thank you. I’ll send Balint to bring them inside.”

But Astrick, his eyes holding a great amount of thought, pushes himself away from the wall. He tilts his head to the side, the cold air catching his breath, and pauses on the edge of speaking.

“What is it?” I ask.

“I’m only asking what you’re using them for. For good?” He lets the words fill out the space. “Or for ill?”

“For light,” I say. “You can judge the rightness or wrongness of that for yourself.”

I watch his thoughts playing out on his face. Curiosity. Determination. Apprehension. He bends his head down, moving the toe of his boot in a pattern on the Pyre steps, only looking up at me when he begins to speak again. “I don’t want to be part of anything that he is a part of. And I don’t know what rites or rituals the Death Bleak embraces.” The muscles around his cheekbones tighten. “Do you blame my caution?”

No, I don’t—I understand it perfectly. But I carry my own caution in return and do not wish to tell this Astrick things that are not his to know. “The candles will be used to bring light to the Pyre. We burn them in the windows. The Bleak does not do his own work with such tools. The candles are mine, Astrick, and I don’t work in the shadows.”

He looks away, taking time with my words, weighting them earnestly. This gives me a chance to study his face—“Never miss an opportunity to study a face,” my father would always say—and, as I am noting how Astrick’s eyebrows arch when he’s thinking, how his mouth sets itself, the way the lines around his eyes expose his thoughts before he speaks them aloud, I think that my father would have liked to paint him.

At home, in Avaine, most of us are dark-haired, pale-skinned, and grey-eyed—none more so than myself and my brothers. But Astrick’s features occupy the appealing shades of the middle ground: brown hair cut close on the sides, but longer on top; skin not shy of traveling beneath the sun; and green eyes that hint towards gold. They remind me of something I miss. Something I can’t quite—my heart reaches for home, and I have it—the fireflies. The fireflies against the evening green of the hills.

“I’ll sell you the candles,” he says at length, lifting a hand to the back of his neck as he had before.

Although I try to hold it back, he picks up on the relief in my face. “Thank you. You’ve no idea how— Well, thank you. Come with me, and we’ll see to the payment.”

But his caution steps between us. “I’d rather wait out here.”

“You don’t wish to enter the Pyre?”

“Never, by my life’s blood, though it is a magnificent building,” he adds with a shade of longing.

I wave my hand towards the door. “It’s not—the Pyre itself is, you see—the Bleak has ridden out. He’s not here at present, and the Pyre is a worthy place of its own.”

“I’ll wait.”

A stream of wind blows through the courtyard, and I am reminded how cold it is, my bare feet turning red from the ice on the stairs. I rub my hands together, trying to spark warmth. “I promise you it is safe.”

Astrick shakes his head and laughs, an indecisive thing. “I don’t think my mother would have liked you.”

“Oh?” I say, wondering what that has to do with anything.

“My childhood was filled with tales of what happened inside the Pyre. And the only way my mother could keep me from causing massive amounts of trouble was to threaten to deliver me here herself if I misbehaved. Since then I’ve made it a general rule to avoid the certain death that awaits me inside these walls.”

“And you still believe your mother’s bedtime threats?”

“Not as much as I remember the sorrow caused by her father being taken as one of your Death Bleak’s blood gains,” Astrick replies evenly.

I retake his measure. “We, then, were raised on similar stories. I am sorry about your grandfather.”

He says nothing, but his eyes flick from my head to my toes, as if making his own reassessment. And it might just be my own assumption, my own sensitivity to the unexplained, but I think his eyes catch a moment on my ring and make note of it.

“Wait here if you wish,” I answer. “Though I can promise you that since the Bleak and guards are absent, you will find neither discomfort nor danger.”

He opens his mouth, closes it—curiosity working on him—then says, "Fine."

"Fine?"

"I'll come with you."

"You don't have to. It was silly of me to press you."

"I said I'll come with you."

The way he says it sounds like one of my brothers, and I feel my expression shift. "All right, then."

As I push open the doors, the immensity of the Great Hall seems new with Astrick beside me—for his lips part as his eyes follow the lines of the architecture.

"Will you wait here while I fetch Miranda?" I ask. "She will have the money to pay you."

But he doesn't seem to hear me. He's already stepped towards the western bank of stained glass windows.

Taking his silence as affirmation, I make my way back to the kitchens. "Miranda," I call out, "the candle merchant has brought us additional crates from the East. Do you have the money enough to pay him?"

She looks up as I enter, flour on her face, her hands still kneading the bread dough. "I can fetch some, in a moment."

"Thank you."

Returning to the Great Hall, I begin thinking of the best way to ration the candles, reminding myself to ask Astrick exactly when he will be traveling through the forest again.

But when I enter the Great Hall, he is not there. I look outside, among those merchants in the courtyard, then come back in, swinging closed the tall doors behind me.

"Life's blood," I mutter. "Where has he gotten himself off to?"

It is in the Long Hall that I find him. Astrick has pulled down one of Balint's boards and is studying the broken window, moving his fingers along the shattered edge of the glass. He has the same surety of movement that Hadspen carries and the same intelligence as Thry in his face. Hearing my footsteps, he casts a glance in my direction, his eyes moving from me back to the glass in a single sweep.

"I can fix your windows," he says.

"What do you mean?"

Astrick does not answer right away, his finger tracing the pattern of the window. Reluctantly, he lets his hand drop to his side and looks at me over his shoulder. “Leather is considered my main trade, but glasswork is my passion.”

I consider the endless glass panels behind him. “Have you ever done work like this before?”

It is with reverence that he shakes his head. “No one has done work like this, before or since. I have never seen its equal.”

“Nor have I.”

He glances at me, a puzzled expression on his face, then looks back at the window. “Where did you come from again?” he asks.

“North of here,” I say, moving on hurriedly. “What makes you certain you can do these repairs if you’ve never done this quality of work before?”

Astrick gives me a set smile that has already taken up the challenge. “The same instinct that said I should trust you. Trust aside, I was born for glasswork.”

“My lady?” Miranda’s voice interrupts us.

I glance over my shoulder to see Miranda—money pouch in hand—just as her eyes turn towards Astrick, and that is where they stay.

“Miranda. This is Astrick, the West Country candle merchant. I hope you don’t mind that I invited him inside. He thinks he can repair our windows.”

“Indeed?” But it’s softly said, and her eyes have not yet left his face. As she comes closer, years and distance come with her, and lifting her hand towards his cheek looks like a long-forgotten habit. Astrick does not flinch. Her fingers have just touched his cheek when she pulls her hand back. “You look like a good sort of young man,” she replies, collecting herself. “Welcome to the Pyre.”

“Thank you,” he says, “for your welcome.” And his words are gentle.

“Where did my lady say you were from?”

“I travel with the West Country merchants, but I myself am from the West Fell, just north of the thoroughfare, ma’am.”

“I’ll be, child. Look at you.” Miranda shakes her head. “The West Fell you say? That’s the nicest part of that county, as I recall. And your family has been there a while now? Several generations?”

Astrick nods, his smile pulling his eyes tight, looking the way a young man would when listening affectionately to a grandmother.

“I’ll be, child. Just look at you. I could have sworn… Well, just look at you.”

“Do you have the payment, Miranda?” I ask, worried she will repeat these words the nightlong and Astrick will never wish to return.

“Oh.” She blinks. “Yes. Here. There should be enough to cover the candles, plus extra to put towards more. Mistress Ember”—she nods towards me—“says it’s important we have as many candles burning as we can find. You take what you feel is fair.” And she holds out the money pouch.

I can see the discomfort in his face. He takes the pouch, but it’s clear he wishes she had decided the pay. When he opens it and pulls out a gold piece, he turns a shade darker. “This is far too much. Do you have coins of a smaller value?”

But Miranda is staring at him in such a peculiar way that she’s not heard what he has said.

“Here.” I take the pouch from his hand. Reaching in for two more gold pieces, I hold them out. “Take them.”

“No, that is far too much.”

“If I’m to hire you to repair windows, you could consider it a contract.”

He looks up again towards the windows, fighting with himself—probably over the insanity of accepting work inside the Pyre.

“Are there any more that are damaged in such a way?” he inquires.

“Too many. I’ll show them to you, and then you can tell me what repairs you believe can be done.”

Miranda is still watching Astrick as I reach out and touch her arm. “Is there anything else you need, Miranda?”

“No.” She shakes her head. “I’ll be. I just…” And she excuses herself without another word.

Astrick watches her leave. “She is an interesting woman.”

“Very,” I answer. “Though not usually so strange.”

“Before meeting Balint, I had never seen anyone taken out of time. It’s disquieting, to see her stuck like that.”

My eyes meet his. “How did you know they were? Taken out of time, I mean. Rumors?”

“There are many rumors among those of us who live on the edge of the forest,” he answers, looking back towards the doorway Miranda had disappeared through. “But I could feel her existence separated out from

time, like a buckle undone or a stitching ripped." He takes in a breath and shakes his head. "Pardon. It's probably the rumors, nothing more. You were going to show me the other windows?"

We walk the different floors, through all the galleries and hallways that I remember suffering any sort of damage. While I'm trying to keep track of what we've seen and what I've yet to show him, Astrick is falling in love. The way his eyes caress the lines of the glass. His reaction to the play of color. His mentions of balance and majesty in the designs. He's besotted.

"You do realize that the Bleak will return one of these next days," I remind him honestly. "If you take on this work at the Pyre, it will prove dangerous. For all I know, he could very well kill you at first glance."

He pretends like he doesn't hear me, but I know he does.

As we stop before a window, Astrick studying a beautiful spray of glass flowers, he quietly says, "I know that I'm crazy for even considering the work. But if I don't take this commission, I'll never forgive myself."

It's past midday and I'm hungry, so I answer, "Why don't we go down to the kitchen to see what there is to eat. You can continue to think it over."

Miranda, after fussing over "the child from the West Fell," serves us dried meat and fruits brought from the East. Astrick begins to ask questions about the Pyre, most of which I don't know the answers to.

"If you don't know when the Pyre was built," he persists, his fingers playing with the dried fruit on his plate, "do you know how the windows broke? Some of breaks look older, but others appear quite recent."

"Some of them are quite recent."

"But you're not going to tell me how they happened?"

I set my mouth and tuck a loose strand of hair behind my right ear. "Let me simply say there was a Death Bleak involved, probably a Witch, and a few hell-wrought spells."

"But—"

"But what?" I ask.

"But something prevented the damage from being as great as it could have been," he answers in full confidence.

"Why do you think that?"

Astrick laces his fingers and sets his hands on the table before himself, like he's preparing to argue over the price of something. "The breaking points in the glass are strange, as if a force just as strong was pushing from the inside against whatever assailed the windows from the outside. While

the breaks indicate that the glass fell inward, I wonder, what was it that kept them from shattering more than they did?" He drums his fingers against the knuckles of his clasped hands. "Was that your doing?"

The night of the great storm I was huddled in my bed. It was the Pyre more than anything, but I am not certain how much I should tell this Astrick.

"How did you do it?" he asks.

"I didn't. And I'm not going to discuss that with you," I say, looking away.

"Why not?"

"Why not?" I lift an eyebrow, as if it's obvious that one doesn't casually confide such events to just anybody.

"Why not?" he repeats.

"It's not your concern."

He looks like he's about to reply with a rebuttal, but then simply answers, "Fair enough."

We finish our meals.

As we are about to leave the kitchen, Miranda shows Astrick a bin full of the glass she'd gathered up after the storm.

"You'll have to sort through it to see if any of it is worth using."

"Yes, all of it. May I take a piece now?" he asks.

"Anything you like."

Astrick picks up a triangle-shaped piece of brilliant blue glass, and smiles. "Thank you."

We walk up the stairs, down a corridor and out into a hall near the Mirror Gallery, with a solitary window of geometric design at the end. Astrick moves the piece of blue glass absentmindedly between his fingers as we pause to look out at the frozen forest.

"Well?" I say. "Having now seen the work to be done, are you still confident you can fix the windows?"

Astrick grips his hand around the piece of glass, hesitating before pulling his gaze from the window to look directly at me. It's almost disquieting. How easy it is to forget the thrum of mortality when no one else around me is bound by time.

He notices my reaction and, whether he understands it or not, takes a step backwards. "I'm not certain I even have the right tools for the job," he

admits, his words shadowed by the reality of what it might actually mean to accept work at the Pyre. “But I want to try, however foolish.”

Nothing in the way his mouth twists with concern makes me think that he will, in the end, accept the challenge. But his eyes have already committed to the idea, even as he’s measuring all the risks—like the very real chance of his death at the hands of the Bleak.

“I wouldn’t counsel you rush to a decision with such high stakes, not by any means,” I say. “You should take more time.”

My voice sounds even, but—by the Lights—a glassworker to help shore up the Pyre is too potent a thing for my hope. I move away from him, a physical confirmation that I mean what I say about him taking time, being wise—although, I am not certain I do mean it, as *any* wisdom certainly would lead him far away from the Pyre.

Clearing my throat, I walk in a small arc around the fixed point of Astrick, who is still standing before the window. The sun is causing the glass-colored light to reflect on his face and his clothing, and my instinct whispers there is a power in this meeting. I do not understand it. But I do understand that to strengthen the windows of the Pyre would translate into something good. Something strong.

“Something absolutely necessary for what lies ahead,” I murmur.

“What?”

“Oh.” I quickly look over my shoulder towards him. “Excuse me. I was thinking aloud.”

“If it were only up to me, Ember, I’d venture a promise, however fraught, but I have to ask my sister.”

“She’ll not want you to return.”

“I might secure a concession,” he responds, rubbing his temple with his fingers. “Though she would demand years of penance of me for taking such a risk.”

I smile with understanding. “She should. And if she says yes?”

“We begin with replacement glass.” Looking at the piece of glass in his hand, he shakes his head. “But where would I find glass of such quality? You see, the main reason I travel the merchant road is not for the candles or for the leather commissions—though their income makes my travel possible—but for the goods the eastern port of Nance brings from Amperea, the nation across the Sandavee Sea. The Amperean glassworkers produce the finest glass one can find.” He presses his thumb against the blue shard in his

hand and looks up, his eyes meeting mine. “Did you know that even the lords of most nations can only afford one or two large windows made from Amperean glass?”

I shake my head, having never considered the idea. The nation which my father is lord over is a small concern, and we have no such windows. Astrick nods to confirm his point, then his eyes flick towards the glass ring on my hand.

“So you buy Amperean glass for your own work?” I ask, casually linking my hands together behind my back.

Astrick’s expression turns listless, and he shifts his weight. “I buy leftover pieces, and scraps, and they still cost a lord’s ransom. That being said, I’ve begun to piece together a small, but very intricate window. I’m almost finished and will take it East to see if I can secure a commission.”

“Then the Pyre will buy Amperean glass,” I reply.

Astrick’s eyes flash. “But even the best glass coming out of Amperea cannot match the quality of what I now hold in my hand. I cannot describe to you the difference. How this was made, I wish I knew. If I’m not mistaken,” his tone turns more casual, “the glass of the Pyre is the same glass used to form that ring on your finger.”

“Oh?” I feel a flush on my cheeks as I press my thumb against the smooth ring hidden behind my back.

“Have you had it long?” he asks.

“What?”

“The ring.”

“The ring? No, actually. It was a gift.”

“Ah.”

“So you feel the Amperean glass might still service?” I redirect.

Astrick watches me long enough for me to know he is honoring my deflection. “Amperean glass is not worthy of the work, but it will have to do, and then we must pray that the Lights will accept the offering. I do wonder…” He looks down, wandering in his thought.

“What?”

“If these windows were made here at the Pyre?”

“Miranda says it was a place of great artistry, before—I suppose it’s possible.”

“If it was made here,” Astrick says to himself more than to me, “there might still be entire sheets of glass.” He lifts his eyes to meet mine. “Are

there any storerooms here at the Pyre? Any places that could have gone reasonably undisturbed for centuries?"

I remember the storeroom Celia and I had searched and its mess of forgotten curiosities. "There are some. I would imagine anything could be lost in the Pyre."

"Should we look now?"

"I can't see any reason not to," I answer, "especially since the Bleak is away. I'll ask Miranda where we should start."

Astrick straightens his shoulders in anticipation and, perhaps by equal measure, curiosity, now that he's come inside the Pyre and found only beauty.

* * *

When I find Miranda sitting beside the fire in the kitchen sewing, I ask where we should begin looking for such supplies.

"The storerooms I've been to with Celia?"

She takes a full half dozen stitches before answering. "I'd imagine," Miranda pauses to turn her stitching towards the light, her mouth shaking slightly in concentration, "if there was any glass left from those days, it would be in the underfloors."

"The underfloors?"

Miranda nods. "The Pyre, as isolated as it is now, was even more so before the road was smoothed and the forest edge was chopped down miles inside of where it used to be. Great amounts of everything—be they created here or imported from the nations—were stored in the underfloors. At times, they were more interesting than many of the port cities you'd hear tell of."

"So you don't mind if we explore them for glass?" I ask.

"I don't mind, my lady. That being said, I think the master will."

"Then the master can take it up with me," I answer. "After all, it's my task to protect the Pyre."

"And you still believe fixing the windows proper will do that?"

"Yes, I do." I brush a stray strand of hair back behind my ear. "Since windows broke as a result of the Bleak's desire to weaken the Pyre's hold, it stands to reason that the opposite is true." When she continues to look at me, I add, "I hope."

Miranda taps her finger against her needle and looks towards the door. "This young man, this candle merchant…"

"Astrick."

"Yes, Astrick. He smarts me as a good soul, a beautiful boy. I could have sworn he was—"

I wait, but she readjusts the emotion on her face and shakes her head before asking, "Have you thought about the consequences of having him working about the Pyre, my lady? Repairing those windows will take quite some time. It is a dangerous thing"—Miranda eyes me—"having someone walking around with moving blood. As it stands now, you are the only one that could be taken as a blood gain. The rest of us are out of time with the master; our stilled blood doesn't call to him. But this young man from the West Fell, his whole life spread out before him as clear as any path…" She puts her work aside and considers me a long moment. "Are you *certain* you want responsibility for his life? Can you handle his death when it comes?"

Her question strikes, the reverberations like a hammered bell, it being the same question following behind me as I led Astrick around the Pyre.

"Is this work so important?" Miranda persists. "To risk another life?"

*Ye*s, the Pyre beats around me. *Yes!*

I give an involuntary shudder. "I think it is. I feel—" I wave my hand helplessly before me. "Miranda, I can't believe it is simply chance that a glassworker has made himself available in the hour we need to protect the Pyre the most."

Miranda continues her stitching. "Even if something is good—or meant to be—you can't predict it will go as you think it ought. You know very well that you were sent here for a purpose that might fail."

"Risk is life," I say, repeating the words my brother Hadspen is so fond of.

"Risk takes life," Miranda replies without looking at me.

"I promise to speak openly with Astrick."

"Do. Now see what you can find in those underfloors," she says, though I can sense that she'd rather we left the windows well enough alone.

But I can't take part in Miranda's caution. If now is not the hour for boldness, no hour ever will be. "What is the best way to access the underfloors?"

* * *

Astrick had gone to the stables to oversee the unloading of candles, and it is there that I meet him. He's also returning a few harnesses Balint had asked him to repair at a tannery in the East.

"I think he will be pleased with the work," Astrick tells me, without my asking. He is carrying the harnesses into the stables and I follow him. Once inside, he returns them to their pegs, and as he does so, I think I glimpse the ease with which he carries himself when outside of this winterbound forest.

"Miranda said what we're looking for would not be in the storerooms, but rather someplace called the underfloors."

"The underfloors?" Astrick's eyes catch excitement, and he returns the final harness to its place. "Let's begin the search, then."

"She warned me that no one has been down there for a generation or more. We're to take plenty of candles and watch for spiders and rats."

"Better spiders and rats than your Death Bleak returning while we search."

He isn't my Death Bleak, I think.

"He won't return today or tomorrow," I say. I don't tell him how I know this: that I can feel the stretch of whatever tether now keeps us bound and that I know the Bleak is far away from the Pyre.

Astrick nods, apparently willing to give me his trust. "Give me a moment to make certain all my effects are in order, or the other merchants will have my head. Our company is spending the night in the lodgings above these stables."

Balint comes into the stables just as Astrick is walking out the door. They exchange some words, Balint giving Astrick's shoulder a pat.

"Did you see these harnesses?" Balint asks me once Astrick has gone. "Good, solid work. And look at that." He points to a beautiful pattern embroidered into the leather. "Flowers, small flowers like you find at the forest's edge. He always does a bit more than you're expecting. Miranda would like that, yes she would. He's so much like our—" But Balint stops himself and, with an old smile, turns away.

* * *

"Life's blood, I haven't had bread this good since I left home."

As Astrick sits beside me, his eyes closed, chewing on a piece of Miranda's bread, I wonder what it is like for him to spend his life traveling the merchants' road through Naeethe Forest. A singular life, to be sure.

We've just searched the entire first underfloor, a massive space supported by as many pillars as one would expect there to be trees in the dense forest. It holds endless piles of goods, supplies, curiosities, anything one could imagine, mostly covered in thick sheets. Searching it has taken us hours. Upon failing to locate anything pertaining to the windows in the entire first underfloor, we've split a loaf of bread Miranda had sent with us —"You'll starve down there if you don't take some food," she had insisted —and we've settled back against a wall to eat, two candles lit between us.

"Your sister's a fine baker, then?" I respond.

"What? Oh, heavens no."

"But you just said— I assumed—"

Astrick laughs and shakes his head. "She's actually rather awful. You see, both of us get rather consumed with our work." His eyes catch the light of the candles. "We become obsessed, and then get surly when we have to stop for food. So we pay the widow Maye, and she cooks our meals for us."

"Is it just the two of you, then? You and your sister?"

He drums the toes of his boots on the stone with a loose thought, then says, "It is now," before putting another piece of bread in his mouth.

* * *

The second underfloor has a lower roof, and we take care to watch our heads as we sort through what has been stored here for hundreds of years: tools of every kind, supplies for various trades, long beams of wood, metals, hooks and saws, cut stone of exquisite quality, textiles, looms, paper, materials to bind books. Everything is dust covered—some rusted, some not, some moth-eaten, some not. It is a strange market, with no one to disturb, to use, or to ply the still objects sitting in the waiting dark. But we find nothing to suit Astrick's purposes.

Returning to the spiral staircase, we descend another floor and begin again. The third underfloor is not an open expanse supported by pillars, rather it's a maze of corridors and rooms.

"We should probably work as a team," Astrick says, peering into the darkness, "so that neither of us gets disoriented alone."

“If anything, we can always follow our footsteps back through the dust,” I answer. “Look at this place, probably hasn’t been bothered since he fell.”

Astrick pauses a moment at my mention of the Bleak, but he doesn’t ask any questions.

We move from room to room, finding barrels and crates: some open, some secured shut. Whole rooms have been dedicated to only one or two themes—whether supplies or tools. One room houses a dizzying array of musical instruments, while another boasts rows and rows of paintings, forgotten and unseen.

“We should keep moving on,” Astrick says from the doorway, after I’ve spent a quarter of an hour’s time looking through whatever paintings I can reach.

“These are incredible,” I say, catching my breath as I shift an enormous frame. “They should be on the walls. All of them should be on the walls!”

Astrick smiles. “I’ll start in the next room over. Come find me when you’re ready.”

I keep looking, admiring landscapes and portraits I know my father would be keen on studying for hours.

“Ember!”

Astrick’s shout calls me from my thoughts, and I send a few paintings falling over in a clatter as I rush towards his voice.

“What!” I say, entering the room, my candle sputtering from my run. From what I can see through the ghostlike shadows across his face, Astrick is grinning.

“Look!” And he pulls away a cloth sheet draped over a large stack. A sweet scent mixes with the dank smell of the underfloor, and I see before me a long room piled with bricks that look like old gold or honey.

“Is that…?”

He grins. “Beeswax, for candles.”

I drop down and press my fingers against the wax. “More than five thousand, it would seem,” I say, looking up towards Astrick, grinning. “To think I’ve been badgering you when we’ve such a supply of wax. How could Miranda have not remembered?”

“Begging for your own cottage, as we say in the West Fell.”

“True.” I release a sigh that turns into a half laugh as I sit down in the dust. “Yet, having the wax is one thing, but know-how?”

“Easier than you might think,” Astrick says smoothly.

The next room holds the supplies for candle making. Astrick rattles off a list, using phrases and names for things I don’t know, and assures me I’ve everything I need. We both seem to feel a bit giddy at the discovery.

“A hopeful promise that our luck will persist,” Astrick says, glancing over at me.

We search the entire third underfloor, but nothing we come across pertains to the glass windows of the Pyre. Astrick is more disappointed than I thought he would be, but he tries to mask the emotion.

“I suppose I never expected us to find what we need in the first place.”

I offer a smile touched by disappointment.

He looks like he’s lost someone to the plague, yet, determined to be hopeful, says, “The quality of Amperean glass is, well, the best I’d known until now. It will do. Why don’t we mark the rooms that hold the wax and candle supplies before going back upstairs?”

Afterwards, we climb the spiral staircase, silence between us.

A sound comes from below us, then a shout, followed by a laugh.

Astrick spins around, holding our candle out before him. “Who was that?”

Seeing a glimmer of light down the staircase, I make an understanding sound and walk back down towards it. The gold shimmer is just inside a doorframe. “It’s only a memory,” I call up to Astrick, gathering it in my hands.

As I come back up the stairs, he holds his candle away so that he can see the light of the memory. “What did you say it was?”

“The Pyre has retained the substance of all its memories,” I answer. “We find them in various places and store them away on the eighth floor.”

“I’ve never heard of such a thing.”

“Neither had I.”

“May I?” Astrick says, moving his hand towards it in question.

I rub it between my fingers, hesitating only a moment. “All right, though I don’t think it will mean anything to you.”

He hands me his candle as I trade it for the memory. As soon as the memory touches Astrick’s fingers, there is a faint snap. He pulls it taut between his hands, and the gold light pulses as the memory presents itself.

“How did you—?” I begin to question, but I go quiet so we can hear the voices.

The memory shows an artist and a soldier coming up the spiral staircase of the underfloors. They are speaking seriously of a long war and a difficult peace. Their hope seems to be wearing as thin as the sound of their footsteps. Then two young men can be heard—the shout and the laugh—and they appear, racing down the stairs, nearly crashing into the serious pair in conversation. The soldier steps back, into a small hallway off the staircase, watching with disapproval as the boisterous young men yell their apologies over their shoulders, running down farther into the underfloors.

"Please tell me he's more serious than that," the artist says, brushing his coat free of the dust from the wall, "and that he can take his father's place when the time comes."

The soldier gives a single shake of his head and lets his hand pound once against the door behind him. "More serious than that? He may be a Lectus Born, but his demeanor is filled with more over-joy than seriousness just now."

"Humph."

"Though," the soldier continues, "I feel certain he will settle down into a seriousness befitting his role."

"May he have many years of preparation," the artist answers.

And the memory fades, now a quiet gleam of gold in Astrick's hands. He does not move for several long counts. When he looks up at me it's as if I've handed him a key.

"You said there are more of these?"

"There are. Many. I have been forbidden from the room where they are kept. And I warn you of the same. The Bleak does not want me to see any more. Though, to be honest, I have gone back a few times to look when he's been away from the Pyre."

Astrick makes a sound and grips the memory firmly in his hands—the emotion of it surprises me.

"What an astonishing thing."

Then he comes to himself, giving his head a single shake as he offers me the memory. I take it, placing it inside the knapsack with the last of Miranda's bread, and we continue on our way up the stairs.

I begin thinking through the logistics of this effort. If Astrick has to travel to the East in order to purchase Amperean glass—

He stops and looks over his shoulder at me, the shadows casting his face in sharp relief. "It looked like they were on this very staircase, so where do

the doors lead?"

I frown. "What doors?"

"The small hallway the soldier stepped into when the young men ran past…it had doors in it."

Raising my eyebrows, I wave a hand. "Do you remember seeing such a hallway on our way down?"

"No, but I can't imagine an entire hallway was misplaced." And he smiles, breaking the lines of shadow on his face. "Let's look for it before we give up on the underfloors."

As we continue, my thoughts return to the memory. It must have been Sperro Magna running through, causing the disturbance. What was it the soldier had said Sperro was filled with? Over-joy? I can hardly picture it. The Bleak even touching anything near joy is a thought as antithetical as—

"Here it is."

I look up to see Astrick paused before a hallway set into the spiral staircase, and, just as he had said, it has a line of three doors.

The doors are locked. Astrick tries all three of them a second time, but they only rattle. He looks over his shoulder at me. "Do you suppose the keys are lost?"

"More than likely, Miranda has them."

He steps back and returns his tight focus to the door's lock. "Before we ask her, let me try just one thing." He takes a thin knife from his pocket. It doesn't appear to be a knife for fighting. Perhaps it's for leatherworking. Sending the blade into the aged lock, he twists his wrist. It doesn't respond, but Astrick is determined. He moves the knife about, muttering something about pressure, and while he works, he begins telling me how the ancient tumblers work. He jiggles the knife again, asking the lock to release.

"Should I go—"

"Ha!" He interrupts me with a cry of triumph and forces the stiff door open. The hinges complain loudly, and Astrick disappears into the dark room.

When I follow, I am greeted by the dim vision of fabric covering something. Astrick grabs the first covering with his hand and pulls it away.

There are several large sheets of pristine glass.

Astrick shouts as he pulls a second covering away, then a third. He can't stop the words from falling headlong over themselves as they leave his mouth: "It's all here! Glass of all colors! Look at the size of these panes!"

Bending down, balancing on the balls of his feet, he moves a hand along the side of a pane. “Astounding quality. Not a chip to be found. Look, there’s a glass cutter there, and it looks like an entire box of tools in the corner. Just grasping the courage to score such glass…”

He’s rummaging and sorting, and I’m standing back, watching it all, trusting this newly minted camaraderie.

“Do you think the other two rooms hold glass supplies as well?” I ask.

But he’s so enamored with his findings, I’m not certain he even hears me.

* * *

“Bricks and bricks of beeswax, stacked and glowing like gold in the candlelight,” I tell Miranda as she imprisons me in the kitchen until I finish eating the evening meal. She’d already fed Astrick while I was lighting candles, and he’s escaped back to the underfloors, not only confident that there is enough glass to fix every broken window in the Pyre but also hoping there is more than enough glass to create new windows, “with a majesty not seen in the last two thousand years of glasswork.” The fervor in his eyes before he left the kitchen had given me hope he would do all in his power to convince his sister that he must return.

Miranda shakes her head, granting our discoveries to be a small miracle. “I’d forgotten entirely it was even there, but I suppose we bought great amounts of wax from those who passed through, as well as keeping our own hives.” Her eyes pause on a thought. “But—as I told you before—the bees did not last. It’s been so long now I can’t even remember if we tried to keep them alive when the eternal winter came or if we—” She shakes her head. “It’s no matter now.”

“Who made the candles in your day?” I follow her from the long kitchen into a pantry. “Did you? Could you teach me how?”

“No, my lady,” Miranda says slowly, her eyes looking for something in the dim light. “I was too busy with all the other things to be making candles. Another woman did most of that. And maybe her man. I can’t rightly remember.”

She pulls a bowl from the shelf—dough that’s been rising—and then I follow her back into the kitchen and sit on the long table. Miranda is still

talking to herself, trying to remember what she can of those days, three hundred years past.

"*She* made candles and soaps, sometimes—special ones, with scents. Like from the evergreen trees. Smelled like a right forest some days."

I lift an eyebrow. "She? The woman who made the candles?"

"No," Miranda says as she punches the dough. "Ederra, Sperro's girl."

"The girl he loved."

"Yes."

"What was Ederra like?"

An answer does not come immediately, Miranda patting more flour onto the counter before working it into the dough. "In temperament? Loyal, bright. An astute girl, my stars. More prone to wisdom than those twice her age. She stood about your height, with harvest-spun hair and wide-set blue eyes."

The young woman from my dream. I fall off the table—well, it's more of a stumble, really.

"Careful," Miranda says, watching from over her shoulder as I right myself.

"I'm fine," I answer. "And you say Ederra would make pine-scented candles? For Sperro as well?"

"Mm-hmm." Miranda nods. "Always reminded him of her."

"Well, that's—Miranda, I should do that! It would remind him of her. Which would remind him of when he was—"

"It will make him angry," she interrupts me sharply.

"And what exactly can I do that won't make him angry?" I challenge, trying to sound as convincing as I can. "How do you make pine-scented candles?"

Miranda gives me a long-suffering sigh and punches the dough again. "I don't rightly remember, but Celia might. She helped Ederra a time or two."

Later, as I light candles about the Pyre and then settle myself in my bell tower rooms, I think over Miranda's words.

* * *

I wake in the steep hours of the night, knowing that the Bleak has reentered the forest. I can sense him coming closer, riot and satiation in his wake. He's traveling fast, unfettered by the mortal laws of time. I know he has

taken a blood gain, or several, and I feel foolish for the sharp disappointment this knowledge brings. As if I should have expected anything else.

* * *

An hour after sunrise, I bid farewell to Astrick. His fellow merchants left an hour before, but he waited to say goodbye.

"Stay on the western road. The Bleak is arriving from the east, so you will not pass each other, but move quickly. One never knows what his state will be after— Well, it's always a small hell when he returns." Astrick is looking past me, towards the eastern road.

When he doesn't respond I say, "Astrick?"

His eyes flick to mine. "I was listening."

"Miranda insisted I again remind you how utterly foolish it would be for you to return," I answer.

He nods, the cloud-tempered moonlight catching the angle of his cheekbone. "I still plan to return as soon as I'm able…if my sister doesn't bind me and lock me in the cellar."

"She should."

"I *should* be about those windows," he replies, looking past me to the Pyre with unfettered affection.

"You're hopeless," I answer, grinning.

His expression turns self-deprecatory. "I know. Goodbye, Ember. Be safe." Then he presses his mouth into a serious line before adding, "As safe as one can be with a Death Bleak. The Lights keep you."

"You as well."

He settles his pack over his shoulder—the grace easily seen through the strength—and walks into the morning.

Instead of returning to sleep, I find Celia, dusting the Mirror Gallery. But she isn't keen on explaining the process when I tell her that I found enough wax for all the candles we need.

"He won't like it."

"He won't like me making candles?"

"He won't appreciate you making candles in the Pyre. Especially not *hers*."

"But the Pyre wants me to make candles, Celia," I counter.

“He loved Ederra.” Celia waves her dust rag. “It might bring back more memories.”

I give her a forceful look. “That, Celia, is exactly what I am trying to do. And if you love your master—or love who he once was—then you will help me. If he can recall memories from the time when he was good, I might have another chance to flare the light of his tenth line. As it now stands, he won’t let me touch him.”

She sets her mouth and watches my face with her brown eyes. “And what will happen to me? If the master is reclaimed, what happens to me?”

“I—I don’t know,” I answer honestly. “I don’t know what happens to any of you. Will you begin to age again? Will you be brought back into time, only to find your days have passed? I can’t say. The chances of your master being reclaimed certainly seem like a shadow.”

Celia averts her eyes and shakes her head, looking for all the world like she wishes she could weep. “Make your candles, if you must, but I’ll not teach you how to make hers.”

“But Celia—”

“I can’t.”

I leave it. Making candles is enough. For now.

XII

I am in the kitchen a day later, when an oppressive weight sweeps through the Pyre. I think I hear the thunder of the horses’ hooves.

“He’s back,” I say.

“Aye, he’s back,” Miranda repeats, looking in the direction of the courtyard with a somber frown. “And he’s been into mischief. You can smell the rot of black magick.”

I close my eyes only a moment, picturing my own light moving out past my skin, giving me room to breathe. Then I toss the rag I’ve been drying bowls with onto the counter.

“I suppose I can’t do anything for him by sitting in the kitchens.”

“Wait for the grit to pass,” Miranda advises. “Wait for the depth of his deeds to grow a bit stale. He won’t be fit for anything in his current state.

Besides, he might have been trying to push himself towards the final blood gain. He may be searching you out."

"You've spoken yourself of my doing what I need to do."

"I did not intend you to walk into the jaws of death," Miranda warns. "And every time he returns of late, it's been in a bad way—"

"It's too late for me to fear that now." I untie the apron covering my dress and leave the kitchens, winding up the back stairs and passing through the Mirror Gallery as I make my way towards the Great Hall.

As strange as the admission is to make, I cannot deny that, with all the Bleak's turmoil, there is something else that has come with his return. Is it relief? No, but—life's blood, what a strange admission—it is something near the idea. For the binding between us is eased by his proximity.

Perhaps, I tell myself, pulling my hair behind me and twisting it into a loose knot at the nape of my neck, this is because we both belong here—in our contradictory ways.

When I come into the Great Hall, the front doors are still closed, but I can hear shouts and know the Bleak will soon enter the Pyre—crawling and cursing, if the pattern wears true.

I am not ready to see the Stone Six burst through the doors, carrying the Bleak limply between them, his cloak wrapped haphazardly around the torn flesh of his body.

I run towards him. "What's happened!"

The captain, his hands gripping the shoulder of the Bleak, is uttering something that slices the air about them. They are burning, sharp words.

"What are you doing?" I demand, when I feel the potency of his spells. "Stop!"

"I'm countering the magicks!" he yells at me.

As I throw my arms around the Bleak, the guards can't help but settle him to the floor. The Bleak's eyes are pressed shut, and he doesn't speak, but I know he is conscious. The captain once more begins his utterances, and an acidic tingle rushes down the skin of my arm nearest him.

"You cannot counter darkness with what is dark! You'll only give whatever curse this is strength in the end!"

"Then *how*," he lifts his darkened eyes to mine, "would you suggest I deal with this treachery?"

"Light!" I insist. "Light drives out the deepest darkness. It is the only thing powerful enough."

"Go to hell."

I am gripped from behind and jerked away from the Bleak.

"No!" I scream as I'm thrown back. Two of the guards come to hold me down and I fight, but I cannot free myself. "These are the prayers of the Line Sanctum," I begin. A hand covers my mouth. Recoiling, I try to jerk away. *These are the prayers of the Line Sanctum*, I think, refusing to be silenced. I can sense light gathering around me. Then I think of the bond between the Bleak and I. *These are the prayers*, I utter, and I send the light through it. A rush, a burst of light, and I find myself free, the guards staggering back, unable to recover their feet. I am crawling towards the Bleak just as Sylvain runs into the Great Hall.

"Help me, Sylvain. Please!" I gather the Bleak's cloak about himself and try to lift him, but I can't hold up the mass of his misery. The Stone Six are still stunned, blinking and unsure, and Sylvain eyes them as he comes to the Bleak's side. Sylvain's face shifts in concern—or, perhaps, in caution—and he manages to get one arm around the Bleak, then the other, lifting him from the floor. I follow behind the strong woodsman, and we deliver the Bleak into his rooms.

As Sylvain lays him down on his bed, the Bleak groans, the sound of great pain catching up with someone. But I am here, unwrapping his cloak, my fingers burning against it. Whatever bent magicks have been practiced, they are still active. Upon my pulling away the Bleak's cloak, Sylvain gives a sympathetic hiss.

The Bleak is not wearing his tunic. He is bare-chested, and his colorless skin has been slashed open in vicious, angry cuts. They cross his chest and his abdomen, wrapping around to his back and his shoulders. The wounds are black, with deep purple seeping out where the red of blood should be.

Sylvain is swearing as he turns away, staring at the woodless fire that still burns in the hearth. I give only a quick glance in his direction, concentrating on the desperate figure before me.

"These are the prayers of the Line Sanctum—" I murmur, begging myself not to fear, praying for courage. Praying for guidance.

As my eyes pass over his torn body, my hands lifted just above one of the wounds, the reek of whatever works that were wrought upon him is too strong. I can feel sweat on my forehead, and I whisper another prayer, cursing my uncertainty for badgering my confidence. I know that time is vital to rooting out poison before it settles, but I'd only learned the

technique of it last summer, how to focus the light into the tissues of the body, separating the poison and drawing it out before it could corrupt or kill. “But will it work?” I mutter, quickly brushing the back of my hand across my brow. I have never seen the like before.

I begin to step back, so I might collect myself. But the Bleak snakes his hand out and grabs my wrist.

“Don’t—go—” he says, taking a long breath after each word.

His fingers wrap tightly around my wrist, leaving a sting in the skin, like something sour on a fresh cut.

“The last time I did my work, there were threats,” I answer, too rattled for diplomacy.

“It’s easing the pain,” the Bleak gasps, “you being near.”

Sylvain grunts from beside the fire. Looking back over my shoulder, the woodsman gives me a cautious look, a warning to take care, then, shaking his head, he steps through the doorway, leaving us alone.

Pressing my lips together, I turn my eyes back to the Bleak.

“Stay,” he hisses.

“You told me, not ten days past, that my presence agitated your blood.”

“You are agitating,” he says with great effort, though his anguish translates into a hard smile. Then it falters. “But I am so weary of the pain.”

It is then a flash of color comes into his eyes. It so startles me to see the eyes of the Lectus Born that I try to pull my hand away.

He grips it harder.

“Sperro.” I use his given name, for it’s hard to see the memory of light in his eyes and not remember that before he was ever a Death Bleak, he was Sperro Magna, precocious boy and seemingly carefree youth. “What have you been doing while away from the Pyre?”

I see through his expression enough to realize that I do not want to know.

You’ll never make it, I think. *You’ve come to stand on the precipice of Beast of Ten, and you’ve tried to throw yourself over and have not managed it yet*.

“It isn’t—that—easy,” he answers with snagged breaths. “Which is why so few have ever—done it.”

I still don’t understand why you want it.

“You wouldn’t,” he rasps.

“But you had such light!”

“You were right,” he groans. “You are—an agitation. Go. Now.” And he releases my hand. I’d almost forgotten he was holding it—the first time I’ve not shrunk from his touch.

I can hear Miranda speaking at the open door with Balint. Then I hear Sylvain. Other voices fill the hallway as well—the guards, Celia—wondering, waiting.

“I think we can do it,” I say, almost without meaning to.

His eyes have rolled back in his head from the pain. “Do what?”

Bring you back.

He closes his eyes—flinching—and twists his body away from me. It is then that I see the horror of his back.

“Miranda!” I shout. “I need water! Hot water! Clean rags! And do you have any Valerian balm and goldenseal?”

“Yes,” Miranda answers from the doorway. “I’ll fetch both.”

“Go fast,” I call after her before turning again to look at the wreckage that is now the Bleak’s back. “I’ve a long night of work ahead of me.”

* * *

He’s banned me from using any light. But the lines of black infection are getting worse, no matter how I clean them with warm water and apply healing herbs. The room is thick with a fast-moving rot, and so I send everyone away and close the door.

Despite the pain, Sperro is still conscious. His hands reach out, gripping the bedclothes, the articulation of his bones a testament to his agony.

“What happened to you?” I ask again as I rinse the rag out and soak it again, my hands aching from the vapors around each wound. “Can I please use my training as a Line Sanctum?”

He doesn’t answer. For over an hour I have been asking, and he’s ignored me.

“I can do little with the herbs on hand,” I say, giving up in frustration. “I hadn’t even thought to prepare any salves; I’ve been focused on other things. Not that I’d trust wounds such as these to my weak tinctures,” I mutter. “I haven’t learned enough.”

He makes a noise in response but doesn’t speak.

“Sperro,” I try again, “this is all I can do for you if I don’t do any line healing. And I’m afraid these wounds are getting worse. They feel—they

feel laced with something."

"They are," he whispers. "They're vengeance magicks."

I'd never heard of such magicks, but the name feels explanation enough. I move my eyes again over his body, the open slashes thick with fast infection and old, discolored blood. I force my eyes closed. "Who did such a thing to you?"

"I can't— Don't ask me now. It was so—difficult." He makes this request with such exhausted intonations that he touches my compassion in a way he never has before.

"Will you let me do some line work, Sperro? I can't see any other way."

His eyes are again closed, but the lines on his face are trembling.

"Sperro?"

He nods, though this movement costs him, for the open wound along his neck is disturbed by the linens beneath this body, and he makes a sound of such weakness it shakes me.

"Life's blood," I say beneath my breath, washing my hands again before coming to the other side of the bed. "We will start with your back," I say hurriedly, "so that you might lie down. Then I can attend to the rest."

He makes no sound, no movement, so I lift my hands to the longest gash and set my fingertips on its edge. There is a searing snap. I give a cry and pull back from the pain, my fingers smarting and ice-cold. Sperro tries to shift his head in response, but he can't. Pressing my fingers into my palms, I grit my teeth and wait for the pain to subside.

It doesn't.

"What magick *is* this?"

"Spite." He scrapes the word out. "And Malice."

My pain is getting worse. I inhale and step away from his bed, waving my hands, my fingers stinging as it builds.

"What can I do?"

He laughs, but it sounds how I feel, and I can't imagine how the Bleak is lying still with so little complaint of his own. His pain must be unendurable.

Rushing around the bed, I splash my hands into the basin of water. It isn't helping. The pain is taking on a cutting coldness. Almost beyond my capacity to think, I do the only thing that comes to mind: I run to the hearth, flinging my hands towards the lapping flames of that inextinguishable fire.

My immediate relief makes me fall to my knees, pushing my hands in farther.

"What did you do?" the Bleak says weakly. "Did it ease the pain?"

I breathe out. Yes, it has. It's tremendous. I can feel my muscles loosening around my ribs, can feel my pulse regulating its pace. A groan from the bed demands that I move, and I do, lifting myself onto my feet and coming back the side of the Bleak's bed.

"What wretched magicks," I say.

He makes an affirming sound.

As I sink down onto the bed beside him and breathe out slowly, I look at my fingers. Still red, though the pain is gone.

"Did it work?" he asks again.

"Yes."

He closes his eyes tighter, and I can feel him shaking. But I am hesitant to touch the treacherous wounds again before I know more. "Tell me what happened? I need to understand—to know what I'll be fighting."

I see his wrestle between pain and indecision. He wants the relief, but he does not want to tell me what happened, nor does he want anything from me, for we both realize what that would mean. It would mean him giving up more ground.

It is after his body shudders that his stubbornness yields. He begins to speak. I have to lean forward to hear his words. "They had him bound. They had him…bound and tied. He was a Third from one of the coastal nations. *Very* powerful. So much power. They wanted me to take him as a blood gain —"

"They?"

"The dark powers that be among these nations. We had gathered… gathered in the ruins of Slatt Clave, and they had brought a Third for me to take, saying it would be enough for me to make Beast—" he draws in the windy hiss of a breath, "Beast of Ten."

"It wouldn't be enough," I murmur.

"No," he agrees. "It wouldn't have been enough. It's you," he rasps. "We both know it's you."

Yes, I think. We are a scale of two, both knowing exactly who is on the other side. I clear my throat. "So they brought you the Third?"

"And I refused the take."

I remain motionless, not wanting to interrupt his narrative, not wanting to hope that he refused the take for a more noble cause than his own pride.

"They tried to force me," he continues, his words strained, "but I've gone…further than most. They couldn't. I was too powerful for them."

"Yet they could inflict such wounds?"

"In the end, almost all of them fought against me. It was—" He fights for a deep breath and then sinks farther into the pillows. "It was not something you would have wished to see. I daresay Meridaithe has become my enemy to the last degree, and some of the others. Callidus tried to convince me as well."

The air in the room chills at the mention of his name.

"So they attacked you for refusing to take the Third? Is that when your guards brought you back?"

A slanted expression catches his pained face. "I delivered some work of my own first. Needless to say, the ruins of Slatt Clave saw bitter blood. Many of us went after one another. It was almost…cathartic."

The skin around my eyes tightens and he senses my disapproval. He laughs, but the laugh shifts into a grimace.

"And the Third?"

"What Third?"

"The one you refused to take as a blood gain? What happened to him?"

"Meridaithe got to him before anyone else could. He was a corpse before he even knew he'd been spared. The fool."

The words hit me like a close death. Dropping my head, I shift my weight and slide off the side of his bed, retreating to the nearest window and gripping the curtains with my hand, my mercy for the Bleak unraveling. All I can think of is this nameless Third. What a mess of horror they all leave in their paths.

"Are you not going to do anything for me?" he calls after me.

I close my eyes, shrinking from the prospect. It is unbearable. I do not want to know of such darkness, of creatures who are willing to rip life apart with no regard.

"Do you truly wish for my help?" I finally say. "You know what it would mean."

He makes a sound. "I can't—endure this. It will. Only. Get worse."

I nod, opening my eyes as I release the curtain.

"Fine. I will do what I can."

“Only—the poison. None of your—light.”

Maddening, this Bleak.

I turn towards him. “That’s not possible,” I state. “I must use light. But I will do as little as necessary to draw out the poison.” I consider the ugly wounds. “Though I am going to need to bring you closer to the fire.”

I search out Balint and Sylvain to help me shift the Bleak. Sylvain finds a lounge in an unused bedroom: soft, long enough. He places it before the fire, and then both he and Balint carry the Bleak—wrapped in a blanket so they are not burned—towards the lounge.

The Bleak writhes. He screams. His Stone Six gather once again outside his chambers, but they still cannot cross the threshold—I attribute it to the fire and count it as a great relief. The harsh-eyed captain calls curses at me as we settle the Bleak. And, finally, I just close the door as I walk by it, so I can no longer hear his black promises.

We turn the Bleak on his side, facing away from the fire. It is with his wounded back that I will begin my work so he might lie down more easily and perhaps find some rest—whatever rest is offered to someone who has taken his course.

Sylvain and Balint stand back, exchanging dubious glances.

“You are free to go now,” I tell them, my eyes traveling the Bleak’s torn body. “There’s nothing you can do until later. Tell Miranda I will send for her if she’s needed.”

The Bleak and I are again left alone.

I study the longest gash. Scraping together whatever determination I can—the memory of that hellish pain too fresh—I lift my fingers to the wound and press down.

The spite and malice hits my fingertips with cutting force, my fingers feeling like they will shred against such malicious magick, but I cannot pull away. The wound itself is a trap, something that seeks to take me inside of itself. I pour whatever light I have into the metal grip of this magick. Then, with a cry, I pull myself away again and thrust my arms straight into the fire.

It takes longer than before to counter the pain. Closing my eyes, I focus on the movements of my lungs as I stretch my fingers; they’re cramped, strained, but setting my mouth in a line, I pull my hands from the fire and turn back to the Bleak’s wound. Again comes the pain, and again I give whatever I can for as long as I am able, only to wrench my hands away and

immerse them inside the flames. This is repeated without either of us exchanging any words, only the tensing of his body each time I press my fingers against his wound and my calling under my breath for the healing powers of the Lights to aid me.

I continue working for hours, until my fingers are too sore for any more, until my eyes are losing their abilities to focus on the space around me.

"I'm sorry, but I can't continue just now," I say as I catch my breath. "I feel less bitterness in this wound. Is there any difference for you? Is the pain lessened?"

He doesn't answer.

Convincing myself that I can stand on my feet, I work my way around the lounge and then kneel down again, right before his face. His eyes are closed, and his breath, though coming in at sharp angles, betrays that he has passed out from the pain.

* * *

Miranda finds me in a hallway as I'm attempting to return to the bell tower suite. I keep looking about, disoriented, uncertain which direction to go. But she holds me up, fretting, guiding my way.

"Don't waste your worry, Miranda," I tell her, stumbling. She grips me harder. "Keep him near the fire. Don't move him back into his bed. He has pillows and a covering and should be comfortable enough until I come back down to continue. But now I really must rest."

"Is it doing anything for him?" Miranda asks, supporting my back as we climb the last staircase and feel the cold, winter air of the open corridor.

"I believe so," I answer. "He is at least sleeping. I feel his body is not *so* tortured as it was. Any pure sleep is healing and—life's blood, I'm tired—he was without his strange stupor. You know, that confusion that comes when he does not look like himself? Whatever that means…so it should be clear, undemanding. There's space for something good to work…" I'm rambling, not making sense, even to myself.

"You best be wise, my lady. If you could see your own face. You look as ill as can be."

"I have to trust Them, the Lights," I mutter. "It's Their work—he's Their concern, after all."

She gets me through the door, and I go straight to my bed, crawling beneath the bedclothes and remembering nothing more.

* * *

My hands hurt when I move my fingers. Grimacing, I almost resign myself to their stiffness and refuse to move. But I feel an urgency, that all hope in eradicating the poison from the Bleak's body is tied to time. I yawn—my lungs groaning—and then whisper a line of prayer to the Lights as I force myself to rise from my bed, and leave the bell tower rooms.

The Bleak has not moved. His face—as nondescript and colorless as it always is—appears even more pale. But the long gash across his back looks less angry, the black infection of that single wound receding, fewer lines snaking into the surrounding skin.

As I stand here, watching the seeping poison, finding the courage to begin again, Celia opens the door, her wide eyes traveling from the Bleak to me and back again.

"They say you're doing some of your healing work," she says.

"I've done very little; there is a great deal more to do."

"Well, then, do you need anything?"

An unexpected offer.

"Could you bring me some warm water, perhaps a few fresh rags?"

Celia nods and disappears. I rub my eyes and give my head a shake, trying to clear the cobwebbed thoughts in my mind. Menace and spite are still clinging to the air in the room, and my skin is reacting like I've burned myself.

When Celia does return, I mix some of Miranda's dried herbs into the water and soak a rag, laying it across the wound I'd spent the previous afternoon treating. Then I look at the other slashes in his grey skin and begin again to draw out the poison.

* * *

Hours later, after I've worked on two of the smaller gashes and my fingers are blistered, I lie down on the soft carpet before the fire instead of returning to the bell tower. Too weary to fall asleep, I breathe as deeply as I

can. Deciphering as best I can the maze of poison takes all my concentration.

"There is so much of it," I whisper.

What gives me some hope, what gives me the barest idea that this is possible, is that I can feel the Pyre beneath me. As I'm falling asleep, I realize that the Pyre loves Sperro. It wants me to succeed.

* * *

We work for five days. Sperro no longer spends so much time sleeping and is now able to lie on his back as I pull the malice from the wounds across his chest and about his shoulders. We don't speak very much. I am focusing on the endless ritual of dispelling the poison then forcing my hands into the fire to ease the cutting pain. And he is grappling with the poison that yet remains in his wretched body. At times, though, his own impatient darkness interferes.

"You need to keep out of my way," I mutter as a wave of his anger fights against my work.

His fists clench, but he says nothing, even as my fingers trip over another tangle of misery.

"I can't work with so little light," I say in frustration, pressing my fingers into a cool rag. When I pull the rag away, there's blood. I step back and lean against the hearth, lifting my bloodied fingers to wipe my watering eyes. "I've given what I can, Sperro. But unless I can flare your tenth line—unless I can work with more light than you've given me permission to do—I can't make any more progress. The remaining magick saturating your body feels barbed."

His face is drawn so tight, I wonder if he's noticing the work I've been doing at all. "That would counter my own purposes," he finally says in that awful voice of his.

"Of course it would!" I know I sound impatient, and I feel I deserve to be. "And it will also give you the relief you seek. Do I have your permission to work on your tenth light line?"

He doesn't answer, and I close my eyes, my head bent, arms crossed over my body as I lean against the mantle by the fire. I am so tired.

"Can you promise it will take away the pain?"

I open my eyes then, after a moment, brave a look at his face—it is a bit clearer than it seemed before. “I can’t promise the outcome of anything,” I admit. *But I believe it will*, I add in thought.

He winces at the sound of my voice inside his head. “Just once. Only *this* time. Only until you’ve countered Meridaithe’s work. No more than that, Meddler.”

“You’re a generous wretch,” I reply, shaking my head. “Now try to keep yourself still.”

“I can scarcely manage anything else,” he complains.

As I step forward and place my hands on a wound crossing his rib cage, I feel a dark weight wrap around my wrists like prison chains.

“Keep your darkness at bay,” I order.

He makes no response, rolling his head to the side from exhaustion. His eyelids are heavy, and he will soon fall asleep—a good thing, as I know not how much pain it will cause to send more light into his chaotic form—but before he does, I think I hear the Bleak mutter that he doesn’t have anything else.

* * *

Flaring his tenth line takes more precision than I had been expecting. Too much, after days of wrestling the poison. Finding the light line, let alone calling forth any healing, puts me into a state almost beyond reason. But I’m able to do enough work that I feel the Bleak settle beneath my fingers, and his tenth line loosen a tangle.

The poison retreats.

At some point, I realize that Balint is carrying me up to the bell tower suite, whispering about the poor girl needing her rest. I notice the day’s first sunlight is just falling in through the windows of my room, and then I’m gone.

I sleep.

When Miranda wakes me, I feel I’ve been hours away. “I can’t,” I mumble, when she asks me to sit up so that she might feed me.

“Tsk,” she says, tucking me back into bed again.

“How is he?” I hear myself say, my voice removed, far away.

“Better. Resting. Most of the infection has abated. Only a touch more work to do, and not until you yourself are better.”

* * *

I am outside two afternoons later, trudging slowly, my breath hanging in the cold air. The forest is beautiful, and I embrace the sting of snow blowing against my face. My hands are so tender I have to hold them carefully in front of my body so as not to touch anything. But I am relieved to feel movement in the muscles of my legs, to feel my heart finding a rhythm other than that of sleep. And two days of rest have left me restless in mind.

When Balint comes across my path, he is deferential. “Have I been keeping the fires of the Pyre burning well enough to suit you?”

“Wonderfully well,” I answer. “It not only helps the Pyre, but with how cold it’s been, I’m grateful for the added warmth.”

Balint nods. “You don’t look well, my lady. Perhaps you shouldn’t be out today. We’ve just set a new fire in the library. It’s warm and calm. I’ve always…” he trails off, then moves his eyes from me to the forest.

“Yes?”

Balint clasps his hands together as he says, “Every time I set the fire in the library, I feel renewed. There’s some sort of—oh, I can’t say—a restorative power? It seeps into your bones. I’ve sought it out many a time over the years. It might suit you now, this afternoon. It’s empty of anyone else, just waiting for you. And as it’s colder out than usual, you need what warmth you can get. Besides, it seems things are stirring about the forest that might impinge upon our peace. Best be safe.”

In reaction to his warning, I pull my hands into fists, only to wince from the pain. “What things?” I ask, my voice touched with strain.

“The clouds are thick with them.”

“With what?”

“Spells, prayers; the bad, the good. More than those of us here are taking interest in the events at the Pyre. It seems that others in the nations of this world are trying to give aid to a cause, be it dark or light.”

I glance up at the clouds above the forest. They are weighted with a particular gravity.

“Surely there can’t be many who know what goes on here.”

Balint shrugs. “You, me, all of us here, we’re right close, you see. We’re caught by what is right before us here at the Pyre. Indeed, we don’t even go far enough afield to know the cruelty of Sperro among the nations. We do not see his killing nor his torture, only the toll it demands of him. But I

figure there are many who know of this precipice on which he stands. Those among the wise, those among the foolishly cruel. And they do indeed take interest. They pray or curse, and it reaches us, as cut off as we are. Can you not feel it?"

I look up again, and wonder. The Bleak has certainly made enemies of Meridaithe and Callidus, and who knows how many others. As for prayers, perhaps my own father, my own brothers, are adding their own to the Pyre. This thought, independent of anything else, is a comfort, for today I am too tired to raise many prayers of my own.

* * *

I don't expect it, but come evening the Bleak finds me in the library. I'd been sleeping, but am now awake, staring at the purpling sky outside the windows. He pushes open the door and limps across the room, looking like someone has bashed both his knees and bent his spine around. I can't help but notice I am not so affected by the dread of his presence; perhaps it is the library.

My only greeting is, "Should you be walking?"

He grunts in some sort of agreement as he drops into his chair, and his expression finds relief. He's managed to clothe himself again, all grey and bound. "You look like death," he says to me, his own eyes hollowed out by suffering.

I can't help the tired laugh that escapes me.

"I thought you were going to come to my chambers this morning," the Bleak adds. "You didn't."

I settle deeper into the chair, my body thanking me for the hours I'd spent curled up, not moving. "Most of the work has been done. And aside from being too tired to continue, I didn't want to flare more than I had permission to."

"You did a good deal more than you had permission to do," he replies, though I know I didn't. "I spent the morning working out some bone magicks to counter it."

My face wrinkles in disgust. "I rather thought you reeked of something vile."

"You do try my patience," he says, but there is little venom behind his words.

“Has my work served?” I ask. “Is the pain gone?”

“From the Slatt Clave? I’m immensely drained.” He looks at the fire. “The wounds grow better, though there are other pains that never leave.”

“Other pains?”

“Always there.” He waves a hand. “The gnawing sensation of slowly getting ripped to pieces.”

But why persist if the only end is to tear yourself apart?

He winces. *You couldn’t resist, could you?*

I stare. His voice—his voice is in my head, but it’s clear and close and sounds rather more like one of my brothers’ friends, come down from university, than like the half-choked rasping I’ve grown accustomed to. It sounds like something made of gold.

What? he continues. *Are you really so surprised to find me inside your head?*

I feel the muscles of my stomach pull together. I am surprised.

Yes.

You shouldn’t be. He shifts in his chair, pulling his cloak across his chest, leaning back and staring at me. *Disconcerting, to have someone’s words slip into your mind so, don’t you agree?*

I press my palms against my closed eyes, trying to still my thoughts and barricade against his. It doesn’t work. His voice saunters into my mind again as easily as joining me for a walk in the woods.

You should be grateful, his golden voice twists in mockery. *This saves you the pain of hearing the words from my own mouth. I know how my voice grates on you.*

Get out of my head. I drop my hands and look at him forcefully.

Too late for that. My regret as much as yours. Can’t you see what’s happening?

What? I ask, but I know what he is going to say.

He pulls his cloak closer about his shoulders, and the dark circles around his lifeless eyes feel darker as he hunches down. *The Lights, the Fates, whatever powers that be, are ever moving this process forward. We are now bound beyond what we were before, and we will continue to be so —*

Until a choice is made, I think.

Not only made, but acted on.

I stare. His voice sounds so calm. When the words I think next rise up in my mind, I own them and speak aloud, “I’ve made my choice.”

I know.

“I choose to accept my calling.”

I know.

“The Pyre will be reclaimed.” *And you are offered the same*.

I don’t want reclamation.

“You don’t know what you want!” I cry, springing forward, my emotions getting the better of me, my tired hands spread before me in desperation. “If you really *wanted* to make Beast of Ten, if you really *wanted* the false power of oblivion and death, you would have done so! And done so on the first night you knew you had a Virtus Third beneath your roof! But you didn’t!” I pull my hands back, sinking my tired fingers into the roots of my hair. “You were Lectus Born. Your capacity for good was so great.” I close my eyes. “And you were seduced into nothing.”

His anger is mounting. *You call everything I have done* nothing*?*

“Yes.” I open my eyes, flinging hands out before me in a plea for him to understand—the glass ring catching the firelight. “You have made death and power your purpose, when it was unto a great life that you were called.”

His eyes are closed now, arms wrapped around himself, head bowed, a foreign emotion roiling towards me.

“You don’t know anything about who I was,” he rasps out loudly. And as if he is unable to help it, I glimpse an image from the recesses of his mind, one of a girl laughing and looking back over her shoulder towards a boy. Then the whispered thought of, *Ederra*. But the image clouds, as if set behind very old glass. And the memory is gripped and ripped from my mind, as he buries it beneath a fog.

I breathe out, my face creasing in such frustration as tears fight against the backs of my eyes. She had known who he was. Ederra had known. That girl he had loved, who must have loved him in return. And what a wretch he’s become!

“You have stolen the lives of so many,” I say as I stand, “when you were supposed to give life. Ederra knew—”

“Ederra knew nothing!” he shouts, pulling himself up from his chair and standing before me, broken and so bent that our eyes are nearly on the same plane. His mouth begins to quiver as he states in a low voice, “Ederra is lost now. Do not speak of her.”

As he takes a jolted series of steps towards the hearth and grips the mantle with a single hand, a shattered murmur breaks through to the edges of my thoughts. It is the voice of his mind, that golden voice, sorting through the same words over and over. Beneath his fury is a plea. *I couldn't have done it. I couldn't have done it, Ederra, I couldn't have. Ederra, Ederra, you could never see what I was…"*

His battered thoughts hit my heart so hard I have to wipe the edge of my hand across my cheek, catching the tears. His are the saddest intonations I have ever heard.

* * *

That night the Lights instruct me.

I dream there are seventy stones: half black, half white. As I pick them up, I feel as if each stone is part of a world—one long, complicated day of a world—and every action in that day reverberates out in concentric circles, for good or for ill.

He has seventy days. In seventy days a decision will be required of him.

The dream settles around me, and I wake up, my empty hands still feeling pressed upon by the smoothness of the stones. I roll over in my bed and pull the blankets close. Seventy days. The Bleak has seventy days to decide if he will accept the final chance offered by the Lights and struggle back to gain a Continuancy after this life, or if he will disappear into eternal darkness.

* * *

"You have seventy days to decide what you will do with yourself."

I'm standing in the Bleak's doorway. He's lying on the lounge before the fire, half turned, his breathing betraying the level of pain he'd spent the night battling.

"I know," he says. "Seventy stones. Seventy grey stones."

"Mine were half black, half white."

He doesn't acknowledge the difference in our dreams and probably doesn't care. But as I pull away his blanket and look at the remaining wounds across his chest, I begin to hear him thinking through his own

dream, his golden voice turning it over in his head, like he's not quite certain what to do with it.

A bag is dropped onto the surface of the table. Out spills seventy stones, but as I reach my fingers out, I am kept from touching them. They are the days to come. Nothing about them will be given to me now. I am told they represent the time I have left, before everything must change. One way or the other.

"Seventy days, then," I reply.

Seventy days, he thinks, *to know the course of our fates.*

Our eyes meet in the blunt honesty of two souls on opposing scales—waiting for the sway, the moment of knowing which way the beam will fall, before one side comes crashing down.

He blinks but looks at my face a moment longer before closing his eyes.

I begin my work, and several hours pass before we speak to one another.

As I am cleaning the wound on his shoulder, I gather some courage, however hesitant.

There's something I've not told you.

He doesn't answer, but I know he's heard my thought.

I'm having the windows of the Pyre repaired by a glassworker from the west countries.

I know.

I glance at him, and he moves, his shoulder rising as he catches me with a sharp look. Then I hear his voice in my head, *He is returning, will be back the day after tomorrow. He's young.*

No contrary order. No anger. No rage. I'm unsure why.

"I believe he's very skilled," I say aloud, "despite his youth."

"That's because he's a Binder, a Light Binder."

"A Binder?" I look at Sperro's face in surprise. "Is he really? Is that how —?" I leave off, thinking of how easy it had been for Astrick to see the memory we'd found.

I hate Light Binders.

At his words, a fresh layer of wariness settles on my shoulders. How could I possibly bring a Binder, a *Light Binder*, into the Pyre with a Death Bleak. It was one thing, when I thought Astrick was only a glassworker.

So you wish me to promise I won't take him as a blood gain, the Bleak thinks with a hint of malice.

"Yes," I answer, clipping at the word. Though what trust I can put into his promise, I don't know.

Sperro gives no answer, and I think several annoyed things at him. He smirks upon hearing them.

"I won't touch your tradesman while I am—" he takes in a breath, his scarred back rising then falling, "making my final decision." There is something else, another reason for him not fighting me regarding Astrick, but he snatches the thought away before I am even certain anything is there. "I couldn't be bothered," he then adds apathetically.

I look up towards the curtained windows and worry, pressing a poultice against his back before braving my fingers on his flesh to draw out more poison. After today has fled, he will only have sixty-nine more to decide.

I know, Sperro answers.

XIII

"Are you waiting for me?"

I stand up from where I'm perched on the front steps and brush my skirts. "I knew you would be arriving at the Pyre today."

"You could feel my anxiety to be about those windows, no doubt," Astrick says. He's looking taller today, confident, very…alive. His green eyes are focused, his golden skin implying winter is not reigning outside the snowbound limits of the Pyre and her forest. His clothing is nicer than before, when traveling the merchant line.

My thoughts turn towards the contrast of Sperro's wasted soul, lying before the fire in his chambers. I brush this away.

"So your sister granted her permission for the work?" I say as I walk down a few steps. He is coming up the stairs towards me, stopping when we are standing on equal footing.

"She fought *hard* against the idea," Astrick admits, glancing up towards the Pyre. "But in the end, I convinced her. With one stipulation."

"Which is?"

He lifts the sides of his mouth, but it's in thought rather than smile, and turns his head, eyes scanning the forest. "I can work only five days at a

time. Then I must return to the West Fell and show my face before I can again return to the Pyre. I'm sorry about that, but it can't be helped. Sisters, you know."

My heart catches on Hadspen and Thry, and I nod. "Yes, I do."

Astrick looks back at my face. "It's good to see you again, Ember."

"You as well." I smile and I mean it. "I can't explain how wonderful it is to have another person who is living at the Pyre."

"But the others live here as well, do they not?"

"No, I—not residing. Living. Blood pulsing. Years passing. Growing older. *Living*." A tired laugh escapes me. "Sorry for my lack of sense. I've been working rather hard with the Bleak these last several days, and I'm quite tired from it."

The atmosphere changes, the mention of the Bleak stripping Astrick of his warmth. His eyes tighten, and he presses his lips together, stepping back behind his invisible fortress.

"He's back, then?"

"Yes."

"Yes," Astrick repeats in a resigned tone.

"I've spoken with him about you," I say.

"About me?" He raises an eyebrow.

"Yes."

Astrick studies my face. "I'm beginning to think we only know a dozen words between the two of us."

"It sounds that way," I say.

"So you spoke with the Death Bleak about me?"

I nod. "He already knew you were coming."

"How?"

"How?" I ask, not wanting to answer his question.

"How."

Because we can hear each other's thoughts in our heads, I think. *And he feels the pulse of the forest, despite having no rhythm in his own blood.*

"He knows all the dealings of the Pyre," I answer.

"Do I dare hope for any assurance he won't take me for a blood gain?"

"He's—he's wrestling with a question of life or death right now. He promised he would not touch you while he is deciding. His focus is elsewhere."

"Whose life? Whose death?"

"His," I answer, "and mine."

Astrick's body tenses.

"Come on, then." I motion towards the stables as I walk down the stairs. Astrick follows. "Balint can show you your room. I thought it best for you to sleep above the stables rather than inside the Pyre. It feels…safer."

"Yes," he replies, but he's looking over his shoulder, giving me divided attention.

* * *

Astrick doesn't want to settle in; he wants to get to work. "It's what I came here to do," he tells me, "no matter how foolish. I couldn't live with myself if I didn't try."

He decides to begin with the windows in the Long Hall.

"The broken pieces are more simple—no, not *simple*," he mutters, correcting himself, "just easier than the others. I can lean the ladder against the stone pillars in between the damaged windows."

Celia, who is usually not to be found when she doesn't wish to do a job, offers no qualms about helping Astrick, making herself readily available to move a table into the empty Long Hall. Then Astrick sets up his work. Although he has brought his own tools, he is enamored with those we found in the underfloors of the Pyre.

"Their heft and balance are perfect," he states, holding something in his hand that I've no idea what it's for. Balint comes into the hall with firewood, and after a greeting, he and Astrick begin the careful process of bringing up the sheets of rare glass.

"It's brilliant, Ember," Astrick says when he has everything he needs scattered about himself. "There's a contraption of sorts that I can run with my feet, and it will help bevel the panes. Do you know how many nights I have lain awake, wondering how they beveled these panes in such a way?"

"Beveled glass has kept me up many a night," I reply, and he feigns disapproval at my levity, then smiles. He pulls several sheets of paper from his satchel—sketches of the damaged windows—and is talking aloud as he leans over the table, when I hear a voice in my head.

I really do hate Light Binders.

I spin around, and there in the doorway stands the Bleak. It's clear he has spent his morning working on the metals of his patch magicks. There is

another spell in his cloak. The stench of it makes me frown, and then I notice that Astrick has stopped talking.

*I hate your patch magick*s, I think. *We are even*.

I say, "Good morning."

The Bleak's eyes travel from me to Astrick, who is paused, still leaning against the table, a bit of charcoal raised above his paper, his eyes watching our silent exchange.

Don't look so worried. I'm not going to do anything to your window tinker.

He isn't mine.

Hmm.

Do you need something? I place my hand on my hip and raise an eyebrow.

Yes. You will come work on my shoulder. There's still poison.

I give a single nod. *If the residue is deep, I'll have to use your tenth line to stabilize my work, as I did before.*

His expression, if possible, turns darker. *I don't know if I entirely trust you in that.*

"I've no reason to lie," I counter. Astrick shifts at my side, and I realize I've spoken this aloud. I tuck my hair behind my ear and look towards him. "Do you have everything you need, Astrick?"

His green eyes move again towards the Bleak. "Yes."

"Good. I have to go, but Miranda will see you fed at midday, and I've half a mind to believe Celia will be eager to make herself available."

Astrick braves a token smile, but his hands are shaking, and I can feel his eyes watching me as I follow the Bleak.

* * *

As the Bleak removes his tunic, I notice there are symbols cut into his skin, crossing over the forming scars from his night at Slatt Clave.

"What have you done to yourself?" I ask, horrified at the runes on his chest.

"Protections," he answers in his stone-slate voice, so very different from the voice I hear in my head that it takes effort to reconcile the two.

"You can't *fight* dark with dark," I say through gritted teeth. "You do realize this will make my work harder?"

I don't have any compassion for you or your work. You're already a bloody nuisance to mine.

A rather encouraging thought.

He scowls. "Just rid me of this pain."

I consider his shoulder. There is no longer an open wound, but the tendrils of a black bruise are reaching up from deep in the muscles and tendons, the poison searching for anchor. This is going to require more than I have in me—with my fingers still so worn from the work of the last several days. Only this morning one had started bleeding again.

I'm not forcing you, he thinks.

"What?" I say as he pulls me from my thoughts.

"You sighed."

"My hands are not yet healed," I give as explanation.

"Are you complaining of your small pain?" he sneers.

"I'm not certain which is more maddening," I answer with equal force, "your darkness or your conversation."

The Bleak gives me a ghostly grin.

"Is it too much to ask the mighty Death Bleak to come sit beside the hearth so I can work directly with the fire?"

"No," he says thinly, sounding affronted. As if he's been so obliging I've no cause to question his willingness.

Upon hearing my thought, he tightens his face. *I do have a vested interest in you removing this cursed spite, and I do realize you need the flame to do so. Don't act so righteously surprised.*

I rumble an annoyed sound through my head. *I wish you would keep out of my thoughts as you've enough of your own to mind.*

Which are interrupted by yours on a consistent basis. You're not the only victim of this arrangement.

"You can't convince me you don't deserve it," I argue. "You chose this course. I didn't."

Ignoring this, he walks over to the fire and kneels down. *Can we work? I don't intend to spend my entire day arguing with you.*

Fine, I think as I kneel down beside him, reaching my fingers towards his shoulder.

Fine, he repeats, but he's mimicking a West Country accent, and I realize it sounds like Astrick's.

"Have you been listening to my conversations?"

You most certainly do *know more than a dozen words between the two of you. It seems you can't stop prattling, a great inconvenience to myself.*

"Sperro!" I punch him in the arm, and he grimaces, but a smile flashes across his face.

It isn't my fault you're so loud. And his thought sounds so reasonable. So human.

"Is it only going to get worse? This being in each other's head?" I ask as I press my fingers to his wound, visualizing light entering and extracting the poison. My skin sparks with pain as I do. "Ouch." I hiss, then continue, "We're truly going to drive each other mad in the end."

Probably. Though sometimes you do amuse, like when you thought you saw a bear in the forest.

He laughs.

I stare at him. "That was weeks ago."

Yes, it was.

"How could you have possibly—I thought at a distance you couldn't—you told me you couldn't hear all my thoughts? Have you fully been in my mind this entire time?"

Not to the extent that I am now. It increased after you meddled with my tenth line. Then it seemed I could hear you everywhere, all the prattling about your family and your brothers and how much you despised me. Curses, I could hear it all.

My fingers flash with pain, and I realize I've been ignoring them. Plunging my hands into the fire, I close my eyes at the relief and keep them there. I need a few minutes before I can work again, and it gives me time to think. Knowing the Bleak is hearing every private thought is its own embarrassment, to say nothing of my wonderings about him.

"It is a gross disregard of privacy," I say as I watch the white flames move around my fingers.

And your prying into the details of my past is not? He tenses beside me. *Your asking questions about my life, about Ederra, is not?*

I push my hands deeper into the fire. *I need to understand who you were if I'm to do my work.*

So much for privacy, he answers contemptuously. *I couldn't even remember most of my past until you took it upon yourself to resurrect the damn thing. What business of yours is it to meddle?*

What business of yours was it to steal the lives of so many for your own blood lusts? I look back into his face and continue aloud, "And don't complain to me about the resurrection of your memories, about the loss of your stupor. Your twisted magicks are like a drug, deceiving you into a deeper course by numbing any feeling you may have had. Well, if you're going to become a Beast of Ten, then I will full well fight to remind you what that really means. Now," I pull my hands from the fire, "can I work in some silence?"

He's been staring at me, nothing in his face moving, but now he turns his head and drops his chin. It's not in submission; it's in wait; it's in mounting menace.

And I hate to see this expression on his face, because I have truly become invested—and not just for myself, not just for the Pyre, but for him. I really do want to bring him back.

I thought we were going to work in silence?

"I can't help it if you can hear all my thoughts," I say, exacerbated.

You could at least practice. I don't dump all my extemporaneous thoughts on you.

Not often, no. But— I think of the other day, in the library.

He jerks his head tightly in my direction, but he does not speak.

* * *

"How did the glasswork go?"

My voice surprises Astrick, and he topples the goblet in his hand, catching it in the same motion and setting it in its place without spilling more than a few drops.

He clears his throat. "You startled me."

I sit down at the kitchen table beside him and, against all childhood lessons of propriety, lean forward, resting both my elbows on the table.

"I'll have your food ready in a moment, my lady," Miranda calls from across the kitchen.

"Thank you."

"My lady?" Astrick asks, tearing some bread between his fingers, but not placing it in his mouth.

"Something she's taken to calling me," I respond, brushing a strand of hair from my face. Astrick watches the movement, then turns his attention

to the stem of his glass. I can see that he wants to ask more questions, but he doesn't.

"The windows?" I prompt.

"Yes." His brow furrows in concentration. "I've spent most of the day getting acquainted."

"How so?"

"Ah." He looks at me and grins. "You didn't repeat what I said. We're making progress."

I wonder if I should tell Astrick that the Death Bleak he's so eager to avoid can hear every word we're saying to one another. But as it's a rather awkward thing to explain, I don't.

"I've been studying the way these windows were put together," Astrick says. "Clearly, I can't take the entire window out; they're too—"

"Massive?"

"Yes, but also unique." Astrick drops his hand, lightly slapping the table. "They are set in a way I've never seen before. And without anyone here to tell me how they came about, it's better if I repair them in their places. It won't be as elegant, but I think my skill is enough for a beautiful aesthetic. I was going to cut the first piece of glass, but I'll have to do it tomorrow, during the day. Would that I could work all night."

"Why can't you?" I ask.

Miranda sets a bowl of stew and some bread in front of me before leaving us again to our privacy. When she's gone over to the other side of the kitchen, I look at him expectantly, and he continues.

"Because I need the light of day." Astrick moves, straddling the bench so he's facing me. "The main reason the windows of the Pyre are so astounding is not their size or their design and color but rather that each cut in the glass catches the morning and afternoon and evening light in different ways, throwing it about the room to create a shifting picture of sunlight. I can't simply cut a piece of glass and set it; I have to understand how to make the cut for that particular piece, to not interfere with these patterns of light. It's—they're unbelievable." Throughout the course of his explanation, Astrick has closed his eyes, losing himself in the beauty.

"I hadn't realized," I admit, spinning the spoon around in my stew. "I've certainly been astounded at the majesty of the windows, but when I first came here, I was rather occupied with—"

“Not being killed,” Astrick inserts as he opens his eyes and looks directly at me, the humor in his tone a poor covering for the gravity in his face.

I lift my hand in silent concession. “So I can’t say I really took notice of how the light played on the walls. Granted, sunny days are rare at the Pyre, and I’ve spent most of them wandering outside in the forest.”

I think more about the windows and what the Bleak—what Sperro—had said of Astrick: that he’s a Light Binder. It feels invasive and personal, so I don’t ask him about it directly, rather I hint around the idea.

“If the windows are such complex pieces, do you worry they are beyond your abilities for repair?”

“You best eat more than you talk,” Miranda calls from across the room.

I put a piece of bread in my mouth.

Astrick looks away as he answers my question. “My abilities, however limited, are why I feel myself well matched for the job.”

I make a sound that’s meant to be an *Oh*? But with my mouth so full it sounds muffled and comes out as a strange, disbelieving sound.

The dimple on the side of Astrick’s face makes an appearance. “I’ll show you what I mean as soon as you’ve finished your meal,” he answers, and then his eyes sweep over my face. “It looks like you’ve had a trying day.”

I think of the Bleak and make a heartfelt noise of agreement.

Miranda sets another bowl of stew before Astrick. “You need more food. Look at you, all skin and bones. Waste away at my table you will not. Right yourself and eat up now, child.” Astrick does, swinging his leg back over the bench so he’s facing the table.

I fight back a grin. Astrick is built like Hadspen: lean but clearly strong. Chances of him wasting away soon are not likely. It’s also amusing to hear him called child; he must be two or three years my senior.

But Astrick has no compunction about the extra food, so we eat in a silence broken only by the sounds of Miranda working across the kitchen. She seems pleased as a spring sparrow to be feeding two people, and certainly her mind is working through everything she’s going to be making for our consumption.

“Shall we go?” I ask as I finish.

Nodding, Astrick pushes the bench back and stands. I almost tumble off backwards.

“Sorry!” He catches my elbow as I’m righting myself.

I can’t help but laugh. “I’m accustomed to the trick. My brothers would often do that on purpose.”

“Well, I didn’t.” And then, “You have brothers?”

“Hadspen and Thry. About as tall as you. We were born triplet.”

A thought marks Astrick’s face—like a glance of sunshine behind a window—but he doesn’t share it with me. Rather, he tucks it away.

“I want to show you something,” Astrick says, “in the Long Hall, where I’ve set up shop.”

When we arrive, it’s rather dark save for a blaze set in the fireplace along the far wall.

“Celia brought me some candles,” he tells me as he searches around the table to find them.

As I’m waiting, I look up at the windows. Very little can be seen. Heavy clouds block out moonlight and starlight. I have learned how rare it is to see the moon at the Pyre. Even on the days when sunlight breaks through, the clouds have often returned come evening, making every night bend below their shroud.

Hearing Astrick say something to himself, I look over my shoulder. He’s lit a candle in the fire and is putting that small flame to the wick of another candle.

“Do you need help?” I ask, walking towards him.

“If you care to, certainly,” Astrick answers. “Can you hold these?”

I take the lit candles from his hands, waiting until he lights two more. As Astrick lights the first candle, then the second, their flames illuminate the flecks of brown laced through the green of his eyes. They look like the eyes of a Binder, mortal yet connected to all living things around them. Binders are an interesting lot, and whenever I’ve been in their presence, I have always thought I could feel them moving forward through time in a different way than the rest of us. As if everything was left with not only more strength, but more will to continue. Perhaps this is why he feels so very alive—my very blood responds to this momentum.

“I’ve brought some lanterns that will help us see better,” he’s saying, unaware of my scrutiny, walking back to the table to where his lanterns are waiting. I follow. They are made of glass, the lanterns, and he opens one and sets a candle in the exact center, over a small pike meant to keep it in place. Pulling his hand out, he closes the glass door. “There.”

My lips part as I stare, enchanted. The lantern is a twist of glass and mirror. It is of such intricate design that, as the flame of the candle flickers, it creates a continuous motion of light, pulsing in all directions. It's like the inside of a star.

He sets his second candle in the next lantern, then reaches for the candles I hold. By the time all four lanterns are lit, I have sat down on the floor, my skirts pulled around me, my eyes traveling the flickering patterns on the walls.

"What do you think?" he asks casually.

I open my mouth but can scarcely speak. "I can't— Astrick, it's like a living constellation. My father would love to see such a thing. You *made* these?"

Astrick settles on the floor beside me and looks up. "Adele was furious because I kept breaking her mirrors on purpose."

"Adele is your sister?"

Astrick nods. "She's not vain, but—" He laughs, and it's a nice sound. "Needless to say, I now break only my own mirrors. The bits of high-quality glass I bring back from the East are perfect for these lanterns. They cut well, bevel well. So you see, I've some experience with the concept the windows of the Pyre were designed with."

"Have you made any lanterns with colored glass?"

"Only a few. Colored glass is expensive."

I tilt my head up and watch the light flickering against the high ceiling. "I'd love to see them."

"I'll bring one next time I come."

It feels like stargazing, watching the light flickering around the room. Several minutes later, Astrick breaks the spell with a question.

"How goes the candle making?"

"Not well," I confess. "Before I could attempt to figure it out myself, Spe—*the Bleak* came back in a state that has, well, required much attention. I haven't had any energy or thought to put to candle making." I frown and blow the breath out of my lungs slowly. "But we need to keep candles lit in the Pyre windows, and the supply you brought will only last so long."

"What if I were to show you how?"

"You?" I turn my head to look at him.

"I know how to make candles."

“But I don’t want to take you away from your work on the glass. The windows are important. The Pyre needs to be strong in both ways.”

When Astrick answers me, he keeps his eyes on the lights flickering about the ceiling. “We could work after the sun goes down. As I told you, I can’t do much work at night. If all you’re making is a simple candle, not caring too much how it looks, it will be quick work to get you on your way.”

I stare at the play of light on Astrick’s face. “All right, I accept. But it will have to be tomorrow.”

“Of course.” Astrick levels his gaze on me. “You’re exhausted. Anybody could see that.”

“Hmm.” I nod and look away, feeling a sting as I blink.

* * *

An hour later, in my bell tower rooms, I’m startled from my course of falling asleep by hearing the Bleak’s golden voice.

Some do not want stars in their heads. And his tone is sour.

I let a grumpy smile escape to my face as I recall a flash of the night sky, spangled and bright, and send it back towards where he sits in the library.

I hear him hiss, and my own weak laugh comes out in response. Life’s blood, I am tired.

But my mind has been set to thinking. And I know it will be a long time before I am able to sleep.

* * *

The next day, Sperro and I are kneeling before the hearth in his room. He’s bare-chested, and my fingers are pressed to his skin, untangling the remaining poison in his shoulder. I bite my bottom lip as I focus.

It is uncomfortable for both of us, and as I flare more light—trying to loosen this stubborn twist of darkness—he shudders and jerks away from me.

You must hold still!

Do not do that again, he warns.

There is no other way to remove the poison, I respond grimly.

It's maddening.

As I wash my hands inside the flames within the hearth and look over my shoulder at him, I can't help but think what a horrible creature he is.

He makes a sound like an amused snort.

Countering it with a sharp sigh, I place my fingers back on his shoulder, bracing my stomach muscles against the tingling pain. "It's not pleasant, trying to help you," I say honestly through my tightened jaw. The muscles in my hands cramp, but—grimacing—I can feel the light under my fingers catching hold, and uprooting the darkness.

He fights my work. *I don't* need *your pity*, he half growls. *I don't need you to try anything.*

"I do feel pity for you," I counter, "and think I almost feel compassion. But then we end up in the same room—"

He laughs.

"—and I remember how infuriating you actually are."

It's devilish, the grin he gives me.

I ignore it. *I've had an idea, a way to make this process more bearable—for both of us.*

I already know. His mouth snaps into a line beneath his glare. *You spent half the night thinking about it. A great inconvenience to myself.*

Accept my pardon that the one of us who doesn't actually need sleep was disrupted.

His eyes narrow into slits. *Just because I don't sleep doesn't mean I don't wish for rest. I was trying to read. Do you know how impossible that is when I have an overly tired voice thinking about my damned welfare the entire night? As if the stars weren't enough.*

I open my mouth to reply, but my fingers snag—I can't lift my fingertips from his skin. There is a counterpull to my work. I send the energy of my thoughts towards the fire in the hearth and flare the flames to clear what I can of the Bleak's influence from the room.

Ouch!

The hold loosens, then releases. I pull my fingers away as he mutters a vile curse.

"Did that hurt?" I ask, half distracted by the blistered flesh on my fingers.

You know perfectly well it does when you stretch the flames like that. A pause, then he laughs again.

"What do you find so amusing?" I ask, as I place my hands again into the fire.

You know what I am, and you are still trying to help me. Do you not think it is rather…pathetic?

I look over my shoulder at him. *You think* I'm *the pathetic half of this pairing?*

His eyes are still trained on mine, and he doesn't disagree, though I can hear a rumble of thoughts he thinks are humorous. But really they're hateful.

"So are you willing to try my idea?"

If it gets me away from the spyglass of your misplaced pity.

"They all say you were so wonderful when you were fully human," I reply as I return my attentions to his fading infection. "You should try to prove it."

Hmm.

Then into my mind rushes a vision of the river trail. Clearly he has no wish to discuss who he once was, as he's willing to try my idea: imagining ourselves somewhere else to distract from the pain. And upon this imagery I focus, walking down the trail, noticing the trees and snow and birds—

No birds!

"Why no birds?" I say aloud. "I love the birds."

Annoying, twittering—I'm not doing this if you bring the birds.

"Do you want to go back to our own minds, then, and spend the next hour tripping over each other's thoughts?" I challenge. "If we're going to both think about the forest, you can't take away the birds."

No birds.

"Fine." I set my mouth. "Then no cloak."

"My cloak?" He scrapes the words out aloud.

"Yes, you have to leave your cloak, with all its bits of twisted metal and patch magicks, back at the Pyre."

"No."

"Then the birds stay." When his eyes meet mine, he sees how serious I am.

"Keep your birds," he jeers. "I'm not leaving my cloak."

I smile. And after enjoying my moment of victory—which makes him curse under his breath—I return back to the forest path. He's there, wearing his cloak. He adjusts it on purpose while looking at me, the metal catching the light of the sun.

My fingers are cold from both the lingering poison in his wound and the cold of the forest walk we're taking in our minds. With a sense of mischief, I cause a flock of red cardinals to rise up before us. He flinches, and I laugh as a bird lands on his shoulder.

Before I can think, he takes the bird in his hand and crushes it. I can hear its bones snap.

I open my eyes. We're in his chambers. My hands are pulled away from his wounded shoulder, and his hand is brought up into a fist.

"Don't think you've found any goodness in me," he hisses. "You may be a Virtus Third, but I am a Death Bleak." He stands then, and when he opens his hand, a single red feather twists and feints through the air, landing beside me. "You do not understand the powers against you."

XIV

The incident with the feather has thrown me. A crash of discouragement—or, possibly, *reality*—hits my shoulders like shards of falling glass.

I send a message to Astrick through Celia that we will work on the candles tomorrow night. I know Miranda will pamper him by any means, so I don't feel bad about not having seen him all day. Retreating to the strength of the bell tower rooms, I curl up before the fire, dreaming of those I love best in the world.

At home, Thry had always been the one to light the postharvest fires in the fields, burning away the husks and dried vines remaining after all was gathered in. It was the place of a Third to lead the burnings—to honor the harvests so abundantly given by Heaven—and a Third born to the lord of the nation was considered extra luck. Our people have always been contented by this. But I now know Thry isn't the Third, he's something else—like an Intuit, perhaps. The thought of Thry being an Intuit makes sense:

someone who knows intangible things, who senses when things are right or not right.

As I lie here, thinking away the hours I should be claiming for sleep—prying images of the Bleak from my head—I remember that at those harvest bonfires Thry had always come to me first and asked me to strike the light. Then he would hold the light to his corn-husk torch and set the first waiting pile ablaze. It never before occurred to me that, in reality, I have always been the one to light the fire. Even though the people had all believed it to be Thry. Even though I had always thought of it as Thry.

This realization brings one answer and one question: Thry clearly had known I am the true Third. That is the answer. And the question? Why didn't he or Mother or Father tell me? My parents never kept things from us simply because we were children. They had often counseled together regarding the affairs of our small nation, and when my mother died, my father had still gathered us, his three children, to discuss and learn. I was never kept outside his other concerns. So why was he unwilling to tell me about myself?

* * *

The Bleak and I finish working through the infection of his shoulder—without speaking—and, finally, he is free of the poisonous effects of the battle at Slatt Clave. I gather the basin and some used rags, stretching the tired muscles of my hands. And just before I leave the Bleak's chambers I glance back at him.

In his hand is a knife. Without looking at me, he begins carving symbols into the skin of his arms, muttering a string of words as his skin splits apart—undoing my work with his own abominable magicks. I swallow the bile rising in my throat, and when he lifts his glazed eyes to mine in challenge, I leave the room.

All afternoon I work on blocking out the sounds of his satisfaction, spending the rest of the day alone in the woods, breathing deeply, trudging through the snow, my nose running as I push my frustrations away. But even after hours of trying, I am not able to shake the despondency I felt while watching him mutilate what had just been healed.

I worry that he might be right: I know nothing of what I am up against.

When I come to fetch Astrick for the evening meal, I find him surrounded by tools, cut glass, and dust—so intent on the work he is about that he doesn't notice me standing there.

"You seem pleased with the work before you."

He looks up, a measurement stick between his teeth. His eyebrows lift in answer as he jots down a final equation, then he takes the stick from his mouth and drops the charcoal in his hand to the table.

"This is—" He motions at the mess on the table with clear emotion. "Do you realize how fine these tools are? More advanced than anything I've seen in the eastern markets. It's—I feel like the Lights have taken me into the heavens." He then shakes his head to break the reverie. "And you? I was worried after I didn't see you yesterday. Has today served you better?"

I'm sure I look a right mess.

"My day was trying," I answer.

"How was the forest?" he asks me as he drops his gaze and bends over his measurements, making a new annotation.

"Did someone tell you I was in the forest?"

"Your cheeks are still bright from the cold," he replies evenly, although he's still jotting notes and not really looking at me. "Not a hard thing to accomplish, I suppose, as you are rather pale."

"I thought of going to the kitchens for evening meal," I say instead of acknowledging his observation, looking towards the last light of day through the broken windows. "Are you finished working?"

"No," he says, following my eyes to the coming night, then glancing back at his paper. "But I'll come with you all the same." Then, almost in the same breath, his words overlapping one another, he asks, "Did you notice the clouds are dissipating?"

I look again at the window. "I hadn't."

"I've been traveling the merchants' road for close to seven years now," Astrick says as he begins to set the table in order, "and I've never seen a nightfall when there hasn't been clouds to block out the stars. The moon finding her way through, but rarely. And yet tonight the night sky is scarcely veiled." He punctuates his words by lifting an eyebrow.

"What do you make of it?"

"I think we might see the stars."

He knows more than he's telling me, this Light Binder who has yet to acknowledge his work.

“Is this tied to your being here?”

Astrick’s expression dismisses the thought before his words do. “I don’t see how.”

“Perhaps it is due to the lanterns you now light at the Pyre.”

With a shrug, he steps away from the table. “Enough work, I suppose. If you don’t drag me away now, I’ll never stop.”

Leaving the Long Hall, we find our way to the back stairs. “Have you set any glass yet?” I ask.

“No. I’ve been wrestling with some complicated equations—that may or may not have been used hundreds of years ago for cutting the glass just so. I’ve also been experimenting with the tools at hand. Only a little bit, though. I don’t want to waste anything…” And he grows quiet, as if he’s left half his thoughts in the Long Hall so as to keep working.

“Where did you study maths?” I ask, picking up the loose thread of our conversation. “I didn’t realize you’d ever left the West Fell.”

It seems to take a moment for the words in Astrick’s head to move over and make room for mine. When they do, his expression shifts into one of quiet disapproval. “You can learn such things outside the universities, Ember.” But his disapproval is not directed at me, but rather at his own lack of opportunity. “There are many books of learning, especially in the East. I’ve studied at home.”

Not wanting to confide in him that this would have been an impossible task for me, I answer, “I’m impressed. Many would not have tried learning such things outside the universities.”

The line of his jaw tightens as he looks at me sideways, as if he’s trying to puzzle me out. “It isn’t so uncommon. Only those of rank or wealth attend the universities. The rest of us are left to scratch out our own learning.”

I nod but don’t say anything more than, “Is there anything you haven’t learned, then?”

Astrick gives a rueful laugh. “Too many things.”

* * *

Miranda has prepared fish.

“You best believe it,” Miranda boasts, smiling as she puts two plates piled with food in front of us. “I asked Sylvain to cut some holes in the ice

of the forest pond and fetch me some."

"Are they safe to eat?" I ask in uncertainty, eyeing the food before me and wondering exactly *how long* these fish have been swimming in the cold waters of the forest. I wish I didn't distrust the food; the aroma is intoxicating.

"Of course they're safe, my lady. Sit, the both of you. What gives you the idea they wouldn't be?"

"The fact that the entire forest is in a battle," I answer, mostly to myself, "to say nothing of asking how old these fish actually are."

Miranda merely sniffs. "Safe is as safe does. My son had a particular taste for fish, and so I thought Astrick would enjoy some brook trout."

"That I would." And when he smiles, Miranda almost falls into it.

"You made easy favorite," I whisper when she's across the room. "When I came, it was 'I can't get too attached to you so I won't be sorry when you're dead.'"

Astrick, from his expression, does not find my comment very humorous, but all he asks is, "When was it you came to the Pyre, again?"

"What season is it? Outside the forest, I mean?"

"Late spring, just coming into summer."

The ridge beyond Hill House will be full of thick grass now. I take another bite of food and fight the growing reality that I will never know my old life again, as if I will never again see my reflection in a mirror and recognize the girl I see there.

"I've been here since mid-winter set into the northern nations."

Before Astrick can ask anything else, Miranda returns with sweet rolls and fresh milk. "I expect you to finish it all. Look at both of you; I've my work cut out for me for certain."

We eat the rest in silence—Astrick in his world, and me in mine—the reality of the Pyre beneath our feet.

After we carry our dishes to the washing bin—and are subsequently run out of the kitchens by Miranda, who insists she has to have some work to keep herself occupied all her livelong life—Astrick asks, "Shall we begin with the candles?"

The candles. I blow a tired breath from my mouth as we walk through the wide corridor outside the Mirror Gallery that ends with a large window overlooking the western forest—caught in their endless freeze. I lean

against the south wall. Astrick settles himself against the north wall, looking outside.

"I'm not very prepared—with the candles, I mean. I meant to have a place readied, to have the wax brought up. But my mind was rather occupied the day long."

"You sound discouraged," Astrick says.

I'm too tired to do more than nod.

"Can I ask you a question?"

I look towards Astrick's face. "I might not answer."

His expression confirms that I don't answer many of his questions, not completely.

I feel a flush on my cheeks, but my expression remains unapologetic.

"You said I would be safe in the Pyre while the—" he hesitates to say the words, "while the Death Bleak is making his decision. How long will it take him to make it?"

"He was given seventy days," I count the time already fallen, "but he now has sixty-six."

Astrick lets out a whistle, the kind that tapers off into silence, the kind that lets you know the thoughts are too big for words. The expression on his face shifts strangely, like it is pinned into place from the inside, and he weighs his words before asking, "What are you even doing here?"

I shake my head.

Astrick lets his question pass, unanswered. "That's clearly not enough time, sixty-six days."

"No," I shake my head. "There isn't much time. I can't guarantee you will finish even one window of the Pyre."

"I'll manage to travel home and back only a handful of times. Would that I could remain here, but I can't. I promised Adele—" He shakes his head, mouth tight, the muscles of his upper jaw working in thought. "And his aim is to take you for a blood gain, then."

No question in his tone. Only reality.

"As things stand now?" I slump against the wall. "Yes."

This is not the conversation I wish to be having. For tonight it feels certain I will end as the final blood gain. I slide down the wall and pull my knees up beneath my chin, thinking of Sperro, thinking of the red feather that had inexplicably floated to the floor beside me.

What a burden is sorrow. Sorrow for him. Sorrow for myself. Sorrow for my family. Sorrow that what I was asked to do is not likely to be accomplished. Sixty-six days isn't enough. The Lights are asking the impossible.

When I look up, Astrick is tracing the glass window with his gaze, serious shadows on his serious face.

"Astrick, how long have you been a Light Binder?"

He goes very still, his face neither shifting in surprise nor in revelation.

"You're a Light Binder," I persist, hugging my arms closer about my knees.

As deliberate in movement as in thought, Astrick settles himself on the floor, leaning his head back against the stone wall, looking at me in a way that makes me feel very outside his world. "What makes you think I'm a Light Binder?"

"The Bleak said you were."

"How would he know?"

"The same way one knows what color they're wearing," I say. Knowing it isn't a very clear answer, I try again. "The same way he knows who is passing through his forest."

Celia walks by just then, carrying a bundle of candles under one arm, with one burning in her other hand. She startles when she sees us, then seems put out. "Hello," she says flatly.

"Hello, Celia," Astrick answers, and I let this count for the both of us.

"Miranda wants me to ask if there is anything you want me to do, my lady?" But her eyes are on Astrick, not me.

"No," I reply. "Though we could use a candle for this window here."

Looking at us like we're mad to be sitting on the floor of a dark hallway, Celia selects a candle from the bundle in her arm and hands it to Astrick. She lights the wick with her own candle's flame and straightens her back, eyes wandering from him to me.

"We're running low on candles. I can't keep up your wishes much longer," she says impatiently.

"We'll soon have more."

"I best be getting along, as I have work to do," replies Celia, most certainly not making any movement towards getting along. "Not all of us can live at the beck and call of the master, doing whatever we please in the meantime, ordering others about from the exalted bell tower."

It isn't a fair thing for her to say, and I don't answer, though the skin of my cheeks burns. Anger certainly won't help my cause, but if Celia doesn't get on her way, I might just show her what it means to be raised with two brothers.

What does it mean?

I startle. "What?" I snap.

Celia thinks I am speaking to her. She pulls her pink lips together, and then, with a tilt of her chin, disappears behind the corner.

What does it mean, asks the Bleak's voice in my head, *to be raised with two brothers?*

I press my face into my hands and make a growling noise. *It means I know how to wrestle someone to the ground and deliver a solid punch. Go away!*

I hear the Bleak's laugh—that golden laugh—and close my eyes harder. Maybe I am going mad.

"Ember?"

He has to say it several times before I realize it's Astrick speaking.

"Ember?"

"Yes?" I reply, my fingers still stretched across my face.

"Let's go make some candles."

I spread my fingers enough to see through to his expression. "But I haven't prepared anything."

"I'll help you. Come on." He stands up and offers me his hand.

It is the kindness underneath his words that causes me to take it, that makes me willing to trust his strength as he pulls me to my feet. And with my fingers wrapped around his wrist, I realize this is the first time I've felt the pulse of anyone else's blood in almost five months. It's—it's wonderful.

When Astrick lets go, I stumble like I'm falling headlong into the pit this day has become. His other hand comes up, catching me, and his brow furrows as I steady myself. Asking a silent question—if I can stand on my own—Astrick waits until I nod, and then he steps away.

"Thank you" is all I say.

Familiar enough with the underfloors, Astrick leads the way holding one of his lanterns, making the underfloors not only visible but beautiful. "When you were indisposed last night," he's telling me, "I came to see what supplies the Pyre has for making candles." He points at two large cast iron

kettles. “They melted the wax in here—you can still see some dried bits at the bottom.”

The flicker of the lantern is distracting to my tired eyes, but I try to focus on the mess of supplies before me. “So I need a fireplace that has some sort of, what would you call it, a spit?”

“What we need is a crane, an arm that will swing out over the flames. We melt the wax, then pull the kettle out, to dip a series of candles before putting it back over the fire.”

“I’ll ask Miranda which fireplaces have cranes.”

“Mine does.”

I look back towards Astrick, confused. “Above the stable?”

“I mean,” he clarifies, “there’s one in the Long Hall, where I’m working. The hearth is quite large, and on each side is a crane you can swing over the fire. There is also plenty of room for this.” Astrick points at a long wooden beam with metal hooks running along the bottom. “See, it’s an entire structure built to be set up and taken down with relative ease. I would not have thought the wood might still be good, but a preserver has been rubbed into it. I’d guess you could hang four hundred candles to dry at once.”

“Four hundred?”

“Four hundred,” Astrick confirms.

“Well.” And I step into the first bright spot of my day.

He smiles.

* * *

The first beam of the structure is so heavy it takes both of us to carry it, with me needing to rest often. And I think, as I am struggling to hold the beam up while counting steps with Astrick, that if I’m lucky, I’ll simply die of exhaustion before the sixty-six days are up. Wouldn’t *that* irk Sperro? Both of us would lose. I wouldn’t win, but neither could he. And I wouldn’t have to carry the second beam up a spiral staircase almost too curved to bring it through.

“Do you need me to find Balint?” Astrick asks when I again call for a halt, set my end down, and lean against the wall. “Or Sylvain?”

“No.” I wave a hand, and after a minute’s rest, I bend down and heft my end, sinking the edge of the beam into my thigh for leverage.

It takes time, but we finally get all the pieces into the hall. It is a simply built contraption, and we set it up along the back wall, to the right of the fireplace. Astrick makes certain it's stable.

"My sister would love to see this."

"Maybe someday she can."

"She won't even step foot into the Forest of Naeethe. A great comfort to me," he adds under his breath. "Now." Taking off his jacket and rolling up his shirt sleeves, Astrick looks directly at me. "Time to bring up the kettles and some wax. Why don't you wait here?"

"I'll help—"

"Balint can help me." Astrick shrugs lightly. "While I do that, why don't you sit here and close your eyes."

"No. I'll come. It will be faster than searching for Balint."

"Please, Ember." Astrick gives me an even look. "Let me do this for you."

I'm so tired. And he's spoken exactly how Thry would have. I nod, but it's not until he's left the Long Hall that I wipe my eyes with the back of my finger. My hands are still tremendously sore from working on the Bleak's cursed wounds, but I'm not going to say anything to Astrick.

I need to make these candles. The Pyre needs them.

* * *

When I open my eyes, it is to the faint smell of faraway honey, round and story-bound and—I sit up, and Astrick's jacket slides from my shoulders.

"You're awake," he says as he pulls two tapered candles sharing a single wick from one of the large kettles, the honey gleam of the wax catching the light of his lanterns set nearby. He steps back and hangs the candles from two of the hooks on the large wooden structure. There are at least three dozen sets in process, hanging in a golden line, turning from a bright shine to a mellow luster as they cool.

"Why didn't you tell me you were beginning?" I ask from embarrassment and a flash of resistance.

"Had our days been reversed, would you not have let me sleep?" Astrick answers from across the room as he crouches down, balancing on the balls of his feet as he looks over several long pieces of wick and a pile of stones. He ties a few of them together before glancing up again. When he finds I

am staring at him—my eyes concentrated, a frown on my face—he returns the look with a set expression of his own. “It was only an hour or two.”

“I’m supposed to be learning how it’s done. You needn’t have presumed __”

His eyebrows draw together. “I don’t think I did presume, for I claim no responsibility or stewardship over you, let alone over whatever it is you’re doing here. But anyone with a remembrance that a body inside time needs rest could clearly see it would have been cruel to have kept you running on your feet. You look like a shade: pale, wan. Whatever you’ve been doing for the Death Bleak has been wearing you thin.” His shrug is matter-of-fact. “I am going to teach you. Right now. But as a Binder, seeing division—shoring up the breaking point—is part of what I do. When it’s so clear your body needs rest, it would have been heartless of me to wake you for the price of a few candles.”

I look at Astrick, across the room from me—he in his sphere and me in mine—and am aware of something being…steadied.

“I’m not sure if I can talk about it yet, why I’m here.”

“I don’t need you to. It’s your task.” Astrick stands up, a long string of the wick in hand, one stone tied to each end. “Let me show you what we’re doing. You see, I’ve tied these stones to the ends of the wick, which is an amazing piece of work. It’s coated in something that’s preserved it—much as the drying apparatus has been preserved—but it burns beautifully.” The smile across his face comes in a flash of satisfaction. “I’ve tried it.”

“Why do you tie a stone to each end?”

“Because this wick will serve for two candles.” He holds the center of the string taut, then lets the sides drop on the outside of his hands, the stones slightly swinging. “The reason for the stones is to keep the wick straight. Will you swing the crane out from over the fire?”

He motions towards a metal pull that hooks into the crane to accomplish the task. It’s harder than I expected, the honey smell of the wax hitting my nostrils along with the heat as I maneuver the crane towards us. Astrick steps up beside me, dropping both ends of the wick into the wax, then pulls them out. Nodding a wordless thanks, he walks around me to hang the wick of the forming candles on two hooks.

“After dipping the candles three or four times, we can cut off the stones, for the candles will still hang straight.” Astrick motions towards the work he’s done. “A tapered candle usually requires seven to nine passes

through the hot wax—more if you want it thicker—but you must let it cool completely between dips, or the wax will fall right off the wick. That" —he looks towards me—"is how you make a basic candle. Nothing special, mind you, but they will serve."

I step towards the rack and lift a finger, just touching the long elegance of a forming candle, yielding my anxieties to the honey-golden balm. "I don't need them to be special, just to burn."

We work until there are rows and rows of completed candles, until my arms will not lift the wicks to hang them on the hooks. Miranda comes in twice, watching Astrick, not speaking. Balint comes with her the second time, and they whisper back and forth, communicating with small movements and quiet words. If Astrick notices, he pays it no mind.

When I finally return to the bell tower and curl up to sleep, I can still smell the scent of old honey on my fingertips.

* * *

Sperro is on the ninth floor balcony—the same one I had seen in the memory of him as a child. I know he is there because he's pulling on my mind, wordlessly demanding I find him so he does not have to go through the bother of finding me.

Getting dressed quickly, I grab my cloak and leave the bell tower. Taking one of the spiraled staircases up to the ninth floor, I walk reluctantly towards the balcony, fussing with a bit of wax on my fingers from the night before.

When I step out into the cold, I'm arrested by the sight—Sperro, walking amidst charred black towers as tall as his waist. They are misshapen, twisted by a destructive flame. A tenuous smoke wafts through the air. I realize they are pine logs, the kind Sylvain cuts for the larger hearths. There must be dozens of them—

There are seventy, he answers. *But I cannot claim* a thing *from this wood. It will not yield its life to me. I blame your presence at the Pyre for this.* He doesn't look in my direction, just walks through the maze of black towers, the snow frozen to the stone crunching beneath his boots. Five of the charred pine logs have been kicked over.

"Sixty-five standing for the sixty-five days remaining?"

He waves his hand, still not looking at my face. “The time doesn’t matter. Not yet. It’s merely the frame for the conflict.”

“Which conflict?” I ask aloud, then, *The one with yourself?*

Now he looks at me like I’m an imbecile. “Meridaithe. Callidus. Some of the others. It will take time for them to gather—to recover—but when they do, to the Pyre they will come. Even now their sentinels stalk the borders of the forest, hemming me in. They don’t dare enter far. I would take them, siphon what I wanted before leaving them as husks—though last night they filtered farther into the forest than ever before. For Meridaithe knows.”

“Knows what?”

He swallows. “How parched I am.”

I lift my hand to my chest. From instinct. From the worry this will rush my fate. From the responsibility of asking Astrick to work on the windows, his blood so living and strong. If the Bleak needs a blood gain…

He cuts me a sharp look, and I close my thoughts.

You truly don’t know anything, do you? he thinks. *You? The Lights sent you?* He throws his hands into the air, incredulous. *Are you so unschooled?*

“We both know I don’t—”

“I don’t keep him alive for charity,” he interrupts. “I don’t *want* his foul blood. He’s a Light Binder: his blood follows the pattern of his course. If I were to take it into me, it would attempt to bind together what I am trying to shatter.” He lifts a hand as if I might interject a question and he’s warning me to be still. “It would neither alter my course nor my desire, but it would be a damn nuisance. Everything would be,” he swallows again, his mouth seeming dry, “harder. Not that outright killing him would pose a problem, though the scent of his blood would prove a sore temptation. Now if I were remaining a Death Bleak, I would most certainly consider the take.”

I grasp at any thought, to change the conversation. “If they’re infiltrating the forest, these others you speak of, are you not—will you not go and stop them?”

He growls and then thinks, *I can’t.*

“But you said—”

“I can no longer leave you for that long!” The words come rushing out, like water after the breaking of a dam. And he’s angry over it. Both angry that he had to tell me and that it’s true. “Have you not questioned why I

remain? Why I haven't hunted any of the nations since Slatt Clave? And unless I carried you with me—"

I shudder. A movement he not only sees but relishes.

"Shall I?" he sneers. "Carry you to the West Fell? To one of the eastern cities? You could watch while I—"

I hold up a hand to push away the image he throws into my mind and take several steps backwards. He watches, enjoying my horror. When I have gathered myself, protected my mind, I glare in his direction.

He shrugs. "I couldn't take you anyway. The Pyre has laid a claim on you—and I haven't yet been able to break it."

“What do you mean it’s laid a claim?”

Go away is the only answer he gives.

And with hands clasped behind him, Sperro considers the charred towers surrounding him once more.

I step towards the door. But before I can leave, he lifts a hand in frustration and smites the nearest smoldering pine log. In that moment, all of them collapse into ashes—nothing more than grey ashes scattered atop the rigid snow.

XV

Even Astrick’s fumble is graceful, snatching the match before it can fall between his fingers, then lighting the fire. He places a pot of water above the fledgling flame and then sits down on a stool nearby, saying, “It will be a few minutes before the tea is ready.”

“Why not just send to the kitchens for Miranda to make some?” I ask.

Astrick moves his green eyes to mine. “I enjoy doing some things for myself.”

I nod.

He’s my responsibility, this Light Binder, and after I’d left Sperro on the balcony, I’d not been able to find Astrick in the Pyre. With worry—trailed by the edge of panic—I’d searched the hallways and galleries, finally finding him in his room above the stables, preparing himself a cup of tea.

I’ve not entered this room since he’d taken up a semipermanent residency, and he watches me as my eyes explore it, noticing the bits of drapery he’s hung and the architectural sketches of windows that he’s attached to the walls.

“Did you take that drapery from the underfloors?” I ask, motioning towards a green-and-gold fabric cascading down one side of the window.

A smile—that should be self-conscious but isn’t at all—graces his face. “I needed a curtain. And until I can procure my own immaculate, four-hundred-year-old, handwoven tapestry, I thought I’d make use of what was on hand.”

“I can’t see any reason why you shouldn’t.”

He sets out two mismatching cups and then bends forward to settle the pot deeper into the coals.

"Does the room suit you?"

As I ask the question, he burns the edge of his hand. Whispering something under his breath as he jerks his hand away, he waves it in the air twice before putting its burned edge in his mouth. Looking in my direction, he nods, then pulls his hand away, shaking it again.

"Yes," he says, the sting of the burn evident in his voice. "The room suits me just fine." The water begins to boil, and Astrick goes about the business of preparing two cups of tea. "Home," he says as he adds a bit of sugar, stirring it in with a tarnished spoon.

"Home?"

"Home," he repeats, handing me the cup, his eyes catching the reflection of the small fire. "Tell me, from which nation do you come?"

I wrap my hands around the cup, feeling the warmth in my fingers, watching as he prepares tea for himself. His hands are callused, with bright nicks of scars across his knuckles and along his fingers. He's watching me now, watching me watch the movements of his hands.

"Well?" he persists.

"I'm from a small nation," I answer, raising my eyes to his. "From the Hills of Avaine."

His expression alters just enough to show he's registered the fact. "The hill country?"

I nod.

"I hear it's beautiful that far up north. Large deciduous forests of oak."

"Yes. They are very beautiful."

"And your family lives yet in the Hills of Avaine?"

I press my lips together a moment before blowing my tea cool. When I'm confident that I can speak without struggling to keep my voice steady, I answer, "Yes. At least, I believe so. Though my brothers are studying at one of the northern universities."

"Which one?"

"Have you heard of La Fount?"

"La Fount is very famous," Astrick answers, swirling the liquid in his cup around. "Tell me more about your family."

"Well, my household is my father, my two brothers, and myself. My mother has been gone these nine years, but," I tilt my head to the side just

enough to keep my voice even, “I’d like to think her presence—the strength she was made of—is still very much with us.”

“Are you much like her?”

“I—” I pause. “I’m not sure.”

“Tell me about your father.”

I shift in my chair, uncertain why it’s too uncomfortable to admit that my father is the lord of our small nation. “He’s an artist,” I finally answer. “He once painted.”

“But no longer?”

“No.” I shake my head. “He can paint no longer.”

“Was it the Bleak?” he asks.

I don’t know how he knows. “It was,” I answer.

Leaning back, Astrick turns, putting an elbow on the top of the chair behind him, placing one booted foot over his knee. “And what of your home? What of the hill country?”

When I don’t answer, Astrick taps a finger against the cup he’s holding in his hand and says, “It’s hard for you to think about home.”

“Yes.”

“Sorry for asking you to recall it.”

I shake my head, setting my own cup on the floor before the fire. “I would like to tell you more, Astrick, but I—”

“Have to focus on this task ahead of you?”

In part. The real answer is that I’m too lonely for home to risk speaking too much about it.

“Yes,” is all I say. “Speaking of which, I must get back.”

“I, as well. I’m finishing a map of every broken window in the Pyre.”

“When did you begin your map?” I ask, even as I am stepping back towards the door, and the safety of my own buried loneliness.

Astrick crouches before the fire, putting the flame out with the rest of the water from the pot. “I’ve spent the last few nights completing it.” Then he looks over his shoulders, his green eyes meeting mine. “There is a particular passage I’m fond of, up on the eighth floor. The rose and thorn passage? It connects two of the square towers on the west, and both sides of the hallway are made up of glass: a beautiful composition of garden roses, blooms of all colors twisting around it.” His dimple appears, and he shakes his head. “Don’t tell me you haven’t seen it.”

I recall the conversation I'd had with Sperro when I'd first arrived. The threats. The menace. *A brave nothing* were his words. "I've seen it."

"Oh, I almost forgot." Astrick stands and puts his hand into the inside pocket of his jacket, pulling something out. It's shimmering, a hint of gold between his fingers.

"I found this earlier. I was in the Mirror Gallery, and I kept hearing an oration, so I followed it down one of the corridors, but no one was there. Only this."

He holds it out towards me.

I take the memory from his outstretched hand, its fluidlike substance smooth between my fingers. The sound of a voice rises between us, but I can't hear what it's saying. Shaking the memory twice, I fold it over itself.

"Was it interesting?"

"It was. Someone was speaking to a grand assembly."

"What did they say?"

His firefly eyes light up in the dimness of this small room. "Triumphant things. Glorious things."

"As I'm certain many of them do."

Astrick then clears his throat and crosses his arms across his chest, but his eyes don't meet mine. "I didn't want to say anything to you, for I planned to fight my way through. But I need to be honest with you, Ember." His mouth pulls tight, into an almost sorrowful line. My heart grips around itself.

"Yes?"

"The presence of the Death Bleak is—it's wearing on me. Even more than I'd anticipated. And I'm feeling tremendously unbound. I've fought it since I arrived, but—"

I cross my own arms across my chest. For protection. "Are you worried you cannot do the work?"

His eyes flare. "Of course I'll do the work. Only, I am supposed to stay until day after tomorrow; I have to go sooner than that."

"Tonight?"

"I'll go tomorrow. His presence dismantles in ways that— It's one day short, I know, but I will be back a day sooner. Prepared to stay the full five days. I have a few ideas how I can be ready."

Beneath the burden of being left alone, all I can manage is, "And you promise you'll come back?"

“Yes. I’ll not abandon the work I have to do here.” Astrick looks at the floor, raising a single eyebrow. “I’m not as strong as you, Ember. How you can be here without—well, I’m suffocating.”

I certainly don’t feel strong. How quickly I’ve grown accustomed to having other living blood around me. Astrick is my only connection with the outside world. It—it helps with the loneliness. I realize that more now than ever, and I can’t think of giving it up.

“Does the power of the Pyre not give you strength?” I ask.

“It does.” Astrick shakes his head. “But with your Bleak being here, it’s like trying to walk through a dark cloud, when what I need for my work is clarity.”

“Do you speak of your work with the windows?” I approach the words straight on. “Or your work as a Light Binder?”

Astrick looks up at me sharply. “My work with the windows.”

“You’ve yet to tell me what it is you bind.”

Astrick gives a quick shake of his head. But it isn’t a refusal; it’s a caution.

“The gardener at Hill House is an Earth Binder,” I say. “The harvests were always abundant, for he bound earth and root, water and sun.”

“It sounds like he did his work well.”

“He did. The traveling blacksmith bound metals. The local merchant bound desires, although I cannot say his motives were very pure.”

This makes Astrick smile, yet his eyes remain reserved.

“And of course the Binders would perform marriages. Wait—” I wrinkle my nose, amused at the thought of seeing Astrick standing before a man and a woman, binding them together. “Have you?”

“Marriages?” His earnest expression is broken by an awkward cringe. “No. Life’s blood. I’m not old enough. Could you even imagine?”

I laugh, and he blows the air from his lungs before laughing himself. It measures things between us, this laughter.

“I will tell you more about what I do.” He looks at me directly, to reinforce the promise. “I will. But not yet. There aren’t many Light Binders, and I must be careful. That being said, I suspect I am to help you with more than just windows. When I know what it is I must do—”

“You will.”

“Yes,” Astrick replies.

We stand in the company of silence before I say, “I suppose we should return to our work.”

He looks relieved to no longer be speaking about himself. “I have cut a piece of glass that I intend to set this evening—I already tested the shine of the light, and I believe all the bevels are at the correct angles—and then I’ll leave come morning.”

“When will you return?” I ask, looking out the window, my traitorous tone of voice being too honest with how I feel about his leaving.

“I can travel home in less than three days. Two, if I press hard on the road. I’ll eat, sleep, and then start back the next morning. Coming and going like this, I should be able to stay five or six times before the Bleak makes his decision. I still—” He pauses, shifting his stance, then says, almost defensively, “I still think I am more help than hindrance to you.”

“Of course you are.” I return my gaze to his green eyes. It’s only more difficult than I thought it would be.

He moves his hand along his jaw. “Whatever strange path the Lights have declared for you, I will play my part. Besides, these windows are mine; I—well, I can feel it.” Then he adds softly, “Whether I understand it or not.”

* * *

That evening I work on candles while Astrick places his piece of glass. It is small, just larger than his palm. But as I listen to him rattle on about cames—some sort of metal casing for the glass—and watch the intricate process of him soldering the piece into place, I can feel that even this will make a difference.

It is what I will hold onto until he returns.

* * *

Snow is falling. It is just before dawn. I watch while Astrick slings his saddlebags into place, listen as he speaks with Sylvain about the state of the roads, and prepare myself to lose the pulse of energy he has brought with him to the Pyre. Bundled in my green wool cloak, I offer him what I can: A smile that is not as truthful as it should be. And also the hope that he will

travel well, arrive home in good time, and then return. The loneliness of being, once again, the only beating heart at the Pyre I keep to myself.

"Five or six days," he says, as he leads the horse Balint has lent him through the archway and out onto the merchant road. "Seven, if the way is bad, but I'll do my best."

"Do," I say. "I will be happy to see you return."

"I will," he says, stopping for the first time this dark morning to meet my expression. "Ember, I—"

"Keep off the roads—"

We have spoken at the same time, and he drops his words, letting mine take the space.

"It's only that the Bleak has been fighting with the dark forces of the southern nations, and I don't know who will be on the roads or for what purposes."

Behind me, Sylvain grunts. "Be wary of whatever travelers you come upon."

Astrick looks towards the road, and I can see he is taking our words with due seriousness.

"I'll be certain to keep myself apart."

He moves then, making the smallest motion towards me before a caught expression comes into his face, and then he stops, nods again, and mounts his waiting horse. I step back, wrapping myself deeper within my cloak, watching as he lifts his hand in farewell and spurs his horse forward.

The snow has stopped falling now, leaving only the white-bound trees. And the merchant's road is too quickly gone from view. Astrick soon follows.

* * *

Miranda is no happier than I. Astrick's leave-taking has required a toll from her that I don't understand. She bangs about the kitchen and snaps at Balint for nothing. I don't feel much different, but I keep the dismay of my isolation to myself.

It won't do to explain why Miranda and Sylvain and Balint and Celia are not enough…why I can't find refuge in them as I had in Astrick—because I need the comfort of a beating heart and a pulsing vein. Astrick is still fresh in this world, as fresh as I am.

That night, I take myself into my prayers and orations with earnestness. I need courage. I need to wake with a light. I need to find my way out of the clouds suffocating my heart.

* * *

The Bleak and I spend the late morning in the freeze of the terraced gardens: he, stumbling through his thoughts, and I, struggling through mine. We block each other out as best we can—though snatches of our personal ruminations get loose, and, like dry winter brambles, they snap when they run up against each other.

He is sorting out what he will do with Meridaithe and the other dark forces of the nations with whom he's quarreled. The Witch he considers a hard enemy. Some he still considers allies. But there are others he is weighing, measuring; they are not his friends, but they've not yet become enemies. They are creatures to be used, but not trusted.

He looks over his shoulder at me. *All of them are to be used; none of them is to be trusted, even those I've an alliance with.*

I brush my hand in his direction, trying to ignore his voice. *I wasn't trying to speak with you*.

His expression underpins his next thought. *Then quit your speculations on my business.*

Then try spending some time on a different topic, I think as I raise an eyebrow.

I'm expecting some fire-spat response, so it surprises me when he looks at me across the frozen garden and considers me for a full minute.

You're lonely.

What? I look up, feeling a startled rush as the blood drains from my face.

You are lonely, so desperately alone, you wonder if it's possible to be consumed by the sadness, to disappear into it.

It's cruel. And his unexpected words hit me, a blow to my chest. It takes me a few minutes to wrestle with them, these words from my heart that I'd not dared to speak aloud. And the Bleak watching the entire process in my head.

He narrows his eyes, a predator knowing he's cornered his victim. A sharp, close-lipped smile splits his face. *The others aren't enough. They*

don't understand anymore. And your Light Binder leaving you behind as well. So desperately alone.

"Yes," I answer, flinging the word at him. "I'm lonely."

"You watch *every* sunset with an unbearable ache in your heart," he says out loud, his voice scraping the cold air. "It used to be your favorite time of day. You would slip from Hill House and take the path down past the stables. Sometimes you would turn into the woods, feeling the lines of every tree echoing up the bloodlines of your body—in complete wonder, loving it so much you thought you would burst. Other days, you would turn down the road instead, passing a traveler or a farmer along your way, pleased with the spread of fields and the cottages being lit, one by one, in the coming dusk. When your brothers were home from university, you would drag them along with you, and the perfect joy you found in their company was almost unbearable in its own right—"

"Please stop."

"And returning home, the windows of Hill House would be full of light —"

"Stop—" I press my eyes closed.

"And you would be welcomed in—"

"*Please*," I whisper, my hands over my ears.

And now, every time you watch the sun set over the western stretch of forest. Your. Heart. Breaks.

My shoulders have begun to shake, and I press my mouth into my hands.

Why did the Lights ever send you to such a place? How could they have asked such a thing of you? You? Sent to save the damned, drowning alone in your tremendous loneliness.

A sound escapes me, and I shake my head, pushing myself from the stone wall. It takes everything in me not to run for the Pyre.

* * *

The Lights are always more merciful than I anticipate they will be, for that night I dream of my mother.

She is sitting beside my father, speaking soothing words, strong words. She is still young to my eyes, the lines of her life's experiences only those of beauty. My father looks older and is caught between the fire and the dark.

He is deciding between hope and sorrow, and my mother is telling him to choose hope.

I have a second dream.

I am here at the Pyre, but instead of things as they are now, frozen beneath layers of snow and dread and misery, it's late summer. The air is just turning sweet, and there is a garden filled with apple trees. I'm sitting on a stone wall, watching the sweet grass and flowers that catch the air beneath heavy branches bright with apples.

A young man and a young woman are walking slowly through the orchard towards me. He's quite animated, moving his hands and speaking of something, while she walks alongside him with easy steps, her hands playing with a long stem of sweet grass. They are both beautiful, as if created by an affectionate artist. She is elegant, with large eyes and the profile of a queen—and I realize she is the young woman I had seen before in my dream. He is broad-shouldered, his face graced with strength of thought, his movement having the most interesting way of drawing your eyes to the lines of his frame. They are figures of a golden age long past. And while she is strong, her light is yet soft, a gold almost touching silver. But he just burns.

I sit watching, knowing somehow that I am to wait, that my time in the garden is not their time in the garden. And he continues speaking to his companion, paying me no mind. But she—she looks towards me, as if she is not expecting to see me there but is not surprised I have come.

She turns her eyes away from me and looks back towards him. Passing under a bough, she lifts her hand and plucks a ripe apple from the tree, holding it out to the golden young man while she again meets my gaze. The apple turns into a fine goblet. Then the goblet turns into a bird. And when he takes the bird from her hand, it flies away, leaving a trail of silver feathers. She sees the feathers and points towards the ground, urging him to take them before they disappear. But he—so intent on the thoughts in his own head, the words he is trying to get out—steps over the feathers and continues on his way.

* * *

When I open my eyes, the sun is blazing through the windows, drenching my room with light. It is afternoon—I'd slept the morning through—and I

lift my hand and place it just above my breast to feel the pulse of a living heart. I think of the apple turned goblet turned bird. And as I think of the bird flying away, I feel the ring on my hand burning against the skin of my chest.

I am filled with a fresh courage.

What was it Astrick had said of the memory he had found?

That it spoke of triumphant things.

Glorious things.

Lifting myself onto my knees, I turn and rest my elbows on the long, stone windowsill and look out over the winter forest, illuminated with the strength of the sun. Glorious things indeed.

XVI

We walk for hours the next day—the Bleak and I—along the wide trail that stretches from the back gardens, over a rise, and down towards the cliffs along the river. Snow is melting beneath our feet, a casualty of the sunlight that has again broken through the midmorning clouds. I wonder if this is in any way tied to the piece of glass Astrick set in the window or to his lanterns, which he left behind, that fill the Long Hall with light.

The Bleak moves deliberately today, his hands behind his back, the metal of his patch magicks catching the sunlight and throwing reflections of it onto the trees. As for myself, I feel freer than I have since coming to the Pyre, even more than I have felt on the days when the Bleak had been absent. Such is the fruit of my dreams.

The forest is ringing with the sounds of birds, and several fly up before me, their music trailing on the air, their bright colors like something from an old tale. After finding a loose feather—black and yellow with a white stripe—I keep my eyes on the softening snow, hoping to find more. It reminds me of my dream.

Several hours of walking pass, and my fingers are now wrapped around feathers of red, black, yellow, and even one long feather of vibrant green, belonging to a bird I have never seen before. I move my finger along the

edge of this feather, watching it give way and then return to its shape, wondering what she looks like.

It belongs to a male, actually. A male Spry.

I look up. The Bleak is watching me with a subdued version of a smirk upon his face.

"Is it?" I look again at the bright green feather. I'd never heard of a Spry before. "And the female? Is she as startling in color?"

"Unremarkable, rather brown, homely," he says aloud in his unnatural voice, tilting his face up towards the trees. "Now that I put my mind towards it, she's not unlike yourself."

"*Homely*?" I reply. "I'm no great beauty, but homely?"

"You come to your own defense rather quickly."

"I'm not defending myself. I've never claimed to be remarkable." And I haven't. Though my father had always called my features enduring in their beauty, classical, and Miranda had said—

The Bleak makes a sound that resembles a guffaw, and I look away, schooling my face, embarrassed. He's teasing me, pulling at my reaction for his own amusement. I know I am not vain—well, certainly not too vain—my brothers had seen to that. But as I pull a wisp of wild hair away from my face, I shake my head from a self-consciousness I am dismayed to discover I still have.

Don't take it so personally, says the golden voice of the Bleak inside my head.

"I'm not," I say over my shoulder. "I've no desire to be worthy of your exalted attentions."

It wasn't an unfair comparison for the sole reasons of—

"I don't care if it was or wasn't," I retort, feeling foolish enough that I can't help but laugh. "What does it matter if a Death Bleak thinks me unremarkable. Homely even."

"Hmm," he replies, but it is with a touch of humor, and I roll my eyes—at my own self as much as at the Bleak. *Fine*, he concedes. *I'll admit you are not quite homely. Once, I might have even considered you quite—* He stops, abruptly barricading me outside his thoughts, making a cutting sound in his throat.

"She's demure, the female Spry," he continues aloud, shifting his gloved hands, still clasped behind his back. "But when she takes flight, she puts the male to shame. With her wings extended, she reveals feathers of an

astonishing silver unlike anything seen on the wings of other birds. In my own time, if you were to find the silver feather of a female Spry, you were promised a life of happiness."

I look back over my shoulder, a one-sided smile on my face, disbelieving that such beauty could have come from my Bleak. The way he had spoken of the Spry's silver feathers reminds me of my dream.

"Did you ever find the feather of a female Spry, Sperro Magna?"

He stops, making no reference to my use of his old name, and then tilts his head forward in thought. A slow nod comes with a slow recollection. "I did. Once."

"And what did you do with it?"

"I gave it away," he says with no regret. But a long-forgotten emotion touches the bottom of his mind. The echo of a memory rings around us: a feather tossed to another without a second thought. He shifts in some discomfort, the metal on his cloak again catching the sunlight of the afternoon. I follow the beams of light up, the sunlight braiding through the boughs of this winter forest.

I pause and close my eyes so the sun can fall directly onto my face. It feels like an age has passed since I've focused on the pleasure of feeling true warmth on my eyelids.

Surprisingly, the Bleak waits. He doesn't move; he doesn't rush my moment in the rare sunlight. And though I can feel the dark cloud that is always weighing down his person, in the sunlight, even his darkness must move differently.

A tranquil moment passes, and I open my eyes, blinking against the sun. "Shall we return to the Pyre?"

Without answer, the Bleak falls into step beside me. It is an hour or more, our return journey, and so I take a piece of Miranda's bread from the pocket of my cloak. I offer a piece to the Bleak. He refuses with a disgusted expression. But when I drink water from my leather pouch, he watches in a way that makes me wonder if he is remembering how good it had once tasted. What I can actually hear of his thoughts are tangled words, wrapped around his pursuit for Beast of Ten.

As we step into the gardens of the Pyre, we each give the other a candid look—one that says we both know the other's considerations—before going our separate ways.

* * *

As I am eating dinner later that night, Miranda keeps fussing over how long I'd been in the forest without proper food. She hovers about me too much; yet, at the same time, she's distracted, impatient. She scolds me for what? The Lights only know. Balint and Celia are both wise enough to avoid the kitchens. But, I think to myself with a rueful sigh, I have no such recourse. I *have* to eat. They don't.

I'm eating as fast as I am able when she asks if I know the day Astrick will return.

"Another three of four days, I'd imagine," I answer.

"Hmm." Miranda tucks her lips together and jerks her head in a quick nod, the kind of nod you give when you're in pain and you wish someone wouldn't ask you about it.

* * *

"You must have graced the world with one worthy thought," I say to the Bleak wryly. "Since the sun has been shining now for three days, one following the other."

"Oh?" he says, though I doubt he's paying me any real attention.

"Miranda has been enough of a beast herself that I almost consider you *company*. Not good company, mind you, but company nonetheless."

Hearing a strange sound, I look towards the Bleak. He is laughing. He moves his head in a human way and grins, stopping close to my side.

"There may have been a time I was considered good company."

I think that in all the days before this moment I would have shrunk away from any reminder that he'd once been more similar to me than different. Now I allow a smile on my face.

"I wouldn't expect you to remember it enough to tell me if you ever were," I needle. "You let your past emerge out of your head but rarely. Quite an accomplishment, I suppose, that you remember it at all. As for you being good company—that couldn't have been a mere three hundred years past; it must have been an age, for you're such poor company now."

His silent agreement comes with a smirk lurking beneath it. Then the Bleak does something I have never seen him do: he bends down next to a

shrub heavy with winterberries and snags one bunch between his fingers, spinning the bright crimson berries for several minutes as we walk, before he tosses them back into the white snow.

I feel the forest—well, it feels like a long breath is released, as if the very trees and plants were experiencing their first true interaction with the Bleak in years, no matter how many times he's stalked the forest.

Then the Bleak speaks to me. "You say things—you judge me on a harsh scale."

I stop, looking at him in surprise for his comment. *You have turned this world into a harsh scale*, I think.

Something slides across his face, like one slab of slate over another, and he moves his hands in a *what-do-you-expect-me-to–do-differently* sort of fashion.

When the sun disappears again, behind a combination of heavy clouds in the distance and the long horizon of mountains to the west, the forest immediately turns towards a purple light, and the temperature drops.

"It's so cold," I say, looking back towards the distant towers of the Pyre. "When we return, I'm going to find Miranda and see if there is any more cider in the kitchens."

"Cider?"

"You know, *cider*. It's made from apples. Actually," I stomp my feet and move my toes to warm them against the chill, "the apples Miranda used have been stored since the last time the trees in the garden bore fruit, stolen from time along with everything else. They're still good enough to juice." A flash of the impressive young man I'd seen in my dream comes to mind. "Did you enjoy cider—before, I mean?"

The Bleak shifts and looks with question towards the Pyre. "I—I believe I did, though I can't be certain." His eyes close, and the early evening wind shifts the torn edges of his cloak. "I would be out in the forest —come back late, my fingers—" I can feel him reaching for his memory. "I must have favored it, for I can almost find the scent…but now I wonder if —" He opens his eyes and gives a dismissive shrug. "Perhaps I never did."

"Would you like to come to the kitchens with me?"

He shakes his head aggressively, and the feeling of shadow around him deepens.

"Why not?"

“I’m not cold, you fool. Besides,” he mutters, “I don’t like the taste of anything on my tongue; it always pulls the blood from my veins and tastes like metal in my mouth.”

“You don’t have to have any cider,” I reply, knowing I sound a bit short. “You could just come prove yourself to be good company.”

Sperro takes a step away from me.

“Suit yourself,” I say. “Good night.”

He says nothing, and I leave him on the edge of the forest.

* * *

Sperro mutters all night. And when I wake in the morning, I know he has disappeared into the forest without me. The trees outside my windows are swaying in a strong wind, and I—grumbling over our compelled companionship—bundle myself against the day and tromp off towards the west. Foul weather threatens the forest, but I know ignoring him too long will be its own kind of misery. And he’d been muttering in such awful confusion that I don’t want to leave him completely alone. Though, I freely blame him for my headache.

He is already miles from the Pyre, having taken the lower trail leading west into a long hollow filled with trees. Luckily, with a fresh skiff of snow from the night before, he is easy to follow. And the trail of his unguarded thoughts is as clear as his tracks. After a demanding two hours I find him standing in the middle of a clearing.

“You come again,” he says, fussing with an open wound on his hand.

“You know what happens when either of us tries to stay away,” I answer, pulling my gloved hands tighter inside my cloak. “You’re farther down the trail than I had supposed; you felt much closer. Now I’m rather tired, as your muttering kept me up most of the night,” I add, mostly to myself. Then I glance towards the hand he’s just wrapping in charcoal grey fabric. “What have you done to yourself now?”

“You’re a black nuisance,” he mutters.

“I’m a black nuisance?” I laugh defensively. “You’re not the one whose fate is tied to a Death Bleak—well, I suppose your fate is. But you chose it.”

He looks up, directly at me. *Do you intend to speak with me the entire time we’re in the forest? You’re prattling is worse than the birds’.*

No, I think. With what could only, in all honesty, be called an impudent expression, I pass by the Bleak, walking farther up the pathway. *Besides*, I throw back, *the birds don't sing for you anyway. You frighten them.*

In silence we continue: he, churning in his thoughts, and I, winding through mine. It is only when I've grown quite hungry that I think about turning back. Just as I am about to speak, the Bleak pauses and grips one of the patches on his coat.

"Someone has entered the forest," he says.

I look over my shoulder at the still trees. "How do—I mean, do you know where?"

"Someone has entered the forest," he repeats slowly, "who has never passed through it before." Turning, muttering a string of words, he closes his eyes and moves his fingers in strange, unnatural patterns. I can feel uncertainty turning inside him. "Two men. Young. Tall." He opens his eyes. "Angry."

My mind races towards my brothers, Hadspen and Thry.

"Wait." He moves his hand towards me. "Who was that?"

"Who?" I ask, panicking.

"You just thought of two young men, but it was too fast. I missed their faces."

I take a protective step away from him.

"What are you waiting for?" he snaps, his chin up, his eyes searching a distance I can't see. "Show me the faces."

No.

"I *must* know. Is this Meridaithe's evil? Is this Callidus?" He looks at me, and the haziness of his face shifts into a touch more clarity, his eyes half wild, half steeled. "December, *please*."

My knees are trembling from the strangeness of my full name on his lips. He looks as strained as I feel, and he is right to worry: he has shattered his allegiances with very powerful forces.

"Will you promise they will be safe?" I bargain desperately, my voice shaking. "If they are the ones who've entered?"

"What?" he snaps, considering me mad for even having the thought in a moment like this.

I drop my chin but keep my eyes trained on him. "If it's my brothers, Sperro, I need a promise from you."

"I will curse you, December," he threatens, as he swings his face towards the west. "Just show me those faces again."

I press my lips together. *Will you promise*?

"Yes! I promise!"

"Here." I call to mind Hadspen and Thry, standing close together, looking about themselves. Hadspen is running his fingers through his hair, pushing it away from his forehead. Thry, his eyes half covered by his own dark hair, turns his head to the side to see something better. Their shoulders are touching, and their faces look worried.

I sigh from a sharp pang of homesickness.

"Yes," the Bleak says, still moving his fingers in strange patterns. "Yes. That lines up. It lines up. They are the two who have just entered the forest."

I take in a breath, covering my eyes with my gloved hand. I've known, of course, that they would come for me. Neither could have lived with abandoning me to such a fate as this. When I open my eyes, the Bleak is staring at my face. He begins to open his mouth, but no word comes out.

My voice is thick with worry when I ask, "What?"

"You seem concerned about something."

I stare. Of course I am concerned. The two most important souls in my world are walking into the grips of a creature who, with the flick of a finger, could take them as blood gains.

"You already extracted a promise that I would not harm them," he says, in response to my thoughts. "It seems you're overreacting."

Overreacting?

He breathes out impatiently, a roiling anger surging around him, but then, as suddenly as it came, it drops into a hollow feeling—like a storm dismissed for a deeper darkness. The Bleak levels his gaze on me, and shrugs, turning back towards the Pyre.

I reach out and grab his wrist.

He halts, then half turns and looks at me impassively.

"My brothers—"

His eyes wander my face. "You worry I will harm what you love most."

I pull my thoughts back but keep my hand where it is, gripping his wrist.

"Do you feel I *owed* you that promise that I wouldn't simply do away with them?" he sneers. "Do you feel I *owe* you any consideration when I am

stuck here in this place waiting for my foes to come upon me!"

These words shake me loose, and I jerk my hand away. "Do you dare speak to me of what you *owe*?" I counter. "You owe the nations; you owe lives and blood and so much more than you can ever repay. So do not speak to me of what you owe; the debt is far too great."

The Bleak does not respond, verbally or otherwise, he simply turns back towards the Pyre.

I steal a frustrated breath and stomp behind him. If my brothers are coming to find me, I am determined to protect them, Bleak or no Bleak.

* * *

"How long will it take them to travel through the forest?" I ask later that day, when I find the Bleak pacing about his bedchamber. He's gripping a piece of metal in his hand, the sharp end cutting into his thumb. Blood is puddling in his palm, running down his wrist.

"What?" he asks, squinting at me. His chambers feel like a shroud; his awareness, the same, and I'm uncertain he even recalls that my brothers are coming.

"My brothers?"

Time, time. He clenches his fist around the metal, pacing, circling away from me. *It is not yielding in the way it— Time—*

"Sperro? How long will it take them to travel through the forest?"

I can't break—

Sperro?

He flinches and then whirls at me from the smoke of his chaos, seething.

"How long will it take, Sperro?" I whisper.

"That depends on how fast they travel, does it not!" he yells.

"I—" I bite the words back. The existence of my brothers holds no interest; his thoughts are riddled with a civil war declared in the ashes of Slatt Clave. His eyes are wide, his fear thick. No, not fear, rather a rotting, but dangerous power, leveraged on decay. Whether that is the decay of his enemies or of himself is still to be decided.

Leaving, I'm almost back out the door when his words hit my back.

"Damn you, I've lost my line of thought." I hear the piece of metal drop on the floor. "Are you asking the time according to the pace of a man on

horseback or on foot?"

I pull myself up short, and slowly look over my shoulder at him, making no attempt to mask my surprise. "You are the only one who would know the answer to that."

He pauses, and I can feel his thoughts roll towards the forest. "Horseback. They will arrive tomorrow evening, just after sundown."

"And they will be safe."

He's about to say yes, but he pauses—the beat of a live pulse pacing his thoughts. He's hungry for a blood gain.

"Sperro?"

Shaking his head, he lifts a hand to his face and drags his fingers downward against the grey skin. His hand is shaking.

"You promised me you wouldn't take them."

"I don't—"

I take several quick steps back towards him, grabbing his shoulders hard enough to rock him on his heels. He is freezing beneath my hands.

"Sperro?"

"I don't keep all promises," he says slowly, the whisper for blood beneath his thoughts, even as his eyes are seeking some harbor in mine.

"You promised me."

Sperro lifts a hand, as if he would grip my arm in return. But he does not. He cannot bring himself to cede me the victory of such a human response. We stand close enough for me to see how deep the blankness in his eyes truly extends. He has gone so far, and for what?

Will you send them away unharmed?

"Yes!" he rages, throwing my hands from his arms. I stumble backwards, catching my balance to keep me from tumbling to the floor. "Your brothers will stay one night, and then," he slices his hand through the air between us, "they're to leave. If they do this, they will leave unharmed." His words are heavy as iron. "But you may not go with them. They must not make any attempt to take you away. This fate is between you and me, and neither of us could endure the separation. Not now. Not anymore."

I open my mouth but stop myself. It is the best offering I could have asked for.

"Now stop pushing your light at me," he hisses.

Coming to myself, I realize I am flaring. I hadn't meant to be, but as he was rising in his own chaos, I was flaring light in return, countering his

weight. I step away, but I do not diminish my light. I am on an errand to keep it; I will not weaken myself for him.

"Thank you," I say hoarsely. "Thank you for letting me see them."

Cursing, pacing, he looks back towards me. I'm unprepared to again find his eyes searching mine. His thoughts are doing the same. And for the smallest space of time, the slightest parting of the curtain, I see myself as he sees me: I look like a bird in flight, like a hope he dares not consider to be real. Then the curtain is closed. The image gone, swept away in his turmoil. A different curtain ripples open. And now I see myself as his final rite of passage. The blood to make it all possible. The sacrifice to be taken. Soon.

"Go away!" he yells. "Now!"

But there is no need for him to speak. I'm already leaving the room.

* * *

I don't sleep. I sit on my windowsill—spinning my glass ring around my finger again and again—and watch every piece of night moving in its slow order. Tonight, the coming day, all these hours will feel like several eternities. All tangled up in one another. All never ending. All never getting me to the moment when my brothers will ride into the Pyre. And then time will be a winged thing. So fast. Its flight feeling like a single moment. A brief flame. Hadspen and Thry will be gone. And I will be once again alone.

My heart beats, my eyes seeing nothing as I stare into the darkness. I am weary, but how far I am from sleep. Stretching my mind towards Sperro, I find him. There. In the library. Confusion circling him like insanity.

* * *

Miranda can do nothing to ease my anxiety.

"Come put yourself to work. You'll wear yourself thin waiting for those boys."

"What if he doesn't keep his promise?" I say forcefully, unable to even recall what peace had once felt like. "I feel—I *want* to trust him. I *want* to hope he is speaking true." I know Miranda can see how stricken I am, and I look away. "My brothers are everything."

“I know,” Miranda replies. “And I’ve nothing to say to make it any better, but he’s said right out he’ll not hurt them. So keep some faith for their safety.”

I keep that faith. All day I keep that faith about me, forcing doubt away as I would a curse.

The day moves forward. The shadows shift. And I find myself staring out the window of a forgotten room where Sperro paces, thinking through a long list of treacherous names, studying maps and scrolls, and making strange motions with his hands.

He will not look towards me, but I know he can feel my thoughts asking him to be generous, holding my good faith to whatever still lives inside his besieged tenth line. But unlike when I’ve forced a sunset or an array of stars into his mind, he says nothing in return.

As sunset comes, as cold turns to colder and the shimmer of evening turns to frost, I set my heart and wait. I’ve already decided it will not be on the stairs of the Pyre that I will greet my brothers. I will be beside the Bleak. I will show my brothers I can stand in my place, so they will be willing to leave me behind. They won’t be willing, but I must somehow convince them.

I’m watching snow being blown across the dark window, as my chin is resting on my hands, my elbows stretched out along the stone windowsill. The doors of the hall open. I turn my head.

The Bleak’s Stone Six enter. And between them, my brothers.

Hadspen. Thry. Their chins lifted bravely, their eyes searching. The guards disappear back out into the hallway, leaving my brothers standing with their shoulders touching, together against this strange world—Hadspen, looking like he wants to kill somebody, and Thry, studying the dim room, his emotions kept back.

“Hadspen!” I shout, my voice splitting. “Thry!”

I begin to run.

“Ember!” Hadspen calls, but it is Thry who reaches me first.

His arms are around me. And then Hadspen is there, swaying us onto the edges of our feet as he grabs me into his arms. I laugh and breathe in deeply the reality of my brothers: their faces, their skin, and their height. I bury my face into Hadspen’s shoulder and give a contented sigh. Then Thry’s fingers grip my forearm, and he pulls me back behind himself.

Sperro has taken a step towards us.

I want to tell them it is all right, but I can feel the change in the air as Sperro stalks closer, bringing with him the stench of his magicks. And the hair on the back of my neck rises with the knowledge that my brothers' fates are not secure here.

"Sperro." I pull free of Thry and step forward to intercept the Bleak. "These are my brothers, Hadspen," I motion to my left, "and Thry."

Neither of my brothers gives a greeting. Hadspen only steps closer to me.

The Bleak has never looked so dead as he does now, in the company of my brothers.

You didn't tell me your brother was an Intuit, Sperro says in my mind.

You forget, I always thought my brother was the Third. But of course Thry was an Intuit. His understanding. His instincts.

Sperro shifts his eyes from me back to my brothers. "Why have you come to the Pyre?" he asks, turning his strange voice on its edge and lowering his head, his eyes—like dark pools—still trained on them.

"To get our—" Hadspen starts, but I press my fingers into his arm, and he closes his mouth. I glance at Thry. He will be the better spokesman. He is wise—and cunning.

Thry steps forward, shaking. "We heard tell of how you spared our father's life and," Thry looks back at my face to read what he can before continuing, "how you have taken care of our sister. My brother and I have come to ask what we might do to bring her home."

My heart twists at this unfulfillable request.

Sperro stares at them, considering what to do with these flesh-and-blood boys, their fierce protectiveness radiating too hotly from their bodies. Glancing from face to face, his eyes narrow. He's hungry—and without bounds.

Hadspen stiffens behind me, and I know he sees the ruthless evil: undeterred, thirsty with power.

Sperro's eyes move to mine, but his thoughts are hidden. When he speaks, the metallic sound of his voice echoes in the hall. "They may stay the night, as promised. But come morning, they leave the Pyre. I have no use for them here."

Thry's hand moves into mine, and Hadspen takes a small step towards me. They do not take their eyes from the Death Bleak as he motions us out of the hall with disdain.

“Come,” I say, taking Hadspen’s hand and pulling him towards the door. Thry follows. Before Sperro can change his mind, I lead my brothers away, through the hallways and up the sweeping staircases.

“Quickly. We will keep quiet in my rooms. He may get distracted, forget you’re even here—if only for a few hours. But I pray he holds his word to let you leave in safety tomorrow.”

“We’re not leaving you here,” Hadspen mutters, his hand tightening around mine.

As we come up to the bell tower corridor, we can smell the forest.

“Do you ever get cold?” Thry asks.

“I’ll show you,” I answer, out of breath for how fast I’ve guided my brothers to their tenuous safety. We come to my door, and I push it open.

A fire is going, the sap of the logs snapping in the flames. Miranda has cleaned the room. She’s changed my linens and dusted the furniture. And I can see from Thry’s face that he is surprised. And pleased. I close the door behind us.

“This isn’t quite what I’ve been envisioning,” Hadspen admits, walking across the room. “My picture involved more chains, possibly a dungeon.” He grins at me. “Rank air, moldy bread, and the like.”

Thry does not look so easily settled. His eyes move from the windows to the tapestries, the chairs, the rugs. Then they rest on the bed, and I see him flinch.

“No, this isn’t bad at all,” Hadspen continues, lying down on the rug before the hearth. “I could get used to this. Much better than Hill House is now.”

“Hill House!” I grip Thry’s arm. “Tell me now what happened?”

“Burned out, black and awful,” Hadspen calls from his place before the fire.

Thry places his hand on my back, and we go join Hadspen on the rug, as if we are children instead of grown. Thry speaks first, sitting close, his voice low.

“The end of the north wing sustained little damage, enough room to live in while the rest of the house is restored. Father has asked for help from the bordering nations.”

“The beggars,” Hadspen growls. “McVoy and Callister said no. But Clairavoux, to the east, said he would help. They expect to begin repairs this summer”—he looks towards the windows—

“I’d have expected to find you coming into summer by now, even in a forest as deep as this one.”

“It is always winter at the Pyre,” I answer, tucking my knees up under my chin and pulling my skirt about me feet. “And Father?”

“Angry—” Hadspen begins.

“Desolate—” whispers Thry.

I give a tired sigh. “His arm?”

“It got infected the week after you’d been taken,” Thry says.

“By the time we were fetched from university,” Hadspen continues, “it had been cut to the shoulder.”

I close my eyes a moment for courage, then open them again. “And his paintings?”

Hadspen’s face clouds, and he looks towards the fire.

Thry gives the hard answer, as he always does. “All burned save one.”

“Ah.” I bury my face against my arms, pressing my chin into my knees, and let out a sad breath. “Which one?”

“A simple pastoral, the large oak trees along the rise.”

I clear my throat, my eyes blinking away tears. *You took his joy*, I think towards the Bleak.

“We heard what happened, Ember,” Hadspen says, propping himself up on his elbow. “But no one understands *why* it happened as it did. Not even Father.”

I look up as Hadspen continues, “Father said you were down in the crowd but that, when the Death Bleak had raised his sword, he stopped and looked at you. Then after cutting off Father’s hand, he did his,” Hadspen wrinkles his nose, “blood gain with Father’s blood, and carried you off. Father was certain you’d be dead.”

I shake my head.

“I knew you weren’t,” Thry says. “I insisted you were alive. I could feel it.”

“So what happened?” Hadspen presses.

I tilt my head to the side, still as baffled by the tale now as I had been when it happened. “He heard my thoughts, Hads. He heard my silent shouting to spare Father and take me.”

“He can hear your thoughts?” Hadspen lifts an eyebrow.

I raise both my shoulders and then drop them. “It’s more complicated than that.”

“He doesn’t—” Thry glances towards the bed, and when he turns back, his face is set and serious, his dark hair falling over his forehead, his cheekbones catching the shadows left over from the fire. “He doesn’t use you badly, does he?”

“No!” My eyes come wide at the thought. “No. He’s never even— No. He’s not—he’s not what you think he is.”

Hadspen snorts. “You speak as if you have a friendship.”

“Hads,” Thry warns.

I grip Hadspen’s arm, feeling a rise of affection for his loyalty. “No friendship, but rather an understanding. We’re both—we’re—I suppose we’re waiting to see who ends the other first. We are connected; our lives and paths have been woven together.”

“How could you have formed a connection with the Bleak? Did you hear how, before burning Hill House, he slaughtered a young mother for a blood gain, in one of the outlying farms? Her husband found her—”

“I’m not going to sit by, wondering when I’m going to die, Hadspen,” I snap. “So, yes, I’ve spoken with him. What else would you have me do?” I press my lips together and tuck my hair behind my ear, struggling with the impossible balancing of my emotions. I don’t know how to describe the way our fates are bound, how we spend hours every day in each other’s company, both of us waiting for him to make a decision as I attempt to strengthen the Pyre.

Hadspen sits up and turns, facing me directly. He lowers his face, lets out a long breath, and then lifts his eyes to mine, giving me a smile instead of censure. “I’m sorry. And I know you can’t help it. You’re too nice to people, Ember—or to morbid creatures, as the case may be.”

Thry cuffs him in the face. Hadspen springs, knocking Thry onto his back. I jump to my knees, laughing, egging them on. Then the door opens, and we all freeze.

“Goodness be, child, it’s a ruckus,” Miranda says.

Thry pushes Hadspen away and collects himself onto his feet. Seeing a tray in Miranda’s hands, I scramble to my feet and go to help her.

“I heard the rumors of their arrival and came as soon as I could. Warm cider, ginger cakes, a bit of cream. Boys,” she says knowingly, after I’ve taken her tray, “are always hungry.”

“Miranda, let me introduce you to my brothers. Hadspen—” Hadspen puts his hands behind his back and nods. “And Thry.” Thry moves his head

to force the hair from over his face, and lifts a hand in greeting.

"Oh, there now. Look at your handsome faces. As pleasant as I've seen these three hundred years."

Hadspen laughs, thinking it a joke, but Thry's eyes move from her face to mine. I bring the tray before the fire, and Miranda sees us all settled around.

"See that you share it between you now. I've a stew on, some bread almost done, and I might try my hand at caramels, if you don't mind. I assume you'll be up talking as much as you can."

Miranda surveys the trio of us, smiles deeply, and closes the door behind her.

"Well." Hadspen takes a large bite of ginger cake and says, "Again, not what I was expecting."

"She seems a good person," Thry says as I hand him a mug of cider.

"She is," I answer, wrapping my fingers around my own warm ceramic mug, blowing the cider to cool it. "Since the day I arrived, she's taken good care of me."

"What is she doing here?" Hadspen asked, already reaching for a second piece.

"Is she really three hundred years old?" Thry questions.

"She was here when Sperro was a young man, before he—before he turned."

"Sperro?"

"The Death Bleak, the master of the Pyre. His name is Sperro Magna. Actually, he was a Lectus Born before he fell into the ways of the blood gain."

Hadspen and Thry exchange a look with one other. The giddiness of their arrival has worn off, and due seriousness settles between the three of us. Sighing, Hadspen stretches out on his back and looks at the fire. Thry picks at a piece of ginger cake. I watch both of them, my disbelief of having their company mingling with a raging need for them to never leave me.

"We are taking you away from here," Thry says quietly. "We will not leave you to whatever fate he has planned."

I shake my head, wishing I didn't have to fight the words I want desperately to make true. "But don't you understand? He only spared Father for my willingness to come."

“We all agreed,” Hadspen insists, crossing his arms and staring up at the ceiling, “that it’s better if Father dies than you. All of us: Father. Myself. Even Thry.”

“No.” I close my eyes at the thought. “I couldn’t live with it. Don’t you see? Besides,” I take a long breath and curl up beside Hadspen, my head tucked against his chest as he puts his arm around me, “I have a work to do here.”

“What do you mean?” Hadspen asks. Thry is watching me, his eyes intent.

“I’m a—I think I’m the only one that can help Sperro come back, before he is lost forever, and he will soon be making his choice.”

“Is it even possible for him to come back?” Thry asks, his fingers moving through imaginary circular patterns.

“Come back?” Hadspen asks.

“I think so,” I say, answering Thry and ignoring Hadspen. “He would have to want it more than anything else, to begin a recovery of his light lines. Would I have been sent here if it were not a possibility?”

“Sent by whom?” Hadspen asks. “Is anyone going to answer my questions?”

But it is Thry who answers, “By the Lights.”

And now I confront my brother with a bare expression, waiting for him to tell what he knows.

“Why would the Lights send—” Hadspen begins.

He’s interrupted by Thry, who asks, “How many light lines has he given as forfeit?”

“Oh, it’s gotta be five, by the looks of him.” Hadspen again takes the conversation, and I can hear the vibrations of his voice in his chest. “He’s the darkest being I’ve ever seen.”

But Thry looks for my answer.

“He’s killed nine lines,” I whisper, “and is trying for the tenth.”

“What?” Hadspen shifts, and I with him. “But that’s impossible. It isn’t done. I mean, wouldn’t that kill him anyway? All ten?”

“It would kill any light in his soul,” I say. “It would mean terrible things for the nations. More horrific than anything we’ve yet faced.”

Thry’s face stills, and he closes his eyes. “Ember, are you saying that he seeks to become a Beast of Ten?”

I sit up. “What do you know of that, Thry?”

Thry is sitting with his arm resting on his knee, moving his fingertips against themselves. He opens his eyes but doesn't look at me as he answers, "I know less about that than I know about your being a Virtus Third."

"What in the magick's slant are you two talking about?" Hadspen swears, propping himself up on his elbow. "Ember? A Virtus Third? Sent by the Lights?" Then he snorts.

"I've known for a long time that you were born after me, Ember," Thry says, ignoring Hadspen. "You are the third born triplet. It was only the last few years that I have suspected you to be a Virtus Third rather than a gifted Line Sanctum. Father said Mother had suspected and had told him so—to say nothing of the Seer that once wandered through the Hills of Avaine."

"What are you talking about?" Hadspen challenged.

"Ember's wisp," Thry explains, "isn't really a wisp."

"What do you know of that?" I ask Thry, getting onto my knees. "The Bleak knows what my wisp really means, but I don't, and you know I cannot read the books in the library."

"There's a library?" Thry asks with interest.

Waving a hand between me and Thry, Hadspen interrupts, "Will someone please explain what is going on?"

"Ember was born third," Thry says, rubbing his eyes with his fingers.

"But you're a Third," Hadspen interjects.

"No, I'm actually an Intuit. Mother hid it from us, convincing Father to do the same even after she died."

"But why? And how did you know?" Hadspen asks, looking at me in a strange, complicated way. "You hear of Thirds often enough. There were two at university in the dorms. Why hide that Ember was one?"

"That's what I've been wondering all these weeks," I admit, looking expectantly at Thry.

"Mother told me when I was quite young. She made me promise not to tell you, unless something happened."

"You wretch!" I cry, just as Hadspen growls, "What a git you are, Thry."

Thry shrugs and shifts, moving his boots towards the fire, his elbows on both knees, head bent in thought.

"So Mother knew I was a Virtus Third?"

Thry looks at me. "She knew there was something, but then she was gone. I've read enough, taking advantage of the university's library, and I began to piece together what she knew and what I did. Your wisp was never

a wisp, but rather something called an Ilaria. It's—it's something often described in the tales of the Virtus Thirds, where it follows them during their life, until they find the thing they are appointed to do. Then it transforms somehow."

"Speaking of," Hadspen says on the heels of Thry's words, "where is your wisp?"

"Ilaria," Thry corrects.

"Shove off, Thry," Hadspen says, as he always does whenever Thry corrects him, which is often.

I smile.

"Ember?" Thry says, curious to hear the answer to Hadspen's question.

"It's a fire now. A rather strange, liquid-like flame. It's in the hearth of the Bleak's personal chambers. None of his beastly guard can enter, only I and the other servants who were stolen out of time. It carries some healing power, but I can't understand more than that."

"Perhaps it is giving you space to work on your Bleak without the filthy magicks of the guards who surround him," Thry suggests.

"He isn't *her* Bleak," Hadspen snaps defensively.

"Yes he is, Hads," I sigh. "I didn't think he was either. But this charge was given to me." I hold out my hand so Thry can see the ring clearly. "Another flame lit by the Lights and then transformed into this ring of glass."

Thry takes my hand in both of his and presses his thumbs against the glass ring. "From what I've read, it is rare for the Heavens to gift a physical object to a mortal, though there are stories of other Virtus Thirds receiving what they referred to as a Bestowal." He lifts his grey eyes to mine, pushing his hair away from his eyes with one hand. "The Lights work in symbolism, Ember, and you must study out the layers in these gifts to know what they mean. But, as an Intuit, I can tell you this is not glass."

"It looks like glass, Thry," Hadspen counters.

I ignore him, keeping my eyes on Thry. "Then what is it?"

"I think you are wearing the physical substance of hope."

Hadspen snorts. "Hope is an idea."

Thry bunches his face in frustration and turns his head, glaring. "Do you want to know why you fail your exams? As miraculous as it may sound to your own ears, you do not—Hadspen of Avaine—know everything." Rolling his eyes, Thry looks back to me. "*All* things have substance. It is

only that we cannot often see this with our mortal eyes. A greater understanding of such things has to come through a Bestowal of some kind. The Lights," Thry adds, "have great interest in what you are doing here, Ember."

I look from him to Hadspen. "Do you see why I must stay?"

"No—" Hadspen says as he flicks a crumb of ginger cake at the fire.

"Yes—" says Thry.

"No!" Hadspen says, turning his head and looking at me. "Ember, if there is a way for us to take you away from here, we must try. You don't owe this Death Bleak, or anyone else, anything. You must go—"

"And go where, Hadspen?" I counter. "If I come home, the Bleak will know where to find me—or Father. If I disappear, then Father will be killed all the same, and I'll have no home. Do the three of us leave behind all the lands we know and stay hidden, hoping that the power of the Bleak does not spread? Hoping he will not hunt me down to finish his quest? That's with the brass assumption I could even leave this forest. We are bound, he and I. We cannot be separated anymore. And if I can prevent— He's almost a Beast of Ten, Hads. You thought the nations trembled before? All the evil in the world is waiting for him to fall into the abyss of becoming such a beast, for then he will terrify the nations unchecked."

"The Lights will check him," Hadspen argues. "The Lights are more powerful than all of us."

"The Lights have sent Ember," Thry says softly.

Hadspen's jaw tightens with anger, and he looks towards the fire. "You don't know that."

"The Pyre needs me to stay, Hads." I move to his side. He won't look at me, but I settle with my knee touching his and link my arm through his arm as I rest my head on his shoulder.

He still won't look at me.

"I can feel the power of this place," I whisper, "and I respond to it. In many ways, it feels very much like my home—however lonely without you both."

I hear Thry pull himself up, and listen to the sounds of his feet as he begins to pace around my room. Hadspen does not speak, but he leans his head against mine and closes his other hand around my arm protectively.

"If this is your path," Hadspen says, "wouldn't the Lights have prepared some way for me and Thry to follow you? You wouldn't have been sent to

do this alone. Why else would we have been born triplet?"

"We cannot always follow each other everywhere," Thry says from across the room.

"I don't see why not," Hadspen replies. "It's not as if we ever intend to let Ember be married."

"True," Thry says, sounding resigned.

"What?" I sit up straight and look from Hadspen to Thry. "I'll marry whomever I choose."

"Not while I breathe," Hadspen laughs. "I've never met anyone I'd like to see you take as husband. Not even at university."

"You'll be hard-pressed to find a boy Hadspen won't terror off," Thry adds, coming over and dropping down on my other side. "No one is good enough for you."

"Talking about my marriage seems rather moot, considering," I remind them.

Miranda bursts into the room with stew and bread.

"The caramels are a bit of a mess," she says as she fusses about us. "But I'll set them to rights, and we'll enjoy them in the morning. Now. You three must eat up and—ah, I see you've enjoyed all the ginger cakes. Balint always said that was my best. Go on. Don't be shy. Eat up. The young must eat."

We do, and afterwards we speak of past days and long memories. We speak of Father. Of Mother. We speak of whatever we can. I show them the drawings I've done: the birds, the forest, the windows of the Pyre. But I do not show them any of the portraits of Sperro. We do not speak of him.

Late into the night, Thry sits against the headboard of my bed while I snuggle against his chest, watching Hadspen—sprawled across the foot of my bed—as he tells us stories. And lying in Thry's arms, I fall asleep.

* * *

Breakfast the next morning is somber. Miranda wakes us with some well-prepared temptations, and so we roll off our various claims upon my bed and gather around the fire, the breakfast tray between us. My brothers discuss what they might do to convince the Bleak they should stay at the Pyre.

“He doesn’t want us on the Pyre grounds,” Thry says. “He senses it makes Ember stronger.”

“Says the family prophet,” Hadspen says, irritable from too few hours of sleep.

“Says the Intuit,” I rejoin, not feeling very good myself.

“That just really sours the lot,” Hadspen argues. “Thry is an Intuit, admittedly a middling grace—” Thry kicks him. “Ouch! You’re such a cur, Thry. Anyway, we now think Ember is a Third, a Virtus Third, no less.”

“So it seems,” I say.

“So we know,” Thry affirms.

“What does that leave me with?”

“The looks,” Thry and I say at the same time, which makes us both laugh and makes Hadspen smile. And when Hadspen smiles, it is like the season has changed. The room thaws.

“Well, I didn’t want to say anything,” he says in fake humility.

Thry raises an eyebrow and moves his hair from before his face with his fingers, muttering, “You *always* want to say something.”

“I always know *what* to say.” Hadspen gives Thry a superior smile. “There’s a difference.”

I snort, and Thry gives Hadspen the lazy look he usually reserves for dogs.

“Oh come off it, you twit!” Then Hadspen lunges.

He tumbles onto Thry, who is still trying to eat breakfast, and who now is beginning to choke. I’m chiding both of them, laughing as Thry fights his way on top. Hadspen coughs, then laughs, before yelling and throwing Thry back to the ground, smashing a biscuit into Thry’s face.

When the door opens, I turn my head to tell Miranda I’m sorry for the noise. But my smile drops. The boys stop rolling. Hadspen, pinning Thry into place, looks up.

It’s Sperro.

The merriment in the room dies immediately, and my brothers and I stumble to our feet. I must have been too distracted to feel his thoughts coming my way.

“I’m sorry if we were too loud,” I say, breathless, brushing the crumbs from the dress I’d slept in, my hair unkempt and wild.

Sperro has only been to the bell tower suite once since I’ve inhabited it, when he was angry that I’d worked on his tenth line. Today he looks about

the room, something in his empty face recognizing what he sees. But I cannot hear a single thought.

I've never asked Miranda about the history of my room, beyond knowing that Ederra had lived here and that it is a place of strong powers. But the expression on the Bleak's face makes me wonder what the full significance is.

At length he says, "They must go now."

Thry's hand slips into mine, and I can feel Hadspen stiffen. Warning my brothers with a look, I let go of Thry's hand and step towards Sperro.

"Is there no more time we can claim? Even a few—"

"No." Sperro looks only at me, ignoring them. "I do not want them at the Pyre."

"Please," I plead as I step forward and grasp Sperro's hand. He flinches and takes a half step backwards but does not take his hand from mine. "Might they not—"

"December."

"I know—"

He's angry, and his face twists as he grabs my arm and marches me out the. Once in the open corridor, he slams me against the wall.

"I gave you a promise, December," he says in a low voice, the words scratching the air between us. My arm, where he grips it, feels like it will snap. "I've kept my promise to not harm your brothers for one night. Don't break yours to me. Send them away. Now."

"They would cause no disruption—" I stop speaking. We both know, Sperro and I, that this is not true. Having them at the Pyre is a help. I know it, and, through my feet, I can feel that the Pyre does too.

Sperro looks down, before again drilling his eyes on me. "I want them out of my forest or I'll take them both, now."

"But—"

"Gone," Sperro barks. "We promised, and I hold you to the terms."

I jerk away from his hand, stepping back, my desperation turning on its head and ending with a flare of anger.

He turns away, walking down the bell tower corridor, the dim morning light catching on the patch magicks of his cloak.

I follow.

"You want them gone from your forest?" I shout, coming at Sperro's back. He ignores me, so I run forward, pulling him around by his arm so

I'm standing in front of him. "Then I want all of your spells gone. I want your slant crafts gone. I never want to see any who practice the dark magicks step across the threshold of the Pyre again. That includes whomever you're still using for your awful purposes. That includes your cursed guards."

"What makes you think you have the power to make such claims?" he counters, taking a step towards me, his face inches from mine. "Be *grateful* I have the few alliances I've kept. Do you not recall, December? The malice? The spite? I'm certain your fingers remember them quickly enough." He lifts his hands, like he wants nothing more than to end me where I stand. "Be glad I'm looking for a way to defend this stronghold. Meridaithe and Callidus are building strength. They are coming for me. They are most certainly coming to ensure that I take you. And if I do not, they will try to end me. It will be a battle like you cannot comprehend."

I try to pull away from the confusion that's emanating from him, a grasping, clinging darkness. But he grabs my wrist, and, watching me struggle, he lifts his chin in satisfaction. "The moment I take you," he hisses, "I will be strong enough they won't dare enter the forest, let alone the Pyre. They will *tremble* before the Beast of Ten! And you are nothing more to this place than that final take."

I'm shaking my head, my teeth clenched, the tears building and falling to my cheeks.

"Let that be a reminder," he continues with malice. "The Pyre is not yours to control. No matter how it's claimed you."

The Bleak flings me away and walks into the dim corridor without looking back. I watch him disappear, running the palms of my hands across my cheeks, shaking.

* * *

Bless Miranda for her goodness, for it's the only way any of us get through. She's packed more food than my brothers could possibly eat.

"You head back to the West," she says, giving them both a pat on each forlorn face. "This forest isn't safe for the likes of you. He'll know if you try to hide, and he'll root you out."

"I'm not frightened," Hadspen replies.

Thry just stands solemn, the angles of his body still, watching me with his big, grey eyes.

"For your sister's sake, you clear out," Miranda orders. "I'm here. I'll do my best by her. Now."

"I'm sorry, Ember," Hadspen says when he can't think of anything else to curse. "I'm sorry we can't stay."

"You can't," I answer, the skin beneath my eyes tight from crying. "And I won't leave. I'm going to see this through."

"I don't know what the Lights are thinking," Hadspen complains, and he gives me a long hug. "We will wait right on the forest's edge until we can come for you. We'll wait forever."

"I know."

He steps back as Thry comes forward. Thry doesn't say anything. Just looks at me.

My bottom lip is trembling, so he pulls me into his arms, holding me close enough that it seems all the evil in the world should be banished. Could be banished. The tears don't come with a great sob, but rather they spill down my cheeks in a steady misery, warm, burning my skin.

I swallow, but it takes several moments for the tears to pass and several more before I can pull my face away from Thry's shoulder.

"I don't know the prayers of the Virtus Third," he whispers in my ear when my crying has turned into a quivering sigh. "But I do know the prayers of the Intuit, and they're yours as long as I breathe."

I nod and wipe my nose on my sleeve, trying to pull myself together. But how does one walking with death let her brothers ride away?

You don't, all of my instincts say. But I must.

When Balint brings their horses and they finally mount, it's all I can do to keep quiet, to keep from calling out. And as they ride away, they watch me for as long as they're able. But the trees stand close in this forest, and soon my brothers are hidden from view.

A hand slips into mine.

I look to my side, and there stands Celia, her eyes wide, her rosebud mouth turned down. She's been keeping to herself since my brothers came, but she must have been watching us.

"I never had any brothers," she finally says.

* * *

I spend the rest of the day in bed, crying until I fall asleep.

I don't dream.

As a bit of sun breaks through the clouds just before sunset, I wake. I feel the texture of the blankets around me and hear the echo of my heart beating. Outside my windows, the snow is being blown about by a thoughtless wind. A fine, frozen glitter. It clings to the windows, warming from one moment of sun only to freeze again as the wind sweeps by in the next. It is such a careless beauty, a winter picture as I've never seen.

But it does nothing for the bruises on my heart.

Part Three

The Light Binder

XVII

He's coming.

I open my eyes, seeing only the untouched food Miranda had brought me the night before. All in the bell tower suite is still. Even the fire burns low, as if hesitant to interrupt the tomb-like feeling of the place.

He's coming, the voice of Sperro repeats. I'm too beaten down to even wonder why Sperro is speaking to me now, the first time since we had yelled at each other in the cold corridor.

And you don't even care.

Who's coming? I think. *One of your treacherous enemies?*

I still can't believe I told my brothers I had to stay and that I had believed it. That I still believe it. I can't fathom why I think anything will

come from my being here. Why haven't I tried to leave?

Because you couldn't. And we both know that.

I close my eyes and turn over, trying to disappear from the Bleak into sleep, and from sleep into nothingness.

He's coming into the courtyard now.

I don't ask who is coming.

That Light Binder of yours, you fool. He's just returned.

My eyes fly wide open.

Astrick is here. Astrick. Who seems as strong as Hadspen and as wise as Thry.

Astrick is here.

Unfortunately.

I throw my blanket off, leaving my bedroom without any shoes. The coldness under my feet doesn't even enter my thoughts. I have to get to another living, breathing human being. And as I race down a spiral staircase, there he is, walking across the Great Hall with Sylvain, three satchels across his shoulders.

When he sees me, he smiles, interrupting Sylvain. "Ember!"

I fly towards him, without saying anything, and fling my arms around his chest, gripping his back with my fingers as I hold on as tightly as I am able.

"Life's blood, are you all right?"

I nod, but I don't let go.

Sylvain takes a wordless leave as Astrick asks, "Have you even slept?" He sounds so sympathetic I think my heart will altogether shatter. "Your brothers were worried you wouldn't after they had left."

I step back with a jolt. "My brothers?" I ask, my voice breaking.

"Yes," Astrick answers, his green eyes traveling my face in concern. Then he glances past me, as if he's wondering what the Bleak has been up to. "I know you told me to stay off the road, but when I saw them passing and watched how they moved, both tall and dark-haired, with the same grey eyes I'd found in you, I couldn't help but wonder. So I stepped back onto the path and asked them."

"You spoke with them," I say, letting it come out in one relieved breath. "You spoke with them!"

"I did more than that," Astrick answers. "I sent them, with a note, to my sister. They will stay with us—with her—while I travel back and forth. That

way, they will be on the West Fell, close as they can be, and I'll have greater peace of mind knowing Adele won't be alone. I'll carry messages back and forth between, so you can communicate. They had no idea of who I was, but we talked long enough that I think it was a relief to them how I could come and go."

"Oh, Astrick. Thank you!" I give him another hug. "I'd forgotten to even tell them about you, we were talking of so many things. *Thank you*." As I pull away, I see his full smile has come out.

"Thank the Most High we came upon the same road. They were worried there would be consequences from their visit—"

"They don't understand," I reply, bringing the backs of my fingers across my cheek to catch a tired tear. "They don't know what is happening here."

He raises an eyebrow in acknowledgement, and lets his eyes wander over my state of dress. "It's difficult to understand, from the outside."

"The inside is just as difficult."

"Yes." He runs his hand through his hair. "Do you think Miranda will feed us before I get back to my work on those windows?"

"For you? She'll do anything."

* * *

"It's not that I'm ungrateful for the hope the Lights have given me," I explain to Astrick later that night.

He's still working in the Long Hall and has cut several pieces of glass based on equations he'd figured out on the road. I'm sitting against the wall, beside one of his incandescent lanterns, a blanket about my shoulders.

"But do I always have to confront darkness before such hope can come?"

"I don't know, Ember. I'm sure it's been unimaginable, what you've had to do." He looks up from his work. "Whatever you're having to do, rather. Who can say why you must battle time and time again. But…"

"But?"

"But I do know that these lanterns wouldn't be half so remarkable were they not set in darkness. Dispelling darkness is the province of light."

I hold his gaze but don't answer.

“Light is the only thing that grows stronger when darkness deepens,” he continues as he goes back to his work. “It is the way of things.”

* * *

Sperro and I walk the forest together come morning, but neither of us speak. I return in time to eat the midday meal at the Pyre, and he disappears into the library.

* * *

“Did you think of anything while you were gone, aside from these windows?” I ask Astrick.

“Admittedly, no,” he confesses, not looking at me as he lifts a piece of cut glass into place. “Much to my sister’s dismay—ah, there it is. The proportions are correct. I’ll solder it first thing in the morning.”

He’s been back for two days, and most of what he’s spoken of is windows, windows, windows. Not that I’ve minded. I suppose I’m impressed with his focus. We are in a hallway where Astrick has been replacing a single piece of broken glass. He’d been conversing all afternoon —with himself as much as with me—about his theories on the construction of the Pyre’s windows, and he hasn’t stopped with nightfall.

I yawn, leaning back against the wall as I cross my arms.

It has been a quieter day than most. I’d asked Sperro earlier if he wished me to work again on his tenth line. He’d called me a string of offensive names and banished me from his gloomy presence, a directive I was only too happy to obey. If he wants to wallow alone in his library, plotting how to confront the dark powers of the southern nations on his own, by all means, I will let him.

“Is there any other work you’re going to do tonight?” I ask Astrick, leaving my thoughts of Sperro behind. “Miranda was insistent I not let you work yourself to death.”

“Speaking of night—” Astrick sounds distracted, clearly not interested in Miranda’s grey-haired worrying. “There is something I’ve been speculating about, and it’s the perfect night to experiment.” Picking up one

of his lanterns, he lifts it above the sill that runs along the bank of windows and begins tracing his fingers along the stone.

"What is it?" I ask, pulling myself away from the opposite wall and stepping to his side.

"Look at these markings." Astrick points to a trail of small symbols, no larger than a ladybug, carved into the stone. "Do you have any idea of what these mean?"

Standing on my toes to see better, I move my eyes along the markings. The symbols are set in what appears to be random patterns. "I haven't the faintest idea," I reply, having never noticed them before. "Do you?"

Astrick quirks his head to the side, shrugging his shoulders in a casual, yet controlled movement. "I noticed them before I left, and they wouldn't leave my mind. In the few nights since I returned, I've spent hours wandering the Pyre, making notes of which symbols are carved into which windowsills. All these markings," Astrick moves his hand along the length, "are a collection of only a few symbols, repeated in different ways. They're letters from an old tongue, see?"

I nod.

"My suspicion is this," Astrick continues, propping his elbow on the sill and finally paying me a portion of his attention. "They represent where to set candles."

His eyes are bright from the idea, their green-glass color catching the lantern's light. I look away, towards the stone windowsill, and press my finger into one of the marks.

"Why do you think that?"

Astrick's gaze is back on the windows—which makes it easier for me to watch him—and he shifts as if the answer to my question is clearly before me. "You've been putting candles in the windows of the Pyre, haven't you?"

"Obviously. It's how you're here in the first place."

"And, obviously, there's power in it. Well," he moves his tongue along his bottom lip, "I've begun to have some thoughts of my own. As these windows were built to display light—by cut, shape, and pattern—I'm asking myself, what if we were to place candles in every place there is a marking? What would it look like?"

"If the windows were designed like your lanterns, I can't imagine how the Long Hall might look. It would be a tremendous display."

He steps away from the window. “As remarkable as it might look on the inside, I wonder what it would look like from outside the Pyre. The building would positively shatter the forest with the vision of light.”

“Should we try it?”

“I’m willing.” Astrick answers so instantly that I know he’s been planning to all along. “Should we begin now?”

I laugh. “Why not?”

“Good.” Astrick withdraws a folded piece of paper from the pocket of his breeches. “Because I spent last night deciphering the marks, and I think I may have worked out the system. I think that perhaps these symbols indicate the size of candle to be placed in each spot. You have two different heights from Adele’s candles and a third height from the candles I brought from the East. The heights of the candles we’ve made here at the Pyre are less uniform, but close enough. They are primarily what we have left now as you’ve probably burned through a majority of the others.” He looks at me for confirmation before continuing. “There are usually three markings in each windowsill—”

“Did you spend *any* time on the glasswork today?” I half laugh as I look at the complicated set of notes in his hand. “Or was it all spent figuring out this possible code for placing candles?”

“Of course I did glasswork,” he says defensively, so earnest he misses the teasing beneath my words. “But don’t you see it all ties together? I’m not only here to fix the windows; I’m here to help illuminate them. It’s part of what I do.”

“Yes, I—” I smile. “I’m assuming you’ve already picked out a window to try?”

* * *

After gathering a basketful of candles in the Long Hall—Astrick leaving his jacket thrown across the table, his shirt’s sleeves rolled up—we make our way up to a window on the third floor of the Pyre that can be seen from the front courtyard. It is the large stained glass piece depicting a line of massive trees, hanging ripe with fruit.

There are seventy-seven marks along the windowsill, and Astrick arranges the candles in accordance with his notes. While Astrick focuses, I light a candle in the lantern and begin to heat the bottom of each of the

others before securing them in place. “We really should see if the underfloors have any saucers,” I say as I work. “Celia is complaining about all the wax she’s scraping off the stones.”

Astrick looks up from the messy page of his markings, notes what I’ve said, and then returns his eyes to the writing on the page before him. I envy him his ability to read and write, and I wonder if he will think less of me when he finds out that I can’t.

“The candles are set, Astrick. Should we light them?”

He nods, looking at the candles we’ve set, then frowns, nods again, and folds the paper in his hands. “I’m certain I don’t have all the heights right, but let’s see what happens.”

Lighting the candles in the corridor produces an immediate effect very reminiscent of Astrick’s lanterns. I step back and tilt my face up. The brilliance. And beauty. And strength.

“This is amazing.”

“It’s a start,” Astrick says, not as impressed as I am. “When we figure out the exact measurements, it will be—” He lifts his fingers in an exacting movement.

“Should we go down to the courtyard now?”

Shaking his head, Astrick steps to the window and begins trading the tallest candles with those of medium height. As he moves them, more and more light fills the passage. It’s startling, and I begin to laugh.

Astrick steps back, relaxing his shoulders, letting his focus fall. “Just imagine when we’ve figured out the right height of candle for each symbol. This entire building will be completely alive with light. To think you only asked me for five thousand. We need more, many more.” His serious face breaks into a smile. “Race you to the courtyard?”

We rush down to the Great Hall, laughing as we try to get ahead of one another.

Two of the Bleak’s guards are standing at the front door, and they watch us pass with suspicion, closing the doors after us. Running down the stairs, into the main courtyard, we catch our breaths, turning, craning our necks upward.

My lips part in wonder.

The window is blazing.

It throws such light out into the forest. The glass trees are alive, soaking in the candles’ flames as if that light is how they find nourishment, pulling

the light up through the trunks, spreading it out into the leaves. But the fruit —the fruit is blinding white. It is a beacon. It reminds me of my ring and something else that I cannot place but know I've touched.

"This window is visible for miles along the south road," Astrick says, interrupting my thoughts. I glance over. He is standing in his shirtsleeves, his hands resting on the back of his head in amazement, his breath hanging in the cold of the dark air, chest rising and falling. "Have you ever seen anything so beautiful, Ember?"

I begin to shake my head, to say I haven't, but then I realize what the fruit in the window reminds me of. My realization feels like both the weight of stones and the discovery of wings.

"Sperro," I answer, knowing it is true. "It feels like Sperro."

"What?" Astrick says, not hearing me clearly.

"The Bleak," I say. "The light in his tenth line feels like this," I wave my hand towards the window, "every time I've flared it. It's— The light there is immeasurable. Endless, like the stars. The vastness of the entire night sky."

I look up, expecting a thick fortress of clouds. I gasp. "The stars."

Astrick cranes his neck back, his mouth closed carefully.

"The clouds have broken above the Pyre," I say.

"I've never seen that before." Astrick looks towards me. "I mean, the stars shine often enough over the West Fell but not above the Forest of Naeethe. Not in all my life have I seen this."

"Powers are certainly moving," I reply softly.

Astrick frowns. "Did you say you were flaring his tenth line? Has he— you wouldn't need to flair the tenth line if the other nine were still in place, would you?"

"No," I answer. "Usually the tenth line stays untouched, the purest segment of any soul."

"Life's blood," he mutters. "Is he going for Beast of Ten?" When I don't answer, he lifts a hand to his face. "That is madness."

"I know."

"Ember, he can't—"

"I know. That is the work we are doing here. That is what we are fighting."

"By the Heavens." He drops his hands, full understanding in his face. "How is such a thing to be done?"

Crossing my arms against the cold, I shake my head. “If I could see it clearly myself, I could answer you.”

The line of Astrick’s mouth takes on a thoughtful slant. “Sylvain told me you were studying to become a Line Sanctum before you came here.”

“I was. And although I didn’t get very far, I learned enough to do some of the work.”

“It does not seem as if you are a simple Line Sanctum,” Astrick remarks carefully.

“It does not seem I am,” I reply at length.

When I don’t give him any more information and he’s waited long enough to know I’m not going to, he clears his throat. “As we both know, a Binder is someone who has the ability to join two things together in some way, whether it be two materials or people or ideas.”

“And you’re not simply a Binder but a Light Binder.”

“Says your Bleak.” Astrick looks away from me, towards the shining window of the Pyre. “I’m assuming that he finds Light Binders to be quite meddlesome.”

“He didn’t say Light Binders were meddlesome,” I answer. “He said he hates them.”

Astrick laughs. And the first part of that laugh is confident, unsurprised. But the end of it turns into the sound of a young man weighed down by the threat of something insidious.

“I’ve never studied, in depth, the binders. How are the gifts divided?”

“Different kinds of Binders are ordained to different kinds of work,” Astrick tells me. “Some work only with the tangible, like your gardener. Some are anchored in the intangible, thoughts and desires, like your unscrupulous merchant. Light Binders, like myself, bind both—the tangible and the intangible.” He waits a moment. “Then there are those who choose to bind together the twisted magicks rather than the good. The Witch Meridaithe—who at times stalks these woods—has some capacity with binding. Legend tells that it was she who bound the work of the Death Bleak to Callidus, the man who enticed him into his destruction.”

“Callidus.” I frown. “What do you know of him?”

“What do I know of Callidus?” Astrick crosses his arms tight across his chest. “The lore is that Callidus was the name of the man who led the Bleak away from his calling and into the dark.”

A winter breeze has begun to stir up the night, and I shiver, no longer warm from the excitement of lighting the great window above the courtyard.

Sperro had mentioned seeing Callidus, fighting against Callidus at the ruins of Slatt Clave. This man, this creature, must be something powerful. I look towards Astrick, only to find him watching me. “What is Callidus?” I ask.

“They say Callidus is a Thrasher.”

My heart tumbles down at hearing the ugly word. “How could a Thrasher possibly have been welcome at the Pyre?”

Astrick shakes his head. “Meridaithe bound for him deception and sophistry, or so the man who trained me said. Callidus was very hard to detect. He was an acquaintance of the Bleak’s father. And when the Bleak became master of the Pyre, Callidus was very flattering. It was he who first began to seep the twisted magicks into the Pyre.”

“Yes, I know. Miranda spoke of it. And Sperro embraced them, the magicks.”

“Did you say Sperro?”

“Sperro Magna is the Bleak’s name.”

Astrick lifts his eyebrows. “I thought I’d heard you say the name before. We on the edge of the forest always thought his name had been forgotten.”

“I’m sure it has been lost to all the nations, only those few here remembering,” I sigh, feeling the desolate weight of the past few days still in its place. “What a thing to have lost.”

“What a thing to have desecrated,” he answers.

My silence agrees with his, and then I persist in my questions. “So what else can a Light Binder do that is different from other Binders?”

“Light Binders join things that have exponential increase,” Astrick answers. “In essence, we bind good to good, and that spills over into something far more than what the separate entities could have been before. I’m—I’m trying to think of a way this is applied in the practical world—”

“Your lanterns?” I interrupt.

“Oh, yes, of course.” Astrick laughs at himself. “Very much so. I bind the glass and mirrors with a pure metal and truth, and the effects are greater light, greater beauty, and greater power. That makes me wonder if the windows were not built by a Light Binder—you see, every time I’ve lit a

lantern in the Long Hall, I have felt as if the Pyre were taking a long breath."

"I believe it does. You must bring more lanterns. You must make more. What else? Your gift is for more than just lanterns, clearly."

"Emotions, virtues, thoughts. To take you as an example, I would wish to bind your hope to your courage, so you would not fall prey to the discouragement that fills this place when your Bleak walks the halls or when the darkness becomes too deep for you to bear."

My Bleak. My stubborn, horrifying, steeped and pitiful Bleak. I sigh as Astrick continues.

"I would also bind your virtue to your determination."

"Virtue?"

His eyes search mine. "Yes, virtue: power, strength, purity. You are a Virtus Third, are you not?"

My expression asks him how he knows before my words can.

"I've had my suspicions—every time you enter a room the windows are a touch more brilliant than before. The fires pulse. The stones of the Pyre feel more settled in their places. Then there is your ring, a Bestowal, if I'm not mistaken—the binding of Heaven and earth. But you just now solidified my suspicions. For if the Death Bleak is truly trying to make Beast of Ten, then the Lights would send the equivalent power to fight against this. Only a Virtus Third could have the hope of pulling him back."

"Or be enough of a blood gain for him to achieve his desires," I add softly.

Astrick sets his face at my words and takes a step away from me, arms still crossed, head bent. After several moments of stillness, he begins to walk the courtyard in the circle of his own thoughts. Stopping several feet away from me, he looks at my face, his breath hovering lightly in the night air.

It is too cold to be out, and we've talked of many heavy things, making the entire struggle feel more tenuous, more susceptible to the wrongness against it. But the light from the window still shines.

Astrick's voice calls me from my thoughts. "It is past midnight by now."

"Yes?"

"The first hours of the night are the strongest for all forces."

My frown falls fast. “So I’ve learned. How is that so? I’d assumed it was just for the twisted magicks.”

Astrick shakes his head. “Powers as well. Good forces. For the first hours of the night must pull from the depth of hope.”

“Hope in what?”

“A new day to come. Sunrise. Victory. My tutor, an old man from the next village over, thought that slant forces wanted us to believe that darkness has an independent foothold in the night, that it can exercise its power, where the light cannot, but it is not true. Would you—” he interrupts himself. “I could do a binding for you, if you like?”

I don’t answer right away. But when I do, it is with another question. “Do you think the Lights intended for you to be here, Astrick?”

“It feels that way, doesn’t it?”

“It feels like you were born for the Pyre,” I give as my honest answer.

“If you were sent for the Bleak, perhaps I was sent for you.”

“Perhaps.”

“Perhaps,” he says as he smiles at me from across the cold of the courtyard.

“What would I need to do to prepare for a binding?” I ask him.

Astrick shrugs. “Where is the place of strongest offering at the Pyre?”

“There are two places that don’t sway as much with the shifting moods of the Bleak,” I answer, moving my hands along my arms to stave off the cold. “The library, which Sperro inhabits most nights, and then the bell tower suite, which is where I stay.”

“Do we risk the library or the bell tower?”

I reach towards the Bleak—he is in the library.

“The bell tower.”

We don’t speak as we climb the stairs to the bell tower suite. Astrick has reclaimed his jacket from the Long Hall and righted his sleeves, pulling his jacket into place. It’s dark green, the same color as my cloak, and it suits him. He is careful with it.

“Adele makes my clothes,” Astrick explains. “She’s a seamstress as well as a candlemaker, and very particular about her clothing. And I’m an extension of that, so I wear what she dictates. If I ever ruin any of my clothes along the merchant trail, she doesn’t speak to me for hours.”

As we walk through the Pyre, he speaks about his home, about the stretch of towns that exist on the west edge of the forest, and what his

boyhood was like in that place.

"Miranda came from the western edge of the forest," I tell him.

"Really?" Astrick sounds interested. "I'll have to ask her where."

"You might not know the place by now. Three hundred years is a long time."

"It is at that."

* * *

The fire in my room has burned down lower than usual, and Astrick adds several split logs from the pile at its side, until it is again a brave blaze. He stands up when he finishes, brushing his hands as he turns to study my diamond-paned windows, which stretch along the entire wall.

"Curious," he says. He walks towards the panes and presses his fingers to the glass. "This is the only window I've seen at the Pyre that simply repeats the diamond pattern." Moving his hand along the stone windowsill, the one wide enough for me to lie down on, he starts to count the candle marks. "One, two, three…"

Along the entire stretch of wall, there are fifty-seven marks.

"The symbols are offset—they're not in a line, but rather they appear randomly placed. I can't imagine what the effect would be." Astrick turns back towards me. "Are you ready, then?"

I nod, feeling nervous. I'd never had a binding—though father has.

Astrick leaves the window and crosses the room. "It's been months since I've bound any emotions, I've spent so much time on the merchant road." But he doesn't look nervous; he looks confident. "First, we kneel before one another, and I will take your wrists in my hands."

Nodding, I kneel down on the soft rug, and he does the same. I extend my hands forward, and he catches them lightly, wrapping his fingers around my wrists, his thumbs resting on the pulse point in each one. I can feel the beating of his own blood through his thumbs, drumming into my veins, and again, I find the touch an astounding thing.

"I ask your permission to perform this binding," Astrick says.

"You have it," I say.

"No." His mouth dips into a smile. "Sorry. You're supposed to ask, 'What is to be bound?'"

"What," I repeat, "is to be bound?"

“Your hope with your courage.”

I can feel the press of every one of his fingers along my wrists.

“From this point on,” Astrick continues, “they will manifest as one strength, but,” he states with a great seriousness, “only so much as you apply yourself unto both.”

“Good.”

His eyes crease. “You must say, ‘I accept.’”

“I accept.” And as I say these words, I wonder why the Lights saw fit to give Astrick such great training in his gift, whereas they gave me none.

Astrick closes his eyes and appears to lose himself in the steady count of his breathing. At first, I only feel the warmth of his hands, but then my hope feels pulled from my heart—determined, an expression of white light—and my courage is coaxed from the long lines of my bones—tinged in the orange flame.

They flare, and I make a sound as despair flees from before them. The flares of each have now overlapped, and I can hear Astrick speaking words that result in the binding of the two lights where they have crossed paths—so instead of returning to their places, they are now stretched and tied. I marvel, feeling simultaneously new and ancient.

A final word, a benediction of feeling, and then Astrick’s hands slide away from mine. I open my eyes. We don’t speak for a long time: me, grappling with the new underpinnings of however my soul has now been tethered, and him, watching wordlessly, an artist’s expression of waiting to see if his work will be valued.

“I think,” I say, taking as deep a breath as I’m able, “I might need to wait before you bind any more. I’m—I need to spend time with—with this.”

“As is often the case.” Astrick stands. He offers me his hand, that tremendously human, living hand, and lifts me to my feet.

XVIII

“What have you done?”

“What do you mean?” I ask, not fully awake.

“What have you done!”

The length of the day before is still in my head, and after I open my eyes and see Sperro sitting in the chair by my hearth, I answer, “Why don’t you just come into my head and see?”

I’ve tried. His voice inside my mind makes me wince. He thinks it’s funny, but the smirk on his face doesn’t last long. He returns to the matter at hand. *Every time I try, I’m blinded. Unless you think directly at me, into that level of light I cannot go.*

“Perhaps there’s a reason for it.” Sitting up, I brush my hair from my face. “I admit it’s a relief that you no longer have access to my thoughts with such ease. I wasn’t learning very quickly how to keep them from you.” I pause, my face creasing from newly fled sleep and question. “What are you doing here?”

He glares at me. *I want to go walking in the forest.*

“Go then,” I reply, wishing to sink back down into my covers.

I can’t. Every time I try to leave, I am held back. I’m afraid the length of the Pyre and the surrounding forest seems to be the distance I can now travel without you.

He shifts in his chair, flicking his finger against his thumb. I blink. Then I shift forward, getting up onto my knees. I can see him, really *see* him. There is no haze, no deflection, nothing between him and me to cloud his features.

“I can see you,” I breathe out.

His eyes meet mine, and for the first time, I see the bridge of his nose, the high cheekbones, the curve of his mouth.

“I can see you,” I repeat in wonder, moving to the edge of my bed, letting my feet dangle above the floor.

He lifts an uncaring eyebrow and returns his attention to the bored movements of his long fingers.

“I can’t—I can’t believe it.” My tiredness has fled, and I’m grinning. “Sperro, it’s your face!”

“What does it matter!” he counters, his words breaking on each other. I don’t give his tone any more attention than I have to. I’m too amazed.

“This whole time, I’ve looked and not seen. That is to say, I could read the expression on your face, see the black hollows under your eyes, the turn of your mouth…but I could never see—actually *see*—your face. And now,

there you are. You're very handsome, Sperro." His features are so graced, so well-formed. "It's—"

I find it disturbing, his voice says in my head.

"It's wonderful!" I exclaim. "But why is it happening?"

Probably because my time is growing short. He stands. *Or because you've done something to add to your strength, and it has disadvantaged mine. Because, for the first time, your belief that there is something you can accomplish here is stronger.* His eyes move to mine, and while I still can't see their hue, I can see them, clear as the river. *It's almost as if you bound—* The Bleak stops, his understanding coming through the expression on his face.

"The Binder," he hisses. "That Light Binder has been doing his work here, interfering. He ends now!" He says the last word with such a mangle in his voice that a flash of panic accompanies my stumble out of bed.

"Sperro, no!"

He's out the door before I can catch his arm.

"You promised me, Sperro," I cry as I run after him, trying to keep up. "You promised me!"

"I promised I wouldn't take his blood gain while making my decision." His rasped voice scrapes up the stairs we are racing down. "I didn't promise I wouldn't simply let him rot. Not that I'm bound by any promises to the likes of you: so keen for me to keep mine, so desperate to break your own."

Sperro is moving so fast he is always turning the corner before I am halfway through each corridor, and is down the stairs just as I am starting. By the time I run through the open doors of the Long Hall, I see Sperro approaching Astrick, his movements predatory.

The fine features of Sperro's face are twisted in a sick, rotted anger, the ugliest expression I've ever seen. Astrick is frozen behind his worktable, a piece of glass in his free hand, his eyes braving an expression of boldness battling terror. The light in one of his lanterns flickers, then goes out, leaving the smell of smoke.

The smell reminds me of death.

"What have you been about, Light Binder?" Sperro's voice cuts across the room as he steps closer.

Astrick glances towards me but doesn't speak, his wide eyes catching the light of morning.

"Sperro!"

“Come no closer!” Sperro snaps at me over his shoulder, and I rock back on my heels. Sperro narrows his eyes, then turns again to face Astrick, each step he takes sounding like a broken drum.

“What did you bind before the sun rose this morning?” Sperro hisses.

Astrick straightens himself now, dropping the piece of glass onto the table and lifting his chin. But the tremor in his voice betrays him. “I bound Ember’s courage to her hope—as was her right. They belong to her and no other.”

With a snarl, Sperro throws himself at Astrick, grabbing the front of his jacket, and flinging him against a stone pillar between the tall windows of the hall. Astrick cracks his head against the stone, then stumbles, but he still tries to keep his feet. It’s too fast, the way Sperro is there, slamming Astrick back against the stone, his hand wrapping around Astrick’s neck.

“No!” I yell. And I’m burning with the fear of what Sperro might do. Astrick lifts a hands to fight for his breath, but Sperro simply grips his neck harder.

“You are not to bind *anything* in her!” Sperro shouts, inches away from Astrick’s face. And the only sound in Sperro’s echo is that of Astrick fighting for air.

I run forward, but Sperro turns, his eyes directly on mine.

One more step from you, and I take his throat out.

I stop.

Sperro loosens his grip enough for Astrick to fight for a single breath. Then he tightens his hand. “Do you hear me, Binder?” Blood appears where Sperro’s fingers are digging into Astrick’s neck, as if he’s stealing it out of Astrick’s veins.

“You’re going to crush his throat!” I scream.

Sperro ignores me, his fingers ugly as they grip harder. Astrick tries to fight, tries to pull away Sperro’s hand, his feet kicking the floor from lack of breath. But more blood is seeping into the lines of Sperro’s grey skin. “If you meddle anymore, I will kill you outright,” Sperro hisses at Astrick.

“No!” But the voice isn’t mine. It is Miranda’s. She rushes past me. “Sperro, no! Leave him alone.” Sperro doesn’t pay her any mind, his eyes fixed only on Astrick, even as she claws at his hand. “Leave my poor Philippe alone!” Miranda wails. “Leave Philippe alone!”

When she says the name Philippe, Sperro startles and his grasp loosens. Astrick’s fingers find a hold between Sperro’s fingers and his own bleeding

neck. He takes a desperate, gasping breath.

"Philippe, Philippe, my boy," Miranda says, trying to push Sperro away. Astrick's eyelids are half closed, but his eyes are focused on the old woman. He tries to swallow, his agony unmistakable as he does. Sperro's eyes narrow in recognition as he looks from Miranda to Astrick. Then he opens his hand and steps back, the smear of Astrick's blood on his skin. Astrick stumbles into the wall and turns towards it, gasping from the pain of sudden freedom, blood running down his neck.

A look of such hunger crosses Sperro's face that I rush forward and put myself between him and Astrick, certain he will claim the blood gain any moment, regardless of how it would disadvantage him. Miranda is babbling, and Astrick, stunned, is lifting his trembling hand to the places where Sperro's fingers had broken his skin, his eyes avoiding mine.

It's a miracle that Sperro didn't break his neck. It's also a miracle that Sperro steps away even farther, looking confused. He's muttering the name Philippe over and over again.

"Get him away from here," Miranda sobs. "Take the master away."

"Sperro." I reach for the Bleak's arm and pull him away. "Come. We are going to go from here. You wished to be in the forest, remember?"

He shakes his head from his daze rather than from disagreement. "I—this man isn't Philippe."

"I know," I say, my hand wrapping around his wrist, my footsteps taking us out of the Long Hall. "He is not Philippe."

"He isn't Philippe." Sperro's mouth is moving. And as the scent of blood lifts in the air around us, I can tell it is intoxicating to him. He wants the blood gain. I grip his wrist harder.

"Go!" Miranda's voice is hoarse as it follows us out. "Take him away."

The kitchens are close, so I lead him down the staircase that will take us there.

"That man is not Philippe," Sperro mutters again, his face bearing a complex expression I could never see before. "I did not kill Philippe. I did not kill Philippe."

We enter the kitchens, and Sperro falls onto the bench, hunches his shoulders, and stares at the blood drying in the cracks of his colorless hand. The red is startling against the grey nothingness of his flesh.

"I did not kill Philippe, but Ederra would not believe me."

Only then do I realize how ragged is my own breathing, how panicked the racing of my heart, how cold my sweat-drenched body. I lift my fingers to my brow and try to clear away the lines of worry, try to breathe deep enough to reach my stomach.

Looking up, I see Sperro is still bent over, staring at the blood. Pulling on my newly bound hope and courage, I banish my anxiety and walk across the kitchen and fetch a bucket of cold water that is sitting by the doorway. It's a struggle to carry it to the bench where he sits, but I make it without spilling too much water on the floor. Begging the Lights for Sperro's sanity and Astrick's life, I sit beside Sperro and take his hand in mine. I lift the rag to his palm, wiping the smear away.

"Do you believe me?" he asks. "That I did not kill Philippe?"

I falter, opening my mouth only to close it again. What does he want me to say to this? I know him to be guilty of many blood gains, many lives. Why would he think I would doubt him having taken Miranda's son?

"There's still blood on your hand," I answer instead, cleaning the rag, turning the water a pink that smells of iron.

"It is always there," he answers absently, "the blood on my hands."

"Then we will wash it off."

When his eyes find mine, I know that Miranda's words have shaken him into two separate realities: one, here in the kitchens with me, and another, three hundred years ago.

He gives no resistance when I roll back the sleeve of his grey, metal-bound tunic and place his entire hand in the water. The blood begins to come off, swirling heavier than the water. I scrub the cracks in his skin and around his fingernails, not content to stop until it is all stripped away. As I clean, I pray to the Lights. It begins gently, the power working through me; I feel its heat in my fingertips. Almost before I realize it, the water is warm.

Lifting his hand carefully, I lay it across my lap. Then using the long hem of my nightdress, I dry his hand carefully.

Sperro is now staring at his other hand, watching it with a strange expression on his face.

"Finished," I say, his hand still in mine.

"Will you clean the other as well?"

"But it's—" I pause, not wanting to say the word *blood*. "It's clean."

"No, it is not. I see the blood on it every day, but I did not kill Philippe."

I'm not certain how long his disorientation will last, so I answer quickly, "Of course I'll wash it. Let me find some clean water."

I find another bucket that Balint has left for Miranda just inside the door. The water is from the river that runs beneath the Pyre. It's clear and lively as it catches the light coming in the windows. Gathering clean rags from a small clothesline in front of the fire, I walk with careful steps, the heavy bucket forcing me to lean to the side. I set the bucket on a small stool before Sperro, then bring a chair from the corner so I might sit directly in front from him. I put my hands into the freezing water. A sound comes from my mouth as a chill strings along my back.

"It's cold."

He's not listening. He's staring at his right hand.

Rolling up my sleeves, now mostly wet anyway, I plunge my hands into the cold water and petition the Lights. It takes longer this time, and my words shiver as I utter the prayers. Then the water begins to lose its coldness, and instead of feeling like water boiled over a fire, it feels like the strength of the afternoon on the first day that spring begins folding itself into summer.

I bring my hands out of the water long enough to reach for the hand Sperro is staring at. When I submerge it, his face shifts: in part pain, in part alleviation. Taking one of the cloths, I wipe the surface of his skin, working tenderly along the lines and around his fingernails. When I have finished, I keep his hand in the water and reach for the other, though already cleaned.

I go through the ritual again. There is no stain from blood, but I clean this hand with the same care. Sperro is hunched, leaning forward, his eyes closed, his mouth moving only just. The Lights flood me with a greater sense of urgency as I reach for another rag and lift his hands from the water, drying them, infusing them with whatever hope I can.

Soaking another rag in the sun-filled water, I lift my hand to his chin. His eyes remain closed, even when I begin to wash his brow. I then wash around his eyes and along his cheeks. I wash his face as gently as I can, then his jaw and his neck.

The act of washing Sperro feels holy.

And it's no longer just my duty or calling to try and bring him back. It's more.

When I am finished and am lifting a soft, white cloth to dry his face, I realize I'm standing, holding his face towards the light coming in the

windows. Closing my eyes, I lean towards him and press my lips to the skin of his cheek, keeping my face close to his. I feel the flicker of his eyelashes against my cheek.

When I step back, his eyes are open, watching me.

"You wished to be in the forest," I whisper. "Shall we go now?"

Sperro nods but says nothing.

By the back door, Miranda has several cloaks hanging and a pair of Balint's muddy boots. I stuff the toes with rags and wrap myself up as best I can while Sperro is still sitting on the bench, looking at his hands. When I am dressed warmly enough to go out, I take one of those grey hands in mine, and he follows.

* * *

"It was a good work: you keeping the master away," Balint says, walking at a pace I'm having a hard time keeping without breaking into a run. "Celia had time to clean up the blood. Miranda has done what she could, but—" Balint sighs.

I nod but don't speak, gripping the rail of the spiral staircase we're ascending, catching my breath as my heart beats triple time. Upon returning from our long, silent walk in the forest, Sperro had gone straight to his room and closed the door. And I had run to find Astrick. Balint was waiting for me.

"We carried him up to our own rooms," he says as we walk up to the eighth floor, up and up. "But the sounds of blood and air—Miranda's going mad and asking after your return. But I told her that you must attend to Sperro first. Calm him down."

I do not recognize the maze of rooms I walk through as I follow Balint's footsteps up more stairs, down a corridor, through a suite, along a hallway, then into a bedroom with east-facing windows. And there he is on the bed, staring upward with wide, focused eyes as Miranda pulls a black thread through his skin, stitching it together. He's breathing, but the sound is awful, and the blood Miranda has not yet cleaned from his neck and face makes it hard to understand the extent of his injuries.

Celia flutters out of my way as I drop beside Astrick. I reach for his hand, and he grips mine in return. His fingers are sticky with his own blood.

“I didn’t dare do more than put a poultice over his throat a while before seeing to stitches. As awful as it looks, the wound will not be fatal.” She threads the blood-stained needle and, with a few deft pulls, finishes her work. Miranda cuts the thread on her teeth.

“I’m sorry I didn’t come sooner,” I tell Astrick quickly, finding it difficult to confront the suffering in his face. “But I had to get him away before he ended you, and I knew you would be taken care of.”

He jerks his head—the black thread pulling his skin, his eyes glassing over from pain—a gesture acknowledging he understands. Then he lifts his free hand towards his throat.

“Of course I’ll do what I can,” I answer.

Closing his eyes, he holds up a hand, attempting to say something.

“For heaven’s sake, don’t speak.”

But he’s trying to tell me something, motioning me away.

“I don’t understand.”

Closing his eyes, it takes Astrick making the same motion twice over before Celia says, “Later?”

He grimaces from pain and nods, letting the strain in his shoulders relax fully against the bed.

“He must be too tired for it just now, my lady,” Miranda fusses.

I brush the concern aside. “Astrick, you’re in a tremendous amount of pain. Let me work on your light lines now.”

But Astrick is blinking several times from heavy eyelids, and it isn’t long before they close altogether.

* * *

I go check on Sperro, but his door is locked and I can hear no sound of movement within. Astrick still needs time; he will be sleeping, so I walk through the Mirror Gallery, and main corridor, before finding myself in the Great Hall. Sylvain and Celia are there, sitting on the lowest stairs of the spiral staircase. He is tense and she is shaken. They don’t say anything to me, and I don’t say anything to either of them, but Sylvain shifts, making room for me beside him, and so I walk over and sit down.

And this is how we pass the afternoon—sitting in silence, marking the passing hours by the informal timepiece of winter light shining through the windows.

* * *

Before daylight has fled completely, I knock on Astrick's door. I hear no greeting, but push it open slowly and step inside.

Astrick is sitting on the side of his bed. I press my lips together and try not to stare. His entire throat is mottled purple from the bruising that reaches up around his jaw. There are five half-circle shapes of black stitching where Sperro had pressed his fingers through Astrick's skin.

"Miranda's stitching was well done," is all I manage to say.

Astrick nods but doesn't speak. He has dark shadows under his eyes, and I can see he's in tremendous pain—I still can't fathom how Sperro hadn't crushed his throat entirely. But that is not what makes me duck my head. He's looking like he did the first day, when I'd sought him out about candles and he'd been suspicious. Does he see me as part of the horror that walks these halls?

I blink back the tired emotion settling in my eyes, looking at his face—so serious. There is nothing fair in me asking him to stay. Nothing fair in me talking of lighting the windows of the Pyre and binding their light. The image of the Bleak—lifting Astrick against the wall, forcing out his breath and his blood—is as terrifying in my memory as it had been to live through. I should have already sent Astrick away.

"You need to go," I say, when too many minutes have passed.

He knows this as well. Though he's trying to fight my words.

I'm not going to let him. The stitches in his throat won't let me.

Clearly it's not easy for him to speak, but when he manages a question, he holds his quiet words as steady as he's able. "How many days until your Bleak decides?"

"I—I think it's coming close to thirty days. Not much time now."

When I say nothing more, he answers, "I've so little time. I should," he takes a breath and winces, "bind myself to the work. If I could be sure it would not," Astrick looks towards the door, "aggravate him more."

"We both know you could have died today."

He looks directly at me.

"Your sister, Adele..."

Carefully, he says, "I know."

"How could you leave her alone?"

"I can't."

“You can’t,” I repeat.

“I know,” he whispers.

I wish I could do something to clear away the disappointment.

He swallows, then waits a few breaths before saying almost too quiet to hear, “This was one of the few times in my life I’ve ever asked the Lights what they were thinking.”

My tone is listless, a thing I did not intend, when I ask, “Did you get a response?”

He lifts a careful hand to his throat, swallowing through his pain. “To prepare myself for healing.”

“A thing we will do now,” I reply, touched by his utter lack of bitterness.

Astrick nods.

“It would be best if you were to lie down. Will that be too painful?”

“No.” But as he lowers himself onto his bed and then stretches out, he can’t help but let a sound of pain escape.

I cradle the weight of his head in my hands until it is resting on the blanket beneath him. A tear falls from the corner of his eye, a stripe of silver down his temple.

I touch my fingers lightly to the broken skin of his neck and open my mind to see what work is before me. The lines in Astrick’s throat have been shattered like glass, still held together but in countless pieces. Fear pricks me, but there is no time for it. I brush it aside with hope, hope and courage, a binding I was given and one that I claim.

Anchoring myself, I close my eyes to begin the first step of my work—the gentle release of light to feel what must be done with his lines. But it is no gentle thing. Light shoots through me, a startling rush. It surges down, out my fingers, and into his body. I grapple with the current, but with the will of his own heart stretching skyward, it creates a conduit. The power of the exchange is independent of me.

I can hear the sound of my own surprise, but it is a distant thing. With my eyes pressed tight, I search for what I am to do, asking to be shown my part. Wisdom pours through me. A greater understanding. A tutoring. And then instead of simply seeing the shattered lines of light and how they might be mended, I see the complex dimensions of each piece: the hue and clarity, the variations, the ways that each line interacts with the veins and tendons

and ligaments of the body, the way light runs through all, penetrates all, expands all.

I feel Astrick's acceptance of this. I feel his choice. It is a transaction between the Light Binder and the Most High; I am a conduit, nothing more.

With the Lights directing my fingers, the splinters begin to align in their proper places, fusing together, binding up every shattered thing. The lines reform and flare, stronger now than before. The muscles in his throat release their bruising, what has been torn is now weaving seamlessly back together. The layers of Astrick's skin begin to repair, starting with the deepest and working out towards my fingertips. There is a burning, and Miranda's black thread is no longer felt beneath my fingertips.

In a space of time that feels both young and ancient, his body receives the order of its universe. A wonder—one of witnessing such unimpeded healing—fills me. I misplace a breath, then hear my own sharp intake to catch it back again. I am in awe.

As the course of his healing comes to a completion, his body finding reconciliation, the light eases. It is a gentle withdrawal of power, a benediction. Then the power is gone.

I open my eyes.

Evening is long past, and night has come. Outside the windows waits darkness. Inside the windows there is light, but from no candle. I look over my shoulder and back towards Astrick—lying with such exhaustion he's almost too tired to breathe—and see that the light in the room is in the very air itself.

"Thank you," he mutters, his eyes still closed.

I take half a step back and sink down onto the floor.

* * *

The lantern is on the floor between us. Hours have passed. Astrick is leaning back against the side of the bed, while I am leaning against the wall, for whatever support it will give me. Astrick's lips part, as if he would speak, but words can be chased away by so many things, and his have fled. He closes his mouth again.

I can't help but look at his neck, the vertical pulse of his vein, recalling the dreamlike images of how the matter within his throat had come together.

There is no mottled bruising. There are no half-moons of black thread. All has been made…whole.

I wasn't ready for it, the flood of connection with the Lights. I wasn't ready for the astonishing reality that the work of healing—in its pure form—has nothing to do with me, that what was required of me was to stand in my place and to offer my effort and my focus, while witnessing a re-creation.

Working on Sperro has been far more difficult—with every stubborn, vengeful thing rising up between my fingers and his last strangled line of light. It has been a painful work.

But Astrick. Even now my veins are tingling. I wonder if this is what it feels like to fully perform the work of a Virtus Third? Is this what I would be set apart to do—I swallow—if my life didn't end here? Is this the kind of understanding that would be before me? Could Sperro simply be the first of many tasks? Though all probability owes he is my last.

I shake my head, too overwhelmed to mourn what might never be. It's such a singular weight—a wistful sorrow at best, the death of ten thousand promises at worst. I feel a weight behind my eyes and blink, looking aside as I run a finger along the edge of my lower eyelid.

All things that are to be, come to pass, *notwithstanding the sphere of your existence.*

I wrinkle my brow as these words reverberate through the very stones of the Pyre, as they distill onto my shoulders from the press of unseen things.

Astrick looks towards me. "Did you say something?"

I shake my head again. "No."

All things that are to be, come to pass, notwithstanding the sphere of your existence.

Ought I be comforted by the thought? For it is in *this* sphere I want to learn. It is in the vibrancy of *this* wild world I wish to continue. The pendulum of my own emotions swings. I clear my throat, unable to think on it. Instead, I look up again at Astrick.

"What did you see, Astrick? As the Lights healed you?"

Astrick lifts a hand to the side of his neck, not in habit, but rather in a tremulous reverence. "I could only think—or rather rest in—the idea of the Most High. There were images in the periphery, but nothing I could—" He pauses just as the candle in the lantern starts to drown in its own wax, then asks, "What if I do not think my work is finished here?"

The image of Sperro's hands—red from Astrick's blood—flashes across my mind. It is a hard thing, making him leave. But I cannot do otherwise. My conscience would burn.

"You leave in the morning nevertheless."

* * *

Stepping into the bell tower suite well after midnight is more surreal than comforting. My legs feel hollowed out; my mind, as empty as the air outside my door. How many times the world has shifted beneath my feet this day, I cannot count. With no more thought than that no life was lost, I sit on the end of my bed, lie back with my feet dangling off the edge, and fall asleep.

* * *

It is not yet first light when I wake, curled up in a ball on the end of my bed, knowing something is wrong, knowing Sperro needs me. I throw my cloak over my shoulders in the dark. As I move down through the Pyre, it is very still. Strange, for usually someone is about. If not Celia or Balint, then one of Sperro's guards, with a memory or two rattling through a hallway. But tonight all is quiet.

When I arrive at Sperro's chambers, I lift my hand—the line of my knuckles white against the dark door—and knock before entering.

Sperro is neither in his bed nor on the lounge before the fire.

"Sperro?" I speak into the darkness.

There is no response.

I know he isn't in the library. I feel him here; whatever need he has is here. I step further into the room.

"Sperro?"

Now comes a sound, that of something weary, that of a longing from faraway places. My eyes search the darkness, but still I cannot see him.

Sperro?

I can't even find his thoughts.

The long, black curtains of velvet covering his windows hang as tall as any sadness, blocking out whatever light might be had. I think how drearily

they serve this room. The sound comes again, from behind one of these long panels.

Stepping towards it, I reach my hands to the curtains, parting the black folds, the ghost light of night coming in the window. And with it, sitting on the window seat with his back to the wall, head leaning morosely back and facing the glass, is my Bleak. My Sperro Magna.

I lift myself onto the seat opposite him, letting the curtains fall back into place. I too pull my feet up and wrap my knees with my arms. His face, still so clearly drawn, is steeped in a melancholy different from any I've known.

"What is it, Sperro?"

He doesn't answer. But when I ask again, his shoulders shiver and his hand slides along the stone—an inch closer to me and no more.

But it is enough.

I reach out and cover his hand with my own. Though the lines of his face do not change and his eyes do not shift from whatever faraway place they are seeing, his fingers move and tighten ever so slightly around mine.

* * *

Balint comes to seek me in Sperro's rooms just as morning turns the snow from grey to blue, whispering that Miranda has sent Astrick away "…with plenty of good food and an extra scarf to keep warm."

Relief and regret compose the beats of my heart. "It's good he's away from this place."

Balint makes an old sound. "Never would have thought it was possible, to be healed just so." Then he looks past me towards the half-open door. "How is he? The master?"

"Stunned. He's not been the same since—since yesterday."

"I suppose," Balint says slowly, "it's a strange relief that he has not. Death Bleaks don't mourn; nay, grief is human. Grief is holy. Who's to say?" His eyes, when he looks at me, are bright—but it is with remembering. It is with pain. It is with a tremor of emotion between his lips as he turns away.

* * *

It is still early morning when Sperro and I leave the Pyre to walk the woods in silence. Of his thoughts I can hear nothing, only distance and echoes and emptiness.

I would have expected to find relief in his mental absence, to have returned to my musings of what healing is meant to be, what it *could* be, if the patient were willing, bound as Astrick is bound, to the Courts of Heaven. Instead, I find the finer sentiments of my heart reaching towards Sperro, in the depth of his ruminations. I want to help him. I want to shake him for his stubbornness, for his misery. I want to weep for the wonder of what I've experienced. I want to weep in frustration that he is so far from anything good.

"That is the price of healing," my mother had once said, after having spent all afternoon patching up Hadspen's broken shoulder. "Once you have begun, you are not content until the one that was ill becomes whole."

We've just stepped inside the Pyre's doors, and I am shaking the snow from my boots when I hear a thought reaching towards me. I can't decipher it, but I glance over my shoulder. Sperro's hand is flat against the stone wall, supporting his frame.

"Yes?" I ask.

His eyes meet mine. *I'm going to the library*. *I don't—*

But he doesn't finish.

"I'll come sit with you, if you like," I say carefully, then, hesitating a moment over the words I am about to say, "You don't look like you wish to be alone."

I worry he is going to refuse—his head bent, his eyes hardening from three hundred years of fighting against any soft thing—but when he speaks, his words seem as lost as he does.

"Is it not strange for you to do that for something like me?"

For something like me.

I swallow at how sad the words make me feel. "Of course I will come with you, Sperro."

* * *

He sits in his chair, and I sit in mine. We're both watching the fire: Sperro, like he'd fallen into the chair in a moment of exhaustion; and I, with my

knees pulled up beneath my chin, leaning forward, my toes—freed from their wet boots—curling over the edge of the chair's cushion.

Miranda finds me not too long after we've settled, and wordlessly sets a bowl of stew in my hands. I eat, feeling young and hungry, taking larger bites than I should. Sperro gives one half of his attention to whatever private thoughts he's been ruminating on since I'd washed his hands clean and the other half to absently watching me eat.

"Would you like some?" I ask, tilting the bowl in his direction.

He gives a refusal, a decisive whip of his chin, but his eyes keep watching my face.

When I have finished, setting the bowl aside and sitting back in my chair, Sperro is no longer looking at me. He is staring absently at nothing, his thoughts rising towards the surface of his mind then sinking under again. But like looking into a clouded pool, I still cannot see clearly what they are.

XIX

"This is for you," Miranda says as she holds out a folded piece of paper towards me. I came into the kitchen for breakfast, or possibly, for comfort. But Miranda doesn't seem to have any to give. "Astrick left it with me yesterday morning, asked me to give it to you. I couldn't think how to tell him that none of us can read."

I reach my hands towards the paper she's holding out and, taking it, I unfold it. The marks swim in a haze, just as they always have. Regardless, I slip the note into my sleeve.

"I'm sorry he's left, Miranda. I know you—I know he reminds you of your son."

The old woman doesn't answer. She just keeps scrubbing some pottery in a bucket of water, her lips pressed into a silent hem.

I leave her to her own private thoughts and go to Sperro. I know where to find him; I can feel him in the library. He had gone back to his room last night but returned to the library before daylight.

As I enter, two of his guards are just coming out the doors.

“Pardon,” one says as his jostle sends me tripping back against the wall. The second one looks at me, his eyebrow raised in challenge. I simply stare back, refusing to be baited. Once they’ve disappeared into the gallery, I take a breath and walk into the library.

Sperro isn’t sitting in his chair. He’s pulled a curtain halfway back from one of the western windows and is sitting on the high window seat: partly in the dim sun that’s fighting through the winter clouds, partly blending into the shadows of the room.

I walk over to him and wordlessly pull the curtains the rest of the way back, giving the window room to breathe and myself room to climb up next to Sperro.

“Would you do something for me?” I ask.

He doesn’t answer or even move his head.

Sperro?

But even in his thoughts there’s no response.

Reaching my hand out, I touch the side of his face. He starts instantly, his eyes wild, pulling away as if I’ve branded him with my fingers. After releasing a hiss that sounds like he’s in pain, he squints in my direction.

“I’m sorry for startling you.”

No matter. He shakes his head and clears his expression. *I was actually waiting for you*.

“Were you?”

You took too long in finding me, he adds, a bit darkly.

“Words are often helpful in times like these,” I answer. “You know, actual communication?”

“Hmm.”

The familiar sound makes me smile. “Would you be willing to read something for me? Miranda says you’re the only person in the Pyre who can read.” I pull Astrick’s note from my sleeve and hold it up.

Sperro eyes me a moment. *I’ve no great interest in doing this for you.*

“I’ve no great interest in many things I do on a daily basis. Now,” I give the paper a wave, “will you please tell me what it says?”

There is the subtlest transition in his face, from boredom to longsuffering. I can’t help but laugh.

Don’t you dare laugh, he orders in his golden voice, snatching the paper from my hand and forcing it open. *Of course*. *It’s from that damned Light Binder.*

"Would you just please read it?"

He sighs and sounds so human doing so I have to hold my breath a moment.

After scanning the words, he looks up at me. *I'm not reading this out loud.*

"You don't have to. Just think it."

Sperro creases his forehead, the look in his eyes a balance between disdain and amusement.

I roll my eyes. "The note, Sperro. Focus on the task."

Pulling a face, he looks down. *Ember, I went to sleep determined to follow your directive, but the Lights wouldn't let me rest—* Sperro snorts, and I ball up my fist, hitting his shoulder with the outside edge of my hand.

"I didn't ask you to editorialize."

He mutters something then clears his throat. *Ember, I went to sleep determined to follow your directive, but the Lights wouldn't let me rest. I cannot think on having to face this Death Bleak again, and I would have sworn to his damnation, but, Ember, you believe there is yet redemption to be had.* Sperro's golden voice does not pause for long, but it is long enough for me to know the words have snagged in his thoughts. *To that I trust. And we both know I can't stop my work on the windows. I'll be back soon. I just need time to travel home and check on Adele. There is glass to cut and windows to repair—and a Bleak to avoid, if I hope to live long enough to finish the Long Gallery. Keep courage as time grows short. I will be there for the end. Your friend, Astrick.*

Sperro looks up. *Well, that's just the stupidest waste of paper I've ever seen. What a fool to come back here.*

But I can't help grinning. What a relief. What a blessed *relief*. What courage. If I can only keep him safe, keep Sperro away from him, there is glass to cut and windows to finish.

I've no need to hear your lover's declarations again.

Now it's my turn to snort. "Astrick is not my lover," I answer.

No more than I'm your Bleak.

"You are my Bleak," I complain.

Hmm, he thinks, but it's heavy and weighted.

* * *

"It's not that I mind *winter*," I say, tromping through the fresh foot of snow that has fallen over the forest. "It's that one can only be frozen for so long without the hope of spring."

Sperro stalks behind me without answering, too focused on his own thoughts to pay attention to the conversation I've been having with myself for the last hour. I glance over my shoulder. His head is bent down, his hands clasped behind his back. I watch a moment—the greyness of his features, the patch magick cloak shifting as he moves, menacing the light.

"Nothing to say about the endless winter?" I ask, catching my breath as my boot sinks into another drift. "Or about my rare thoughts on the subject? Sperro? *Speeerro*."

"I've heard everything you've said, you wretch," he utters, scraping out the words.

I give a half laugh and turn my attention back to the pathway ahead.

"At least I'm your wretch," I rib him.

He makes a sound of firm disagreement.

And I truly laugh.

The fresh snow is light as cotton. Impossible to gather up in my hands but sparkling as the rays of afternoon sun fall upon it. It gives the forest a lift, a glimmer, a freshness to the air.

We've been walking for hours, trekking over the path that runs along the North River. Each time the trail runs close to the water, I marvel at the ice hanging from the cliff banks and the impossibly frigid water moving in pristine austerity.

We are coming up along the edge—only a determined tree or two growing out from the cliff that falls down into the river. We've walked this path before, and perhaps it's the play of the rare sunlight on the ice, but I can't help thinking that things are changing.

"Sperro, is the river's edge thawing? Is there less ice than before?"

He's muttering, and I don't think he's heard me. I look over my shoulder again as I step forward. My booted foot sinks into the snow, and all drops out below me. I'm tumbling, falling back. I shriek as my weight shifts.

But then Sperro's hand is around my wrist. He pulls me back towards the pathway, but at the price of catching the backwards momentum himself.

He falls.

“Sperro!”

The black water absorbs the Bleak, sluicing outward in an angry sound at the disturbance.

“Sperro!” I can see nothing. No further disturbance in the ink-black water.

And so I jump in after him.

The water is as ice, cutting my skin. I drag myself up, my gasp echoing in my own ears as I break the surface of the river.

“Sperro!” I gasp. My dress catches on something. I fight it. The current is pulling at me, and I go under. I’m bound by my cloak, the mittens still on my hands. I rip them off, struggling upward, my muscles turning sharp and tight.

I again break into the air and reach for a breath. Though it’s warm in comparison to the river, the air still burns my lungs. I’m trying to make a sound, but I can’t manage it. My arms move slower now as I fight to keep my head above the water.

There’s a glint, a brief sight of his cloak. Then it’s gone. I fling myself towards it. My fingers find the grey fabric before me, and I throw my arm out to catch it.

I find him, and my hands—aching, purple for the cold—try to grab a secure hold, but I’m failing. I try pulling him towards me, but again I’m swept into the fast water. I close my eyes and take a sharp breath as I go under. My lungs burn; the corners of my lips turn to ice. First, my feet can’t find an anchor. Then I can’t find my feet. I cannot move.

An arm comes around my waist, and I am pulled against Sperro. Then I am lifted, gasping as I am dragged to the shallowest bank and up the incline, to the path above the river. When Sperro tries to set me down, I’m shivering so violently that I can’t extend my legs and I collapse. He picks me back up, holding me against his chest.

Without speaking, he begins to walk purposefully through the forest towards the Pyre. I try to cling to him, but my hands won’t obey my mind. The water of the river was little more than moving ice, and it feels like my blood is now the same. My heart trips over itself, and I fight for a breath.

Sperro makes a strange sound, bringing me closer to him, but to no avail: he is just as wet as I am.

Already there is ice forming between us, our clothing freezing together in the perfect pattern of a frost. The sun is cutting through the trees, creating

flashes of brightness off of our wet clothes and slicing the fog of our breaths. The muscles of my arms and my legs are caught, strained in unnatural tension. I try to breathe more deeply, but the shaking of my body fights even the movements of my lungs. How could water still move and be so cold? I will freeze before he can get me to the Pyre. Closing my eyes, I tell my blood to move, my heart to beat.

"We're almost there," he whispers. "Don't fall asleep. Stay awake."

I can't. I'm too— I begin to tumble into the depths of my own unconscious.

"Awake! Stay awake!" Sperro orders, and his pace increases, his breathing stuttering off its usual rhythm. "You sleep now, you sleep forever," he says, cutting into my crystallizing thoughts.

I'm moved, shifted, his hands gripping me closer. I hear the crack of ice.

"Life's blood," he mutters. "Stay awake! Resist the descent into your head."

I can't.

"You're the creature of flame," he cries impatiently. "You torment my existence with fire. Can't you even warm yourself?"

I—

No! No! His thought crashes loudly into my mind.

He spins. So fast my eyes roll inside my head. I'm halfway set down, and he reaches around, letting go a dark string of evil curses.

"My cloak!" Sperro shouts. "My cloak!"

"Wh—what?"

"It's gone! The river took it! All my patch magicks. Three hundred years—" And he curses again.

In a frenzy, he fully drops me into the snow. I'm trembling, the snow almost a relief, something I can disappear into. My fingers start to grow warm, the hint of summer, but before me is a blackness, a siphon pulling me away.

I'm sorry you're lost, Sperro.

There is a loud crash. I snap my head, feeling my muscles writhe at the pain of movement. Sperro must have picked me back up and carried me to the Pyre, for he has kicked the kitchen door open and there is the rush of heat, the sounds of footsteps and questions. Miranda is here. Her hand touches my face. How it burns. I try to move away but cannot. It is unbearable. And then I feel as if the floor is falling.

* * *

I don't know how long I've been sleeping, but my eyes flutter open like I am breaking through a chrysalis.

"You mad creature," Sperro says. "What *possessed* you to jump into the river?"

I am lying before the fire of my room, the dance of flames before my eyes, covered in a blanket of the softest white fur, the pelt of some winter creature. Miranda is rubbing my feet. I shift—despite the uproarious proclamations of every muscle—until I can see not only Miranda just before me, but also Sperro, sitting in the chair against the wall, watching me with more focus than I've seen him give anything outside his own pursuits.

"I thought—" I can barely speak through the stiff muscles of my jaw, "you would be drowned."

"Drowned?" His face creases in impatient disbelief. He looks like he feels no ill effects from his own fall into the ice-ridden river. "Water can't kill a Death Bleak."

"But it can kill a human," Miranda chides sharply. Sperro gives her a quick glance, then looks towards the windows as Miranda continues. "Celia is making you hot tea. I'm going down to fetch it. You lie quiet now. Don't move."

As soon as Miranda leaves my room, Sperro is again watching me. His eyebrows crease. "The question my curiosity settles on," he says slowly, "is this: Why would it concern you if I drowned? You would have won."

Convincing my tired mouth to speak, I whisper, "I am here to help save you, not to end you."

"Every soul in the nations wants to end me," he states.

"It seems that some Being in the vast skies thinks you're worth saving."

The line of his mouth begins to move towards a disbelieving smile, but then it catches—and he looks away. My own eyelids close, my face tingling from the warmth of the fire reaching for my skin.

"How could it have been so cold?" I ask, my mind clouding over again.

"As cold as life," he answers, sounding preoccupied.

"As cold as death," I whisper, and then, *Thank you, Sperro, for pulling me from the river.*

* * *

“Do you have any idea what it would take?”

I’m sitting up in my bed, holding a bowl of broth between my hands, taking slow sips. Although I am certainly able to be up and moving about the Pyre, Miranda has ordered otherwise. But it is not Miranda who sits with me for company—it’s Sperro. He was here when I woke up the first day, sitting in the same chair near the fire, and hasn’t left me for more than a few hours at a time since.

“Well?” he inquires.

“Excuse me?” I ask as I jerk my head away from the bowl of scalding broth. “What did you say?”

“Do you have any idea what it would take?” he repeats, his voice carrying an edge.

I shake my head. “What *what* would take?”

“You know very well what I mean,” he growls.

“No,” I raise my eyebrows, “I don’t.”

“Wretched nuisance.”

Half of my mouth rises, and I watch his face as I’m blowing cool the broth.

Then his voice comes into my head. *If I decided not to take you as a blood gain.*

My heart drums, and I look down. “If you decided *not* to take me as a blood gain?”

“The *if* is very significant,” he bites.

I pull my lips together, my brow wrinkling in question. “Sperro, don’t you mean to say if you decide not to become the Beast of Ten?”

“That is not what I said.”

“But it is what you mean.”

“No,” he insists.

I look up. “You want to know what would happen if you don’t take me as a blood gain?” I say, waiting for him to confirm I’m right.

“I want to know if you would have any clue as to how you’re supposed to manage it all.”

“Right. *Manage it all* meaning that you don’t take me as a blood gain and I help you step back from becoming a Beast of Ten.”

“I’m not really considering the idea, December.”

“Certainly not.” I lift both of my shoulders as if to say, *I’ve no business to speculate*. “I only—”

“This has nothing to do with you,” he snarls. “I’ve made bitter work of my relationships with Callidus and Meridaithe. And the thing they want the most is for me to secure Beast of Ten. My refusing your blood gain would be all about them. It has nothing to do with you. Nothing to do with your precious Lights.”

It takes great effort not to raise my eyebrow. Instead, I continue to sip my broth, thinking. Finally, I admit, “In answer to your question, I don’t know all of what I’m supposed to do if you decide not to take me as your final blood gain. But I’m certain I’ll be able to figure it out, seeing as how the Lights have led me this far.”

His face darkens at my words. He says nothing, and I twist to the side, lifting my bowl onto the windowsill behind my bed before turning back to face him.

"But, Sperro," I speak quietly, "I don't think you have the option of simply refusing Beast of Ten. You have to choose—between light and darkness. A Death Bleak is still darkness. Great darkness. Your choice can only be either accepting the oblivion of that or fighting for some restoration of light into your being, gaining some hope of a Continuancy after this life."

Sperro shifts in his chair, lifting his hand to his chin, looking through me. He knows I'm right. I can see it in his stubborn expression. "I might even try to reclaim my rights as a Lectus Born, if only to spite the Witch," he says.

I can't help but give him a wry smile. "As if spite can be the motivation for any pure progress."

"You've admitted yourself that you don't know what you're doing," he snaps back. "I've a mind not to believe anything you say. Don't think I've changed my mind, in any case. I said *if*. *If* is never something to be relied on." He stands, taking a few steps towards the door. "Neither is a Death Bleak."

I once believed the same.

In response, he hisses in my direction.

As he leaves, slamming the door to the bell tower suite, I think I hear an unexpected sound: the true clang of a large bell. It is clear for only a moment. Then the sound spreads out into the quiet of the morning forest below. It's so startling that I lie back in my bed, my heart pounding out the surprise in my chest.

He's—he's considering it. He really is considering it.

XX

The cold of the river has aggravated Sperro's wounds from the Slatt Clave. It is not visible to the eye, but I can feel an embedded sting coming from one of the scars. During one of his visits to the bell tower, Sperro asks if

I'm strong enough to leave my bed. When I nod, he commands I deal with the nuisance.

"Although it is needless to say that my confidence in your work is nonexistent," Sperro complains as he removes his tunic, "even I can't fathom what your Lights were thinking when they sent *you*."

"Then we have finally found common ground," I answer, getting out of bed and waving him to settle before the fire. "Nevertheless, I am undeterred."

Sperro makes a disparaging sound. "You're rather resilient today."

I lift a hand to my hip. "I would say it's your daily visits, but—"

He laughs and looks at me from the corner of his eye. "The fire in your hearth is a natural flame. Can you use it in your work?"

Moving my thumb against the bottom of the ring on my hand, I consider his question. "I believe so."

Shrugging, Sperro kneels down, the fire casting light shadows across his skin.

Kneeling down beside him, I lift my fingers to the scars on his back. "If I don't do something significant to help draw this out, it will go too deep for me," I speculate, pressing my fingers to the grey flesh of his back.

"Obviously," he answers. "Why else would I have asked for your help?"

A Death Bleak who really does have faith in the work of a Line Sanctum. *Well*.

"Oh, shut up," he growls.

"I thought I covered that thought," I reply, then I begin.

He is resistant to my work at a core level, and I sigh, remembering how clear it had felt when I was helping Astrick. Astrick. He hasn't yet returned. And I can't dismiss the worry that he's changed his mind, that I'm going to be left to do this work alone.

"You're still tremendously bad at containing what's in your mind," Sperro interrupts. "A great assault on my own privacy."

I glance at his profile. "I thought you couldn't enter my mind because of the binding?"

"That depends on what you choose to think about. If your thoughts are touched by fear or dread or worry," he pauses, "or me, they sometimes find their way through."

"Seems an appropriate pairing," I answer.

His short laugh has a bite. “If only you’d stop worrying about that Light Binder.”

“He could have died, Sperro. Of course I’ve been worried about him.”

Sperro grunts. “He’s not coming back for a week yet, so you can stop your blasted wondering.”

My pulse feels like it’s changing directions—the hope that I won’t be left to fight alone is too fierce. I really am doing my best not to feed it.

“So he’s not yet entered the forest?”

“He’s not yet entered the forest, but his mind is bent in this direction.”

I feel a stinging in my fingers and pull them back from Sperro’s skin, shifting until they’re hovering above the flame. The ring on my finger brightens, neutralizing the flame, and I find relief. “How is it I couldn’t find any information about Astrick in your own thoughts coming from your head?”

“Perhaps it’s due to my great skills in deception,” Sperro says, then laughs. “You’re too honest about most things.”

“A failing indeed,” I reply dryly, returning my fingers to the scars on his back. “Then I am assuming that you know how concerned I am over Astrick returning. There’s not going to be a repeat of what happened before, is there?”

He doesn’t answer me for some time, but as I work, I catch him looking at his hands, those guilty hands I had so carefully cleaned. We’ve yet to speak about that day. Sensing my attention—or hearing my thoughts—Sperro balls his fists and crosses his arms, his head bent down.

* * *

That night I sit awake, thinking—keeping my thoughts of Sperro tucked close so that he might not hear them. I’m buried in my blankets, pulling them tight around me, as I watch the fire. Before my eyes I keep seeing an image of taking one of Sperro’s hands, then the other, washing them, cleansing them. I see his face, feel the contours of it beneath my fingers, feel the coldness yield to warmth as I kiss his cheek. And then like the rush of the river itself, I see him—clothing wet and clinging to his form, his frantic realization of what saving me had cost. As I think of this, over and over I see myself placing a new cloak about his shoulders, a covering, a garment to replace the ill patch-magick cloak now gone.

A new cloak. I could make Sperro a new cloak. I sit up. It is as if someone has just opened a door of a dark room. And the way before feels light. And I know I am meant to walk through.

My door opens, startling me from the images in my head.

"Oh—" Celia says abruptly as she sees me awake. In her arms are fresh linens. "I didn't mean to wake you. Miranda asked that I bring these up." She doesn't say anything else as she opens the door to the armoire and puts them away.

"Celia?"

She turns to look at me, a hand on her hip. "Yes?"

"Would you—do you think there is a suitable fabric from among what Miranda has purchased from the merchants for a cloak?"

"You already have a cloak."

"It isn't for me."

Celia's cheeks lift slightly towards her eyes, and she looks at me for a long moment. "It's for him, isn't it? Because he lost his other one?"

"Yes."

"Did they ask you to?"

"They? Do you mean the Lights?"

Celia gives a single nod.

"I think so. The image keeps playing out before my eyes. It…feels right."

"So it's only you, once again, that can do the work."

I'm not ready for the fierce possessiveness of her tone, and I open my mouth to speak, then close it again. Her eyes. This poor girl, stuck out of time, is staring at me with burning eyes. And I understand why.

"I actually don't think I'll be able to finish it quickly on my own. Would you be willing to help?"

She sets her mouth to the side, wanting to say yes and not wanting to have to say it.

"Your help would make all the difference. Time is very important."

"For your life, maybe. Not his."

"His as well, and he knows it. There aren't many more days before—"

"All right, then." Celia lifts her chin in a small triumph. "I'll fetch the length and bring it back come morning. I hope you can sew well enough to not make a mess of my work." She gives me a look of subtle challenge and leaves the room.

After Celia leaves, sleep comes in unsettled fits. When I do succumb, I dream wildly in images both bold and bright. Most of the dreams are simply about people or places I've known, but none of the people are wearing their own faces and all of the places appear different, more angular and faraway, foreign and unsettling, even Hill House. I know it's my home, but it feels as suspect as all the other misplaced remembrances.

I wake more than once, and at some point in the dark night, with only the low coals in the fire burning, see that Sperro has come into my room and is sitting in the chair across from the bed, watching me, the greyness of his clothing melting into the shadows.

I can hear him ruminating, and even though his eyes are watching my form, they are not seeing me. His words swirl about my head, his thoughts shifting in ways so random that I can't follow where they are going or predict what they will come to mean.

Slatt Clave. Meridaithe. It was in the trees. The trees. Philippe. I didn't take Philippe. But if the patterns break up, the patterns break. It was Callidus who promised. Callidus was right. Close as a whisper. Close. Not for Meridaithe. For everything. Close to—Ederra.

"Ederra," he mutters, "I see you now. I didn't for so long."

Ederra.

* * *

When Celia returns in the morning—complaining about the breakfast Miranda asked her to deliver—she brings with her the most beautiful length of blue fabric I've ever seen. It's deep in color yet holds such a vibrant undertone that it could pulse under its own power.

"This is a color he often wore," Celia says as she lays it before me across the foot of the bed. "I saw it a few years back in a merchant train, and it reminded me of Sperro as he once was, so I bought it and kept it aside."

"It's the perfect thing," I answer, my fingers feeling the loyalty she's poured into the cloth. Next to it she places a pair of sharpened shears, a spool of deep blue thread, and then a spool of gold.

I don't ask the question aloud—what the golden thread is for—but I raise my eyebrows as my eyes meet Celia's.

She doesn't answer, but picks up the shears and snaps them shut, slicing the air. "Get out of bed, then. You're taller than I am, and I'll use your height to decide how long it should be."

I smile at her abrupt order but wordlessly do as she asks.

It does not take Celia long to cut out the pieces. "We'll double the fabric and stitch it together so it's thick and warm," she orders. "Oh, and we need enough for a hood. He likes a hood."

Between the both of us stitching, the cloak comes into form. Miranda brings a meal midday—not asking what we're about, though her winter-snow eyes take in the scene with great thought—and Celia continues to sew while I eat. She pulls hard at the thread, her pretty mouth bunched and turned down at the corners, watching me eat with pure envy.

"Would you like some?" I ask, lifting a piece of bread spread over with butter in her direction.

Celia glowers and ducks her head. "Miranda says no. That we're not to waste the provisions on those of us who don't need it."

"But certainly the Pyre is wealthy enough for that."

"It's a waste all about," Celia sighs. "I would love to eat the bread. I would love to remember what it tastes like. But that's the outline of the problem, isn't it? I can't. When Sperro took us out of time, he took our taste—and I can't right remember what anything tastes like, except—"

"Except what?"

"A peach," Celia sighs, drawing the thread through the seam she is sewing with such apparent longing I can't help but feel sad for her. "I've clung to the remembrance of what it's like to taste a peach all these endless years. Years and years and years. I'm bent on remembering my last peach. I took it from the kitchen pantry that day, the final day we all were ourselves as we ought to be. Wasn't supposed to have eaten it, and about fifty years ago I confessed it to Miranda."

A laugh escapes me, and I look up at Celia's face. "What did she say?"

Celia looks at me and lifts a shoulder. "She said she was glad I had the memory to hold on to." She snorts. "Then she scolded me for petty thievery and her not having enough peaches for the tarts she was making for dinner that day, the day it all changed. That woman has a memory like a tree—nothing forgotten."

I've finished eating now, and I take up my needle and sit down near Celia. "What about you? What have you forgotten or remembered, aside

from that peach?"

"Oh," Celia sighs again, "I remember how nice it was to cry, to really cry. Crying is not the same how we are now. Not that I had many reasons *to* cry then, mind you. My life here was good, and it'd be a lie to say anything otherwise. You can't imagine how it was, Ember. All the halls teeming with people, travelers and nobles. But those of us who were part of the place were a country unto ourselves—stable hands and serving boys, maids, stewards, cooks, and woodsmen—so many of us we would have consumed a village. There were marriages and births and deaths, and our lives were as worth celebrating as theirs were—the family's, I mean, and those of all the important folk who lived at the Pyre. It's all so very like a dream." Celia makes a sad sound. "Would that I could dream again, Ember. Would that I could *dream*."

I think of the tangle of dreams I'd just waded through. Dreams were not always a comfort.

"What would you dream of?" I ask.

"Peaches."

I laugh, and then so does she.

* * *

Are you occupied at present?

I look up at the unexpected question, surprised not only by the words but also by the tone. It wasn't demanding.

I'm sitting in the Mirror Gallery, bundled up and drawing. Celia and I are almost finished with the cloak, and we plan to meet back in my rooms later tonight.

His golden voice comes again into my head. *Well?*

No, I think. *Sorry. I am only a bit surprised you asked.*

You have been working on something, and taken great care to keep it to yourself. I did not think you wanted my interference.

You're right. I don't want your interference. I smile. *Have I really managed to keep all thought of it from you? I've been practicing, but still—*

As unlikely as it seems, yes. Impressively so.

That's a relief.

Oh, I'm certain that I am doomed to hear most of your thoughts in regards to me. If I wanted the self-torture, I could force myself in and hear

them all, no doubt.

Hmm, I think, not certain I believe him. *Well, I am not occupied at present. I'm simply drawing in the Mirror Gallery.*

I'm in the library.

Yes?

Aren't you going to come in?

I raise my eyebrows. *All right. Are we going to talk?*

Probably not.

Then I'll bring my charcoal to keep drawing. I'm trying to capture the windows of the Pyre.

I can feel him pause, and then he says, *Why do you feel a need to tell me things I do not—and never will—have any interest in?*

I laugh as I stand up, reaching for my green cloak, which I'd carelessly left on the floor. *It's the charm of your personality*, I think in reply. *I can't help it.*

You're quite vile, December.

Says the Death Bleak.

* * *

Late that night, as Celia and I are sitting before the fire, sewing the almost-finished cloak, I think about my time with Sperro in the library.

We'd not spoken at all. He had sat in his chair, and rather than looking at the fire, he had watched me and continued to watch me, his eyes never leaving my face. His expression had been one of consternation—of unhappiness and distance and other things that a Death Bleak likely carries—but his gaze had been piercing. Exacting. As if all the clarity that I can now see in his face had been poured into his ruminations regarding me. I had pretended not to notice and focused on my drawing, which didn't come out very good.

"Are you going to be sullen the night long?" Celia asks sharply.

I look up, brought back to the reality before me. "No. I was only—I was only thinking."

"Humph," she says. "I am finished. Are you?"

"Yes, just about," I say. My fingers are a great deal slower than hers.

Celia's mouth changes shape, as if she's pulling at the insides of her cheeks and measuring me in the process, deciding what to do with me.

“I want to add some embroidery to the cloak,” she finally states.

“Embroidery? Of what?”

“It’s only this,” Celia says, twisting to face me, angling into a fighting stance despite sitting on the ground. “I knew him, back before. And you didn’t. And I thought that this—you see, he would spend hours almost every night charting the stars in the sky.”

“He was interested in astronomy?”

“Sperro wanted to know everything about the stars: their patterns, their movements, how dim or how bright,” Celia answers. “More than once I was with him up on the roof of the Pyre, covering the lantern so he could study what was above us, then uncovering it just enough for him to make his notations.”

I move my fingers over the cloth of the cloak again. “What is it you want to do?”

Celia hesitates. She looks so young and endlessly *here*. “I want to stitch some of his favorite star patterns into the cloak with the golden thread.”

“A celestial map to counter the patch magicks he’d worn before?”

“A map of the stars because he loved them,” she answers. “And because I don’t even think he remembers how brightly they shine. All of us had forgotten, until recently, when you and Astrick began burning candles and the clouds went off for a handful of nights.”

“Do you have the stars memorized yourself?” I ask. “Enough so that you would know how to stitch their patterns?”

“No, not many,” Celia admits evenly, challenging me with her tone. “But I remember the important ones. We can start there, and then, if the sky clears up tonight, we can go up to the roof of the Pyre and map out a few more. We’ll take Astrick’s lanterns.”

“Certainly.” I nod my head. “Just tell me where I should begin, and show me how you want to stitch the stars.”

By the time I’ve finished one constellation, Celia has done three.

“Your stars aren’t as straight as mine,” she complains.

“I know.” I laugh, ruefully. “Perhaps I should just do one or two stars in each constellation, and you can do all the others. Then it would look less like a flaw and more like an artistic interpretation.”

“We can try it,” Celia says impatiently, “as long as Sperro doesn’t mind imperfect stars.”

“I’m afraid all of my stars will be imperfect,” I answer, snipping the thread between my teeth. “But they’re my best, nonetheless.”

* * *

After Celia sees I’m bundled up—arguing, “I’ll not have Miranda after me for causing your premature death”—we take Astrick’s lanterns, some paper and charcoal, and the partially finished star cloak with us to the roof of the Pyre.

Celia leads me up to the ninth floor, where a semi-hidden stairway, which looks long forgotten, sits in the northeast corner. With two of Astrick’s four lanterns already lit, we climb our way up, through two floors of spiraled stone, until we come to a door that Celia unlocks with a key. She pushes the door open, and I follow her, the crisp cold of a winter night rushing into my lungs.

I pull my cloak tighter about my shoulders. We settle our things, and I look about, studying the roof with curiosity. It seems that at one time the roof had been filled with gardens. Now they are all dead or frozen, the stone garden boxes covered in snow, the small, beautifully trimmed trees stuck forever in their places, waiting three hundred years to again see a spring.

Tilting my head back, I gaze upward. While it is not a clear night, the clouds are as delicate as cobwebs, a single bright star blinking on the western horizon.

“That star I’ve already placed,” Celia says as she spreads out the cloak. She points to a particularly lovely star, bigger than almost all the rest.

“These will all be summer stars,” Celia says, standing, looking up with a squint. “He preferred the summer stars. I think he just preferred the summer. Winter up here can be very cold, especially if there’s any wind to speak of.” Celia raises an eyebrow, and it looks exaggerated in the lantern’s light. “Anyway, the world outside us is in full summer, so these are summer stars.”

“Can you imagine the warm air of a summer night?” I ask, watching my own breath dancing like a frozen cloud. “Can you imagine bare feet on grass?”

“No, I cannot,” Celia answers, shaking her head. “But years ago I came across a memory of summer. I could feel it, all the way to my fingertips, but

then it left me so...trapped." She looks down at the cloak. "I put the memory away with all the rest."

"Do you ever go through the other memories you've gathered?" I ask.

"No," Celia answers. "The few times I tried, I was so desperately sad that Miranda counseled against it."

Once we have lit all four lanterns, they create a beautiful interplay, reflecting off the stone balusters and flinging light into the endless sky above us.

"If these lanterns have any sway in clearing away the clouds, it might yet take a while," I say as we settle ourselves in the middle, with a few small candles lit to help us see our stitching as we sew another constellation Celia has remembered.

"This will be up near his shoulder," she says, "right behind his heart, which is nice. She always found this constellation first when they would stargaze together."

I had been forcing my needle through the blue cloak—pulling at the golden thread, tugging when it had got caught—when she said this. I look up. "*She* being Ederra, you mean?"

"Yes," Celia replies, watching my face as if to measure my expression. "He never loved anyone else, you know. Not in that way."

I nod thoughtfully, becoming aware of what she is trying to tell me. It is the strangest, most ill-fitting vetting I've ever received.

"So it seems," I answer. "I believe she is still fighting for him, wanting him to claim a Continuancy."

Celia finishes a star and then asks, "What do you mean?"

"Only that Ederra hasn't left me entirely to myself," I answer honestly. "I've had my own moments of understanding her, I suppose. I had a dream that I believe to have been of her and Sperro. She looked right at me, unsurprised to see me there, and I've wondered since then if she is not watching these days as carefully as the Lights are."

"She knows you're here?" Celia blurts out.

I'm so startled by the passion in her voice I drop my needle and look directly into her eyes. "It appears so, yes."

"And she's fine with you being here and all? At the Pyre? In her rooms? Spending time with him?"

I laugh. "Is that why you didn't warm up to me when I first came to the Pyre? You thought I was trying to usurp Ederra's place?"

“Oh, Ederra has been dead these three hundred years,” Celia says, fussing with embarrassment. “But there you were, in her rooms, wearing her old clothes—same height as her, same way of moving and all—”

“If you’ve been fussing over what Ederra might think, you’ve no need,” I say, starting to wish for this conversation to be over. “I’m certain she wants me to succeed, for his sake.”

“Well, I’m glad of it,” Celia says with relief. “And I’m sorry, but only a bit. It’s just that you’ve changed in regards to him: you now pull towards him. And he’s—well, he’s certainly fascinated with you. He watches you like he—” She pinches her mouth. “It just isn’t right, that’s all, him thinking of you that way when he’d loved her so. There were never two people more fated to be together, and she died because of him.”

I press my lips into a line. I want to ask more about Ederra’s death, but it feels like trespassing into the lives of all of them, both those stuck out of time and those already gone on.

Celia’s voice breaks the silence. “But your thoughts of Sperro aren’t…?”

I look up from my attempt at sewing a golden star. “He’s a Death Bleak, Celia. He is neither the young man you knew nor a creature to be thought about,” I wave my hand in the air, “in any terms whatsoever—save life and death.”

“Life and death make a very large swath of the human experience,” she retorts, with more sarcasm than is necessary.

Just then, the door leading out to the roof bursts open, and Celia and I both jump. It’s Sylvain, breathing hard. His eyes move wildly from us to the lanterns we’ve set at various points on the roof.

“Life’s blood, I thought the roof of the Pyre was on fire,” he spits. Shaking his head, Sylvain delivers up an obligatory glare for the two of us before asking, “What in the hell are you doing?”

Just as I’m about to answer, Celia gasps and shouts as she jumps to her feet, “The stars!”

Both Sylvain and I look up. Astrick’s lanterns have worked. The wispy layer of clouds has dissipated, leaving crystalline stars blinking over the winter forest.

“I don’t think we have time for all those stars, Celia,” I say, standing alongside her.

“Well, of course not,” she states. “But there’s the crown. And there’s the Man of Battle, over there. Oh, and the Wolf! I’d forgotten it!”

“You haven’t yet answered my question,” Sylvain huffs.

“We’re making a cloak,” Celia answers, “for the master.”

Sylvain’s disproval gives extra energy to his next words. “That he might again build up his patch magicks? What fools you are.”

“It has nothing to do with patch magicks,” I reply sharply. “We are mapping out the constellations and sewing them into the cloak. The signs of the Lights working in the heavens.”

“Nothing you do will alter his course; it’s time you realized that,” Sylvain answers, moving his hand over his shaved head. But his eyes are studying the cloak spread out on the stones beneath us, and they don’t look as doubting as his tone would lead us to believe.

* * *

Where are you? The library?

Yes, he answers. *I’m reading.*

I’m coming down.

I know. I can hear you getting closer.

I roll my eyes, turning my thoughts towards the windows as I pass them. Unbound afternoon sun is shining through the west-facing panes, casting color all over the floors of the corridors. It’s such a deep pleasure. And I realize I am coming to understand, to a fuller extent, how beauty ministers to the heart in a way nothing else can.

When I arrive at the library, Sperro doesn’t bother to look up, just turns his page and continues reading. Walking across the carpet, I take the seat opposite his. There’s a small log burning in the hearth, and the room feels pleasant in its afternoon comfort.

“Don’t you have something for me?” he asks without looking up.

“It isn’t yet finished,” I answer, settling into my chair, pulling my feet up. “Do you know what it is?”

“I know what it’s not,” he says, and a cruel smile wanders across his mouth even as his eyes still focus on the page.

“Oh?” I say. “And what isn’t it?”

“A lover’s token, a gesture of romance.” He closes the book and looks up at me. “You must have simply brought me something dealing only in

terms of life and death."

My lips part, and I can feel my cheeks flush pink. "Have you been listening in on my conversations? I thought I'd kept them from you. I also thought you said you were trying to give me privacy?"

I have been trying to stay out of your tedious affairs, but there are certain words and phrases I can't help but hear. Especially when you think them over and over again.

"I wasn't thinking such things *over and over again*," I say, forcing my coming smile into a scowl.

I'm not handsome enough for you? He raises an eyebrow and laughs.

Determined to spoil his entertainment, I give him a look of detached assessment, as my father would. "Do you wish to know what I think? Brace yourself for the disappointment of me not finding your features so repulsive."

He tilts his head and lifts his eyebrows, the anticipation of a spar lingering in his subtle smile.

I continue. "The bridge of your nose is particularly fine. It's a rare line, not often seen; it's regal, yet without denying the face of warmth. It would have made you look noble, had you not turned yourself into a Death Bleak with reptilian, blank eyes."

But not so blank as you had once thought them.

"No," I answer, my voice turning softer. "Not so blank."

He lifts his chin, a near-human gesture.

"Anyway," I wave my hand, "I could argue you've also been fortunate in your cheekbones. Brow? Masculine. So yes, I would say that before you fell, you were very handsome indeed."

He tilts his head, his eyes narrowing in subtle challenge. "And in all your inane sketching, do you capture me as you suppose I once looked, or are you honest enough to translate to the page what you see before you now. My face no longer inspires beauty. It causes fear, fosters doubt. It reminds people of despairing things, of dark acts and dark places."

"I rather think it's like your voice," I say after a moment. "When you speak aloud, it sounds like slate, or like metal, a difficult scraping sound. But when I hear you in my head, your voice is strong, almost golden. Like honey, but in the fresh, good way. Not sticky or sweet, but rather untainted somehow. Clearly, both voices are part of you, even if I'm the only one who

can still hear what you used to sound like—what it always should have been."

I rub my fingers together and shrug, looking aside casually, though I feel no such emotion. "As for my drawings, neither version of you is a very good likeness. The human form was always my father's strength, not mine."

* * *

A few days later, we are sitting again in the library—both of us ignoring that there is less and less time remaining before a decision will be demanded of him. Sperro is leaning against a wall, thumbing through a book. I'm settled in the nearby window seat, alternately watching the birds outside the window and Sperro with his book. Both views make me jealous.

"Sperro?"

He doesn't move, but I can feel his mind flicking towards mine. He's listening.

"Would you mind telling me what's in your book?"

He lifts his head now and shifts his body, looking at me almost companionably. "I didn't think you were interested. You've never so much as taken a book off these shelves."

There is a passion behind his eyes—I catch my breath. It's almost as if the Bleak has fallen away and I am simply seeing a young man, speaking of what he loves.

"You can read whatever you wish," he says when my eyes don't leave his. Then he hands me the volume in his hands. Before reason can stop me, I open its pages, just to see if this time it will be different. It's not.

"I can't read. Remember?" I say wistfully, my fingers moving over the elusive letters.

Sperro makes a strange noise, and I look up. He's looking at me now like I've told him I'm a brook trout.

"You can't read?"

"You know I can't read! That's why I had you read the note—" I break off saying and then repeat, "You know I can't read."

"I'd forgotten. Or not understood." He frowns. "And you've never been able to read?"

I shake my head. "It's always been so. One of the reasons why my brothers went away to the University and I was not even sent to one of the

schools for girls. Letters have always jumbled themselves together or turned around. I'll think I understand, I'll study the sounds, even know how to spell any word you ask me to, but on the page I can't make them out."

"How strange." He frowns and folds his arms, shifting his weight onto one leg as he turns to face me, pressing his shoulder against the wall just as any young man would. He moves the back of his thumb across his chin, speaking in his cold, slate voice. "I suppose I could try to teach you."

I stare at the undecipherable page and twist my lips down.

"I don't think it would work to have you teach me."

"Perhaps not. Would you have me read aloud?"

Glancing up quickly, I lock eyes with him and press my lips together, astounded at the offer. We have what? Sixteen days? Seventeen? And then he must make his decision. Are we going to pretend there is no boundary of time around us? Are we going to continue our strange dance of existing in half-step with one another, with no thought to what happens at the end? I would love him to read to me. But…

He misinterprets my reaction.

"I don't have to," he defends. "I just thought you might enjoy it—"

"I would enjoy it!" I answer, lifting a hand. "I'm surprised is all." But my smile comes out wrong on my face, a bit sad. "Is it not a strange idea? To have a near Beast of Ten offering to read me novels in his library when everything will soon be…?"

Sperro draws his eyebrows together, then his face fills with some realization. He takes a step away from the wall, away from me, and makes a face like he doesn't care. But I catch it, the flare in his eyes, bright as any flame-bound color. The remnant of his true self.

"I do wish you to read aloud, Sperro," I reiterate, trying to untangle our conversation as best I can. "More than I can say. Do you have a favorite?"

He looks back at me, watching carefully for my reaction as he thinks, *But you hate the sound of my voice.*

"I certainly do not. I find it far less—"

"Hideous?"

"Abrasive," I answer.

"Really?" And he looks as if he doesn't believe me.

"No, actually." And the confession makes me laugh. "It's as awful as it's always been, but I've grown accustomed to it, I suppose."

He changes his posture and crosses his arms. Then, unexpectedly, a sharp smile splits his face. He laughs, and I feel like it's at my expense.

"No need to be rude," I answer, yet I can't help but smile. "You didn't answer my question. Do you have a favorite of all the books?"

Sperro lets the edges of his mouth soften. He comes and sits beside me on the window seat. He does not look at me, rather his eyes peruse the shelves of his library, as if he's having a personal conversation with the room. I can hear him muttering titles in my head, thinking of characters and verse and poetry.

"I used to pore over the epics," he begins, "the great poems of conquest and valor. But I set those aside, for I only wanted to understand the magicks and how I could manipulate them." After taking a pause, he adds, "Lately, I've had more patience for the old tales." Sperro moves his hand along the edge of the stone windowsill, his eyes still tracing the high shelves of the room.

"What are the old tales about?" I ask, curious if they are the same tales I'd been told as a child.

"Various things."

"And the one I've seen you reading so often, that you keep by your chair? Bound in red leather?"

His eyes again catch color, and when he looks at me—for only a moment—even the dullness of his face is changed.

"It is the tale of a Witch king."

I wait for him to continue.

When it appears he won't, I shift so that I'm facing him directly. "What is the story? What happens? You must know the story well enough by now to tell me."

He sits stone still for a long moment before saying, "I suppose it is the tale of his redemption."

"Is—is it?" I stammer, blood rising to my cheeks for the surprise of it. "Have you always cared for it?"

His eyes half close. I can see a division in his face. Then, shaking his head, he stands, and I watch him walk across the room to his chair before the fire, where he picks up the worn volume in question. After a moment, he raises his eyes to where I sit, a cold hardness smothering the openness from only moments before.

“Upon any thought, I’ve never really cared for it at all.” With a flick of his wrist, the book is sent flying into the fireplace, the pages reaching out, flapping against the air.

“No!” I jump off the window seat.

It hits the burning logs, tumbling down, settling in a bent shape. The moment the book ignites, I feel as if something has punched my stomach, stealing the air from my lungs. I gasp, dropping to my knees, my hands reaching out across the stone floor.

“Sperro! Why did you do that!”

“What does it matter!” he barks, and I’m taken aback by the thin, desperate fierceness in his voice. “What does the tale matter, December? It is an empty story, a hollow thought.”

“Redemption is none such.”

“Yes, it is. It is old and stale.”

“No!” I cry, bringing my hands into fists before me, looking up intently at his face. “It is new as the morning, fresh as the day.”

“It is a withered thing.”

“It is the chance of every man!”

“Look at me!” he shouts. “Look. At. Me.”

And I do. I look at him, a grey creature, shaking in his wrath.

“I am a Death Bleak. Nothing else. Nothing more! Nothing.”

“Not nothing,” I cry, a guttural sob rising in my chest. “Not nothing,” I repeat, forcing the wet tears from my face with the heel of my palm. “And you, even you, Sperro, are given one last chance. Please.” My voice is trembling. “Please don’t throw yourself into this abyss.”

He watches me for a long, hard moment, then turns and leaves the room.

XXI

Days filled with nothing—like days overwhelmed with too much—wear you out just the same.

Sperro has disappeared. He has retreated to his rooms and refuses to be seen. His absence leaves me waiting, wondering, struggling through the

heavy fog of his deep retreat. Celia and I have finished his cloak. It leaves me with little to do but walk the forest or help Miranda in the menial chores, many of them useless and redundant.

Astrick has not yet returned. I miss Thry. I worry over Hadspen. And I wish I could see Sperro. It's almost unbearable, knowing there was an *if* that might now be gone. My sadness is more for Sperro than for myself. And what of the Pyre if he descends irrevocably into the dark? Will it break? Will it fall? Will all the books in the library be burned for his empty temper?

I ask Celia—as we're carrying a basket of memories to the eighth floor—if she would like to give the cloak to Sperro. When Celia doesn't answer, I glance towards her face. Her expression is pensive and drawn out, like a long held dread is now before her.

"What's wrong, Celia?"

"I can't, Ember. I can't give him this cloak."

"But why? You've helped as much as I, and the stars were your idea."

She is shaking her head, and I'm not certain she even heard me.

"Nothing bad will happen, Celia," I say, uncertain whether I'm speaking the truth.

"It's just that I'm not going to do it is all."

"All right. I will take it to him. When it feels right," I add wistfully.

In the long swaths of time that Sperro's retreat has left me, I find myself in more concentrated meditation on what it means to be a Virtus Third. At first I find nothing, an empty room, bare of instruction. But as I keep at it, thoughts begin to come, then images, as if I've closed my eyes on a windy, sun-filled day, yet can still see the dance of light through my eyelids.

The more I give myself to these meditations, the more I feel the fog give way to this greater sense of wonder. I cannot yet articulate it in words, only in light and feeling, but I trust it nonetheless. The Pyre tugs at me, and I give back. I know I'm gaining essential truths that I do not yet understand.

But I cannot live in my meditations for every hour of every day, and when the insight falls away, I'm wild for something to do. My drawing has failed me. I cannot sit still long enough to capture any image. Miranda does not always want me in the kitchen. And Celia is not keen to have me follow her in her work.

I walk every corridor in this grand building, searching for errant memories, but I find few. When I try to chop the wood Sylvain has left for

the Pyre, Balint stops me.

"I'll not be letting a lady do my work for me."

I want to beg for his allowance, make him understand that, with Sperro's self-imposed confinement, I cannot do my own work. Instead, I leave, taking myself on another walk through the forest.

I stay away from the river.

One night, when I find Sperro's door unlocked, I brave entering his room. When I peer into the gloom, I see him crouched on the floor, facing away from me, trying to sew a bit of metal into an old, faded black cloth. But he stumbles over the words and can't find whatever darkness he needs to make the new patch magicks effective. He throws the cloth across the room. He shouts and yells and curses.

I open my mouth to speak, but something holds me back, the feeling of someone standing beside me, setting a hand on my shoulder, telling me that Sperro must work out some things alone. Closing my mouth, I step back and go quietly out of the room, unseen.

Our days are growing short.

* * *

I'm sitting on the wall that runs east of the courtyard, swinging my legs back and forth while gripping my cloak around me to keep warm, when a familiar figure comes quietly through the western arch.

"Astrick!"

Astrick's head cocks up, his eyes finding me. I gather myself onto my feet, then run atop the wall until I reach the stairs, flying down them and across the courtyard. I throw my arms and all of my relief around him.

Astrick catches my momentum, returning the embrace, the strength of his pulse almost shattering it's so grounding.

"I didn't know if you would be all right," I say as he loosens his hold and I pull away, my hand still griping his arms.

"I didn't know if you would be," Astrick answers, looking at me, his hands still on my upper shoulders. "Are you well? Has he yet made his decision?"

"No. I mean, yes, I am well, only he hasn't yet made his decision," I answer openly. "For days he's disappeared into his own mind, not leaving his rooms. But before that we— I believe he's still questioning—"

“Life’s blood, Ember.” And he looks over my shoulder, towards the front door of the Pyre, as if, by just looking, he could know our fates.

As he does so, I let my gaze touch on the skin of his neck. Still healed. Still whole. Astrick notices, and he swallows, uncomfortable. Carefully, asking only silent permission, I lift my hand from his arm and touch my fingertips to his throat.

“It should have crushed your throat,” I say, shaking my head. “That much power. That much force. More so than it did, I mean. It should have crushed right through. I can’t figure how you were even still alive to be healed.”

“I can’t figure it either,” Astrick says. “Adele was beside herself when I told her of it. Terrified. Some nights I would wake up, gasping for any kind of breath, and she swore I would never return to the Pyre.”

I brave a direct look at his face. “Why did she? Let you come back, I mean?”

Astrick’s hands fall away from my arms. Tilting his head slightly to the side, he looks down at me. “A Light Binder sent to aid a Virtus Third does not step away from that path lightly, nor without consequence. It took time to convince her of this, but in the end she consented.”

After a few moments, I say, “And the windows.”

Finally, Astrick’s eyes catch their accustomed light, and his face loosens into a handsome smile. “And the windows,” he repeats. “I bored her to tears with descriptions of the windows.”

“How long will you stay?”

He sets his face and looks back at the Pyre. “If I stay for five days, I can return home and come back just before your Bleak’s days run out—so that I will be here for the end.” He lets out his breath. “If he waits that long.”

“I believe he will. Something changed, after the river.”

Astrick frowns, like he hasn’t quite heard me right. “The river?”

I wave my hand to the side. “He fell into the river, and I went after him—not that he needed me to. Anyway, he saved me and lost his cloak.”

Astrick starts to speak—the look of too many worried thoughts in his face—but then he closes his mouth. Crossing his arms, he looks intently down at me for a long moment.

I lift my fingers to my forehead, unable to rightly explain the significance of these days he’s been away. “Sperro spent hours sitting in the chair across from my bed. He asked questions, with the possibility of

another way working on his mind. He admitted, as much as he was able, that he might be considering a different course."

Astrick shakes his head lightly, again looking past where I am standing. "If you want me to take comfort in such slender possibilities, Ember, I will, but—" He lifts his shoulder, looking baffled. "You have what, a dozen or so days left?"

"Nearly, by my count."

"Then I'd better see to my work. But if you are able—"

"I intend to keep Sperro away from you at any cost."

"My safety is not worth *any* cost, but we will do the best we can," Astrick replies as we begin to walk towards the Pyre. "I should warn you that Thry gave me strict instructions."

A happiness at his mention of Thry's name settles inside of me. "Instructions to do what?"

Straightening his shoulders, Astrick looks over at me. "To do whatever I must. To help you in the task before you."

"And you are to do this in the spare time you have between fixing every broken window in the Pyre?"

"What do the windows of the Pyre matter if there is no Virtus Third to light them?" he asks practically. "Come on, let us beg Miranda for bread while you tell me of the weeks past, and I'll tell you of your brothers."

* * *

The pattern of these few days in which Astrick stays at the Pyre takes shape. Astrick tells me in which hall or passage he will be working, which window he is fixing, and I spend my day reaching towards Sperro, so I will know if he ever leaves his room. There are a few nights when Sperro comes out and stalks the Pyre, walking with a strangely uneven gait. I find him as soon as I'm able and follow a step behind him, wondering what he has inflicted on himself to cause his halting movements. He does not speak to me or place a single thought into my mind.

These next five days go quickly, selfish for how fast they steal the time. And I have no more insight about the workings of Sperro's mind than I did before. Astrick, though, has almost completed the Long Hall and has repaired the glass in several small windows found in corridors and stairwells. The Pyre knows. It is growing bolder beneath our feet.

The night before Astrick is to leave, when Sperro and I are walking a dusty corridor in silence—any possibility of unspoken communication between us hedged up—we round the corner into a dim passage to find Astrick, fixing a single piece of glass.

Meddler slithers the ominous whisper through Sperro's mind. And he lowers his head, jaw working, eyes trained on Astrick's stilled form like a wolf watching his prey. And Astrick—my heart drops for seeing it—shudders, involuntarily, but holds both his ground and his courage, refusing to be defeated.

Sperro notes this, flicks his hand in the air, as if declaring Astrick something not worth his time, and walks on, passing the Light Binder without a second look. I lift my trembling hand to the wall only a moment before following Sperro. As I pass, Astrick and I exchange the look of fellow soldiers during a long campaign.

"Life's blood," he mutters.

When Sperro makes his way back to his rooms, he pauses at the threshold and looks back at me from over his shoulder but does not speak.

I wish to shout, "What is it you want me to do!" But he would not be able to give me an answer. I bite back the words and take a step towards him—interpreting his uncertainty as a question, as an invitation.

And when he steps into the loneliness of his room, I follow. Sperro walks to his bed, but he does not lie down. Rather, he sits on the side, staring ahead at nothing. I sit beside him, gingerly at first, but the weight of his body causes me to lean towards him, and our arms touch. He leans against me, leans upon me, and releases a difficult breath as he closes his eyes.

I wait with him until his shoulders droop, until his head is heavy and hanging forward, until it's not only my body holding him up but also my hands wrapped around his. And then I ease his body down, telling him to rest. Telling him I will wait, however long, and be with him when he is able to come forth from the darkness.

* * *

"Astrick," I whisper, knocking louder on the door to his stable rooms. It is almost dawn, but the clouds have cleared and the stars are still out,

moonlight pouring in through the small window of the stable hallway. "*Astrick*."

I don't think he hears me, but then there is the sound of feet on wood. The door is pulled open, and he moves a hand across his eyes, leaning against the doorway.

"Is everything all right?"

"Yes. Are you?"

"It took a good hour for my blood to stop racing through my heart, but I survived. What do you need?"

"I'm sorry it's so early, only I've been sitting with Sperro for hours, and I remembered that I had these, and I wanted to give them to you before you leave. But I needed to wait until he was asleep so he wouldn't know."

"What are they?"

I thrust the books into his hands—the two books that I'd taken from the library—and forgot about—when I'd first arrived. "They're books, Astrick. Important books. I'd hidden them in my room. One day, Sperro railed about something missing from the library, and it was one of these books. I can't fathom how he hasn't found them in my mind, except I'd nearly forgotten them myself. It was only tonight, as I was in his rooms, that I remembered them, that I knew I should send them with you. There is knowledge in them I need. One is a book about the Pyre, and the other seems to be a record of all the callings and the curses: those who work in the light and those who work in the dark."

Astrick opens to the title page of the first book.

"The *Orbis Terrarum Explicative*! Wonderful! But why would you send this with me?" Astrick whispers, his eyes flicking in the direction of the Pyre. "Shouldn't you study these books here?"

"Because—" I take a long breath. I always hate having to admit this to people, especially when I think them intelligent or gifted in any way. Astrick is both. "I can't read, Astrick. I've never been able to. It's—it has never worked for me."

"You can't read?" He draws his face together in the shadows. "But I thought you'd said you'd received the note I left you."

"I did."

"Miranda read it for you?"

I shake my head. "Miranda can't read anymore. No one at the Pyre can. Sperro took it from all of them."

“Then how did you know what it said?”

“Well, Sperro can still read.”

Astrick says something, some word I don’t know, and leans his head against the doorframe. “That’s certainly good to know, that any correspondence between us must be delivered through a Death Bleak. Life’s blood, Ember.” He lets out a long sigh that turns into a laugh. “Well,” lifting the books in his hand, he looks at me, “I’ll take these with me tomorrow and study what I can. They might be helpful to me as well. And Thry will want to look at them.”

“And maybe Hadspen.”

“Oh, I think not,” Astrick answers, standing straighter, his face shifting towards disapproval. “Hadspen already has something he’s looking at.”

“What’s that?” I ask, confused, rubbing my hands on my arms for the morning’s chill.

“My sister.”

I open my mouth, but no sound comes out.

“Adele is quite beautiful,” Astrick says. “And Hadspen has noticed. He’s been tremendously attentive.”

“Oh. I’m—sorry, Astrick,” I answer, feeling awkward for being in the middle. “He is honorable, Hadspen is. You’ve no need to worry.”

“Oh, I think he’s honorable too,” Astrick says, blowing out his breath and shaking his head. “And whatever he lacks, Thry is there. I can’t say it is what eased my mind, in leaving her alone with them, however honorable.”

“What eased your mind, then?”

“Oh.” Astrick lifts a shoulder in the dark, and I wish I could see his expression more clearly. The moonlight isn’t bright enough. “They have a sister. They know. It’s a pact, is it not? They make certain my sister is safe; I try to do the same for theirs. It isn’t as if Hadspen hasn’t taken me aside and informed me of what he will do if I don’t take care of you.” Astrick pauses. “Or what he will do if I take too good of care of you.”

“Too good of care?”

Astrick doesn’t answer, but he shifts, and I’m suddenly very aware of his shoulders and the casual confidence of his body.

“Too good of care,” he repeats. Then he bends down, his face tilting close to mine, leaving a light kiss on my cheek.

I’m not breathing as I feel him pull away now, reclaiming his doorframe. My eyes are wide. I begin to laugh.

“Forgive me.” He smiles and runs a hand through his rumpled hair. “I had to have something for Hadspen to torture out of me, after I do an inquisition of my own. By the Lights, that boy will be the death of me. Well.” He raises his eyebrows. “Good night, Ember. I’ll find you in the morning before I ride out.”

“Good night.”

I step back as he closes the door. Then I turn around and walk down the stairs and out of the stable.

The night smells almost incomprehensibly clear. As if I’ve stepped into something clean. My heart is beating. My whole body is awake. I laugh. It’s silly, I know, to take his teasing for anything beyond simply that. Only…it was so normal, so real. For that one moment, I wasn’t at the Pyre—rather, I was a girl still on the edge of her life, all possibilities before her, all the endless questions being asked.

Walking across the dark courtyard, my lips move into a subtle smile. It’s good to remember that outside this forest there are people living untarnished lives. Taking a moment for the stillness around me, I stand at the base of the steps, my cloak wrapped around my shoulders. What would I give to be able to live out a natural life here, in this place, among these trees? What I had already given? Home? All the familiar roads?

Question unanswered, I slip back into the Pyre.

* * *

Miranda sighs.

I look up from the dish I am cleaning to see her standing before the line of kitchen windows.

“Has Sperro left his room this morning?” she asks me.

“No.”

“He’s been lying in there for days,” Miranda fusses.

“He has,” I reply, feeling the warmed water on my hands as I clean the other dishes.

“And Astrick? When was he coming back?”

I pause and blow a strand of hair from my face. “Well, it takes him two or three days to travel home. He said he would only stay for one night, and…” I count the days in my head. “I think we will see him before long.”

“It’s a melancholy spirit that’s settled about the Pyre, my lady.”

I agree silently.

“Hello!” Balint calls as he and Sylvain come in through the outside door, each with an armful of firewood.

“Hello,” I reply. “How is the forest today?”

“Busy,” Sylvain grumbles. Then he turns to Miranda. “We lost one of the big trees up north, one of the oldest in the forest.”

“Oh dear.”

“It’s a bad omen,” Balint inserts.

“Do you know why it came down?” I ask.

“Probably a storm,” Balint answers.

“It was no storm. The forest is weakening,” Sylvain says, contradicting him. “I don’t know how much longer it can hold on.”

They all look towards me, assuming I will have an answer.

I wipe the hair from before my eyes with my forearm and then settle my hands on my hips in response. “We will know soon, either way, if the Pyre falls and Sperro with it.”

“Let us hope it doesn’t,” Balint says.

“Let us hope he doesn’t,” I murmur in response.

* * *

It is past midnight, and I’m standing in the open corridor outside my bell tower rooms, looking over the forest. Sperro’s new cloak is clasped against my chest, and I’m trying to reach through his cloud so that I might find him. I can’t feel him in his room. I can’t feel him in his library.

As I look over the frozen forest, I reach my thoughts out towards the trees. They are silent, these evergreens, as silent as sentinels and waiting to be freed. But there, out towards the east, is some unsettled movement. A weighted thing. Returning to my room, I put on my warmest dress, my boots, my own cloak of green, and with the blue cloak still held carefully in my arms, I follow Sperro into the forest.

There is no moon, but the low clouds reflect off the white, snowbound forest, creating their own light. It isn’t long before a new snow begins to fall. There is no menace in the expression, rather a gentle, quiet strength, and I walk through the tall silence of the forest unafraid.

I find him in a small clearing. He's standing still, arms crossed, head bent forward as the light flakes of snow dance around his figure. Pausing on the trail, I watch him, aware of how little time actually means when all you can think of is the person before you.

Sperro does not turn towards me, but his thoughts do, and I feel him clear the space between us.

Ember.

I answer with my own clarity, my own openness to him.

Sperro looks over his shoulder, and the snow's reflection throws the features of his face into contrast, an angled combination of the dark and the dim. Nothing else in or about him moves. He just waits. So I step into this clarity between us, walking across the clearing, and stop only when I've come around and am standing just before him—close enough that if I lean forward I would touch him, close enough for the cold cloud of my breath to break against his shoulders.

His eyes rest on my face, his head bent towards mine.

Is that for me?

I nod. *It's a cloak. Made by Celia and myself. To replace what was lost.*

Things that are lost do not find replacement, December.

"Yes, they do." My words are as quiet as any I've ever spoken, but they are enough for this midnight forest. "Lost things can be found. Lost things can be replaced by something of even greater worth."

He watches without moving as I carefully unfold the cloak. It falls between us, the patterns of the constellations nearly invisible. I feel Sperro lift a hand to touch the cloak, his fingers moving across the rich fabric, pausing on the gold threads.

"I have a candle with me, if you would like to see it."

Sperro shifts, lifting his head as he looks past me.

I don't need a light, December. I can already see the stars. They've swirled through your thoughts for days.

And as his hand grasps the cloak, I let go.

Thank you again, Sperro, for pulling me from the river. This is a token of that rescue.

When he answers, it is with audible pain. *I wish you would stop trying to do the same for me.*

Part Four

The Pyre

XXII

Trouble.

I look up to see Sperro standing in the arched entryway of the rose and thorn passage, looking down at me.

I didn't even hear you coming. I crane my neck to see his face better. I've been sitting on the floor, watching the glass flowers try to pull any kind of light out of the feeble afternoon, counting how many days we have left, Sperro and I, before he must make a decision. Two? Three days? And Astrick is still not back.

"Trouble," Sperro repeats, this time speaking out loud. "Trouble is coming." He no longer looks like he's walking endlessly in his thoughts. He looks focused.

"What sort of trouble?" I ask.

Sperro looks past me a moment. Then he takes the two stairs down into the passage and comes to stand before me, his hands clasped behind his back, his eyes traveling over the patterns of the windows.

"They are coming. Tonight."

"Who is coming?"

"Those who would demand my oaths, to end all this and take my final blood gain."

I swallow. "Meridaithe? Callidus?"

Sperro shifts his eyes to mine—not so blank as they once were—and nods in sharp confirmation. "They, among others. They will come demanding an oath. If I step into the blackness, it will be tonight. If I

choose not to follow that way, I will have to fight against them with whatever slant and twisted magicks I can conjure."

"You can't fight darkness with darkness, Sperro. It will never work, not in any lasting way."

He presses his lips together, his brow creasing, a strange expression on his grey face. At length, he answers, "You keep insisting one fights darkness with light."

I hold my breath.

"But that is a thing, December, that I do not think I can abide. My light was abandoned so very long ago." He raises his eyes again to the windows. "Either way, this ends—we end—tonight."

As these words settle, everything is stilled. Strangely, even the air seems changed, becoming a soft, hazy version of the real thing. Sperro stands without moving, all grey and silent, and I'm still sitting on the floor, realizing the end of all these long days has come. Tonight. It is tonight I will know whether he flings himself into darkness—taking my life with him—or begs mercy of the Lights.

"Sperro?"

"Hmm?" He looks down at me, and the distant expression on his face makes my heart break in a way it never has before.

"I will be standing with you when they come."

Sperro nods his head once, as if he's always expected me to stand beside him and I'm simply repeating something we've already promised.

"There is one more thing you should know," he says.

"Yes?"

"The Light Binder."

"Astrick?"

"They've taken him."

* * *

Sylvain is lighting the torches in the courtyard. Balint, on my orders, is bringing out Astrick's lanterns and placing them on the ends of the long stairs leading up towards the Pyre's front doors. They are not yet lit, but inside each of them is an unburned candle.

"They will reflect their light through the entire courtyard," I tell Sylvain, who has come to stand beside me, a torch burning in his hand. He

doesn't say anything, just stands there, the torchlight forcing his face into sharp relief. He's not looking angry in this late afternoon, but rather uncertain.

"Do we know when they're coming?" he asks.

I shake my head and swallow. "Sperro said he would tell me when they were near the Pyre. That we would have time."

"Time to what?" Sylvain spits. "Time to prepare for a bloodbath?"

"I—I couldn't tell you," I answer.

I ask Sylvain to mind the torches, and then I go inside the Pyre. There I encounter Celia, walking through the front gallery, her arms full of candles, her eyes heavy with worry.

"Are those for all the south-facing windows?" I ask as I'm walking past her.

Celia nods, heading quickly towards the spiral staircase. "Especially for the big one in front that shines over the courtyard," she calls over her shoulder. When I pause in my steps, so does she. "Astrick taught me," Celia adds, "where the different sizes go to make it shine out." She blows a stray strand of hair from her face. "I think that I can remember which heights go on which symbols."

"Good." I give her a grim smile then continue on my way.

"Is it true, Ember?" she calls after me. The question makes me stop again, and I turn on my heel.

"Is what true?"

"That they took him? That they took Astrick? Miranda was muttering about it in the kitchens, but I could hardly get any sense out of her."

"Yes," I answer, feeling a sting from the admission.

"And he is yet alive?"

"Sperro said he was. Celia," I straighten my back, stoic as I am able to be, "we will get Astrick back."

Celia grips her candles harder, trying to trust the words I'm not certain I can believe myself. "Will we get the master back?" Her question is so bare, such a stripped honesty, another version of the same question I've been asking myself all day. Braver than mine, actually, for she's willing to show how much his choice would mean to her.

"He must decide."

"Has he given you any small thing to go on?"

"He hasn't destroyed the cloak we made for him."

A small blush passes Celia's pale cheeks. "Yes," she says. "There is that."

"There is that," I repeat before stepping out of the Great Hall.

* * *

Miranda tries to feed me—she fails. I'm far too distracted. But she ties my green cloak about my shoulders, her old fingers fussing with it about my neck so that I'll be warm as I go in and out; searching the grounds of the Pyre for anything I need, saying the prayers of the Line Sanctums, telling the Pyre to stand with us, and asking the Lights for what I don't yet know—those unknown prayers of the Virtus Third.

When the light of the afternoon begins to shift and I know evening is ready to surround the Pyre, I walk up the stairs that lead to the library, leaving wet boot prints on the carpets that run the length of the corridor.

I push the doors open and am greeted by the mute figure of Sperro, sitting before a cold, black hearth. He's slouching, elbows on the armrests of his chair, hands together, his fingers drumming a slow, mournful line.

"Sperro," I ask, "is it time yet?"

He doesn't reply.

I wait a few moments before asking a second time.

When he still does not answer, I ask him inside his thoughts, *When does the Witch come?*

He starts, shaken from a thought so far away that only speaking into his mind could remind him to come home.

"She does not come yet," he replies, his voice a deathly pitch, still and low and frozen.

"When, then? The day is all but ended."

"At dark, not at dusk." Sperro moves and turns, looking at me. "Darkness. When all the light has gone out of the air. When the blackness is all you can see between your face and your hand. That is the hour they will arrive."

"How many hours past sundown is that?"

He shifts, his blank eyes troubled. "Three hours past sundown." He turns more fully now and looks at me, making a study of my face, perhaps the first time he's considered me as a person separate from his own pursuits—a young woman from a small nation, taken from my family, held in the

stronghold of a Death Bleak. His thoughts then shift, and he sees me now as an untrained Virtus Third.

"Will you be ready?" he asks unexpectedly.

I lift my shoulders. "We are setting as many lights as we're able, but I don't know exactly what I'm preparing for."

"You don't make a very convincing argument."

"For trusting me?"

He turns back around with a broken sigh and sinks into his chair. He's mine, this Bleak. And tonight only he can decide.

The library is fading into a deeper blue on its continual descent towards night. I walk forward—past Sperro in his chair—and kneel down before the cold hearth. It's been cleaned, the charred wood and ashes all swept away, and someone has placed fresh logs here that are still waiting for their burning, as grey as the rest of the room. Looking about, I try to find a means of lighting the firewood, but nothing has been left to help me accomplish the task.

Giving out a long, frustrated sigh, I let my chin drop, my eyes closing. Now that I've stopped moving and am on my knees in the quiet of this fireless room, I cannot deny the feeling that's been clinging to me through the afternoon: that of having something looking over my shoulder. A deep thing. A darkness. It is seeping into my mind, trying to lace me with fear.

Destroyed, it says. *Things will be destroyed tonight. Your Bleak. Your Light Binder. Your life. It all falls into darkness tonight.*

"No." I shake my head, bringing my hand down on the stone floor. "It will not be so."

You don't get to decide, says the fear.

"I do," I refute, my breathing getting faster and faster. "I will not fear. I will *not* fear. There is no place for it here."

Fear is essential. Fear is what gives you visions of things as they really are. Fear is what keeps you from being deceived.

"That is not true," I say, giving a desperate laugh. But the cloying voice is wrapping around me, and I'm no longer certain.

Then the image of Astrick is forced inside my head. He's bound, surrounded by cloaked figures. Markings have been cut into his skin. His head is bent—

"Astrick!" I cry out.

Light the fire.

“Astrick!” I’m trying now to stand but can’t for the oppressive weight on my shoulders.

Light the fire, December.

I turn, looking over my shoulder at Sperro. He’s leaning forward, his hands gripped into fists, watching me with a jagged determination. “This is the Witch’s work. She’s reaching towards you, testing your strength. Light the fire, December, or Meridaithe will take your mind for herself.” When I stare at him blankly, he repeats aloud, “Light the fire.”

“I can’t,” I answer, frustrated by the confusion that is besetting my mind. “I don’t have anything to light it with.”

Sperro curses. “You daft wretch. Of course you do. You’re a Virtus Third!”

And like a rising flock of crows, he leaves his chair. The sound of wings fills my ears, and he is behind me in an instant. His arms reach around my shoulders, and he grabs my hands, forcing them forward, slamming them onto one of the rough logs in the hearth.

“Say your prayers, December. Say your prayers of the Virtus Third.”

His grip on my hands is so desperately tight I can’t move. I am surrounded by Sperro.

“I don’t know the prayers of the Virtus Third, Sperro,” I gasp. “They were never taught to me.”

“They’re in the old language, the language that once was spoken at the Pyre,” he says, his tumble stone voice scratching over my shoulder, his lips right beside my ear.

“I don’t know any of the prayers.”

“Curse you,” he rasps. “And you think you can stand beside me tonight and not fail? Perhaps Meridaithe is right.”

But he’s still holding my hands to the log, almost desperately. Our hands have started to shake.

“She isn’t right,” I defend vehemently, “but she’s coming. Help me, Sperro. What do you know? Do you know any of the holy words?”

“I severed the holy from myself a long time ago.”

“There must be something?”

“There is nothing.” And he starts to let go.

“No! There must be something!” As I cry out, his arms pull me closer to him. “These are the prayers of the Virtus Third,” I prompt. “These are the prayers of the Virtus Third—”

“December—” He rests his chin on my shoulder as he says my name.

Sperro Magna of the Pyre, you know the prayers of the Virtus Third.

The words of the Pyre reverberate through me, and Sperro also shudders.

Sperro Magna of the Pyre, you know the prayers.

“Say it, Sperro!”

“I can’t—”

“Let the Pyre help you. These are the prayers, Sperro! These are the prayers,” I prompt.

“These are the prayers,” he answers, and he lets out a breath that I can feel moving along my cheek.

Sperro Magna of the Pyre, remember the prayers of the Virtus Third. As these words echo around us, I can feel his lungs sink, then fill again with air.

“These are the prayers of the Virtus Third—” he hesitates, his voice breaking.

Then he finds something, be it the Lights offering grace or the Pyre giving memory, he finds something in the deepest part of his soul, something next to the center of his stilled heart. He says a word with great effort. “Veni. *Veni*.” Then it’s a string of words. I do not recognize them. I do not understand them. But they are beautiful, making me feel as if my blood is shimmering and the room has gathered together its light. And his voice—that harsh, dark, slate voice—sounds almost beautiful in the utterance.

He repeats the prayer twice.

When he pauses, I close my eyes and throw myself into it. “These are the prayers of the Virtus Third: Veni, veni o oriens, Solare nos adveniens, Noctis depelle nebulas, Dirasque noctis tenebras.”

The sound of fire rushes into my ears, and I’m enveloped. Sperro cries out. He lets go of my wrists to catch me to him, and twists away from the flames. His arms fully surround me now, the side of his face pressed against my temple, keeping me close.

With my own hands pulled away from the blaze, I wrap my fingers around Sperro’s arms. The heat. The light. I can feel it in my bones, burning away any thought touched by the Witch’s fear. It dispels any dark vapor, every contrary thing, and I give a broken sigh of relief.

“Sperro,” I whisper.

But he doesn't answer.

I twist, turning to face him, and he collapses against me, his head falling onto my chest, his cheekbone resting in the hollow at the base of my throat, his eyes closed. His breathing sounds corrupted, ill.

I forsook the Light long ago, he murmurs.

Pulling him as close as I am able, resting my cheek on the top of his head, I mark how strange it is to feel him in such a human way, to feel his hair against my face, to feel him collapse into a fathomless exhaustion against the beating of my heart.

"Sperro."

And then, from outside the window, comes a long-drawn-out sound—the toll of the deep bell. It rings like a forge, and all the stones of the Pyre shake with it.

Breathing in, I press my lips into Sperro's hair. "Do you hear the bell?" I whisper. "The deepest, strongest of the bells. Something has happened in your tenth line. Can you feel it?"

"You wretch," he murmurs. "You wretched girl." But he presses his face into my chest and clings to me all the harder. "I have not yet decided."

As I hold him, I look towards the windows. It is dark now. Fully dark. Soon our enemies will be upon us. There is a sound in the corridor outside the library, and when the door opens, it is Sperro's captain.

"They've been seen along the road," he barks. Then he sees me holding Sperro. "What have you done?"

"Help me stand," Sperro answers in a muffled voice, and I can't tell if he's speaking to me or his captain.

I shift, placing my hands beneath his arms, trying to lift him.

"You must try, Sperro," I say. "I can't lift you on my own."

"I—" But he's so fatigued that he stops speaking, and we focus on getting both him and me to our feet. The captain simply watches, looking hesitant, suspicious. But I am able to help Sperro stand.

"We must get into the courtyard," Sperro tells me, his left arm around my shoulders. I grip his left hand in mine as my right arm circles his waist. "We must get into the courtyard," he repeats, his eyes moving to his captain's face. "Aid me," he orders, lifting his other arm expectantly.

The captain hesitates, then comes forward, placing Sperro's right arm over his own shoulder. Once Sperro is secure, we begin to walk. Sperro is

doing his best to hold himself up, but he's unsteady, and I worry that the journey to the courtyard will be too much.

Just help me, he answers my worried thoughts. *Stand beside me when the Witch comes, when Callidus comes.*

Will you stand with me? I ask.

I—I don't know.

We struggle down the small hallway and through the gallery. The stairs are harder, and he leans on me, relying on the strength of my legs.

"What happened?" the captain growls again.

But Sperro does not answer, and neither do I.

By the time we've made it down into the Great Hall, the servants have gathered, waiting.

Miranda makes a move towards us when she sees Sperro struggling, but Balint reaches out his hand and holds her back. As we come to a stop, Celia steps forward, a longing, a fearful worry, marking her face. And in her arms, bundled and folded, is his cloak of midnight blue and golden stars.

"Master Sperro," she says with a small voice, and her hands are visibly shaking as she holds it out towards him. "Your cloak was in your chambers, lying across your bed, but it's cold tonight, and I thought you would wish to —" She tries to shape the words, to ask him if he will wear it, but her courage is spent, and her bottom lip is now trembling in time with her shoulders.

Sperro moves his tired gaze around her face. "Celia," he says, like he's saying it for the first time.

Sylvain gives a low whistle, and Miranda makes a noise.

"Celia," Sperro says again, then adds, "will you tie the cloak about my shoulders?"

Celia nods, letting the cloak tumble loose in her shaking hands. She steps towards us and, taking the cloak by its shoulders, raises her arms, lifting herself onto her toes, and I pull back as she casts it over him.

The captain curses, leaning away from the cloak. But I help as I'm able, guiding the fabric to fall down Sperro's back. When it's in place, Celia secures the cloak without looking at Sperro's face. Although her hands, once finished with the job, rest for a moment on his shoulders before she steps away.

Feeling Sperro beginning to give way, I grip him harder, straining to keep him up. His captain moves fully away, no longer helping. He's left me

to support Sperro on my own.

"We must go," Sperro says. And for the second time that day, as we struggle to the doors of the Pyre, there is the sound of a large bell, ringing like a warning call over the forest.

* * *

The courtyard feels hollow, eerie, like an old, windblown crypt, the abandoned remains long since disintegrated. As empty as it feels, there is a tremendous wind assailing the tall pines of the forest. The tops of the trees sway, their trunks moaning. Sylvain's crackling torches—set in the braces along the walls that surround the courtyard, spurting and flickering in the wind but holding their light nonetheless—can only just be heard above the noise of the coming storm.

Sperro and I limp down the wide steps, passing Astrick's waiting lanterns, until we're on the stone of the courtyard, standing fifteen feet out from the steps of the Pyre, facing the forest.

"Which gate will they come through, Sperro?" I ask, struggling to speak under his weight.

"They come from the west," he answers. "But they will not come through the gate. Help me—" He then says, "Help me stand straighter. I need to—I have to be able to—"

"Yes," I answer. As he steps away, I keep my hand on his waist, feeling his body shift as he transfers his weight onto both of his feet. I pull back. Now that we stand separately, I can feel the sharpness of the cold wind as it blows my green cloak out behind me.

Back to his full height, holding himself up without betraying any weakness, Sperro looks as he ever has: dark and grey, tall, broad-shouldered, and menacing. The cloak secured about his shoulders has caught the wind as well, whipping behind him, the gold constellations catching the torchlight as the fabric fights the wind.

Can you stand by yourself?

For now.

When he looks towards me, his face is half in shadow from the darkness of the night and half in light from the burning torches. It's a wild moment. The cloaks about our shoulders are pulling, snapping in sound, and the wind

is increasing in our ears. It is bitterly cold, and a gust of snowflakes rips through the courtyard, ready to blow through us.

Sperro reaches out and grabs my hand, his fingers strong as they wrap around mine. He's asking for a thousand reassurances, all the while giving me something he never has before, an ancient strength, one that does not pull from the dark.

And I know that this memory will be a flame beside my heart for the rest of my life—whether that life lasts one hour or one hundred years more. I will remember Sperro Magna standing in the wild winter of the Pyre's courtyard, impossibly straight, his hand gripping mine, his eyes fixed on me.

"They're here," he says, and he releases my hand.

They do not come through the gate or from the forest. Rather, they come from the darkness. Out of the deepness of night appear countless figures draped in black. Among them are a tall man—hooded, wrapped in a velvet cloak—and the Witch Meridaithe.

The figures take a strange formation, and two of the torches in the courtyard are snuffed out, only their smoke left, before it is stolen by the wind. Heaviness falls around us. As the figures spread out in a broken semicircle, I feel the same fear I'd battled in the library, rooted in hopelessness.

I glance at Sperro, wondering if he understands what they are doing. His has shifted into a menacing sneer, his lips twisted, eyes moving from figure to figure. Then he laughs, and it is a devious sound. My heart falls, though I resist the instinct to step away, praying Sperro will be able to remember.

"This is all you bring against me, Witch?"

Another torch goes out.

Meridaithe gives a treacherous smile, her fingers twisting about her staff, her serpent-like eyes moving from Sperro to me. "This is she," Meridaithe says, but it's to the tall man cloaked in velvet, at her left. "The *Virtus Third*."

The tall man lifts his chin and takes a step closer, pulling his hood back so I can see his face. He's handsome, pleasing to look at—old enough to exude wisdom and strength, young enough for pleasure and the satiation of one's appetites.

I set my mouth, my eyebrows drawing together. Something is not right with him; he's dissembling. The coloring of his face, the way his hair falls,

the line of his jaw—these seem like they're not supposed to be there, as if he's woven a spell to keep me from seeing through the veneer. He's gilded himself in a human look, when he feels anything but.

"We found something of yours," Meridaithe calls out to me. "Abandoned. Thought we'd take care of it for you."

One of the figures beside Meridaithe appears to pull at the air, and the darkness flutters away. I flinch. There stands Astrick, his arm gripped by Meridaithe's henchman, his hands bound by chains, an iron shackle about his neck.

Astrick's head is bent forward, and his nose has been smashed—bruises puddle beneath both eyes—but he's trying to look up at me, his eyes intent on my face. When he opens his mouth, I stifle a scream. It's filled with metal. Nothing there but a filthy piece of metal.

It's not real, Sperro says inside my mind.

What have they done to him? I ask, not letting my eyes stray from Astrick's.

It's a patch magick spell to stay his tongue. He's a Light Binder; his tongue is a weapon.

"Astrick—" I call over the wind.

He tries to nod, but it's clearly painful.

"A Light Binder is a take," Meridaithe continues. "Any one of us would be satisfied on his blood, but we thought we'd bring him here first, as a present for you before the end."

I swallow and return my gaze to the Witch, speaking as firmly as my shaking voice will allow. "The Pyre will not abide this."

Above the rumble of amusement, it's the high-pitched sound of her laughter that most unnerves me. The man in the cloak does not laugh, but he smiles, his eyelids half closed, his expression amused.

Sperro begins to pace, his arms folded. He opens his mind only enough for me to see how he's pulling their attention away from Astrick, then locks me out. This will be a decision he makes on his own.

Taking a long breath, I watch him stalk back and forth, staring down the company of figures before us. He's not strong enough to stand long, let alone pace. His eyes shift towards me for only an instant, and with his deep-blue cloak whipping about his grey form, he appears to be an apparition.

"Do none of you remember Slatt Clave?" Sperro finally says. "We fought opposed. We drew battle lines in that ground. I still hold myself to

them."

"Let us redraw the lines—" the tall man begins, his words sounding like an overture.

"I come to give you your Bewares," Meridaithe interrupts, her eyes glinting, her voice sticking strangely to the air around us. "I have Bewares for the likes of you, for the soon-to-be Beast of Ten."

"I'll have none of your Bewares, you Witch," Sperro hisses. "I claim my own fate, and yours be damned."

"Well done," says the man in the velvet cloak, taking a step forward, his voice sonorous. "Well done. You have set your own path and deserve to hold the power you do. I applaud you well. Only he who takes power with both hands can keep it, and you are determined to hold onto yours." His eyes move to mine briefly, then return to Sperro, who's stopped his pacing and is watching the man cautiously. "You are one blood gain away from Beast of Ten. Everyone doubted you could make it, but I never did." He takes a step forward. I, in turn, step towards Sperro, and the man takes note. "Tonight is as good a night as any for the taking. Indeed, it seems rather fit. This is what we've been working towards all these hundreds of years, the breaking of the Pyre, the achievement that only few have ever accomplished. Here you are, on the brink of your greatness. You need no Bewares to tell you your fate."

Sperro does not answer. And though his eyes are focused on this man, Sperro does not reveal anything.

Do not listen to him, Sperro, I think, hoping he will hear me. *It is not greatness; it never was. It is misery. It is nothingness.*

"You gave yourself to my training with great hopes," the man continues. "I have kept you, given you protection and guidance. I have given you vision."

Oppression is gathering around us, both seen and unseen, and I want to burst, to fight against it, to break the false glass of this man's words.

"I suppose," I call out, "that you are the one they call Callidus."

His eyes move to mine, but they don't linger. "Yes," he answers, his focus again wholly on Sperro. "There were sacrifices given. Given and taken. You have come so far. Come now a bit farther. Step into your birthright."

"His *birthright*?" I say, loud enough to counter the wind. "His birthright is the Pyre."

“And he will take it with him,” Callidus answers, his eyes still trained on Sperro, as if setting a snare, not wanting to startle his prey.

“A Virtus Third holds the Pyre now, and the Pyre will remain holy.”

At my words, Astrick attempts to step towards me and is jerked backwards, off his feet. He struggles up onto his knees and nods his head in an encouraging way, receiving a solid cuff on the ear for it.

“Do you dare take another’s destiny?” Callidus challenges me, his voice still trying to please, though it’s sounding frayed at the edges.

“I don’t—” Sperro begins.

“Yes,” Callidus interrupts. “Each time you have doubted I have helped you forward. Trust me again.”

“No,” I shout, my fists clenching. “You’ve no way forward. You’re a creature of a backwards path!” I look up at Sperro, who’s unmoving, his mouth frozen in question. I’m close enough to take his hand, and so I do. I grab hold of it with both of mine. “Sperro, listen to me. You were born unto the Pyre and the rightness of the place. You were born to live and to die, then to gain—”

“He will become immortal!” Callidus says.

“He was already born unto immortality! We all are,” I shout, defying Callidus. “But going into the abyss, killing all light, will strip him of that inheritance. It will only leave him ceaselessly blind. What right have you to forge your lack of vision over the life of a Lectus Born!”

And in that instant, one of Astrick’s lanterns comes to life, flaring behind me in the courtyard. I don’t turn, but I can hear heavy, booted feet. Sylvain. Sylvain is lighting the lanterns. Another is lit. Then another.

Astrick’s stricken eyes are watching the light behind me, and his chest shudders, like something has offered him unexpected relief. His power is building; I can see it behind his eyes. As the light of the lanterns shakes the darkness, Meridaithe moves a step back, and I take courage.

“The Pyre has been reclaimed for that which is good,” I declare. “Mark this. Here the Lights reign, as they ever will.”

“We will take the Pyre,” Meridaithe cries.

“No, you will not!”

“No, we will not,” Callidus says unexpectedly, his voice taking on a manipulative tone. “The Pyre’s very own Death Bleak will take it. And when it has fallen, we will dance on its corpse.”

“No!” I shout again.

Behind us I hear footsteps, and I look over my shoulder to see Sperro's Stone Six approaching. But the eyes of the captain are not on Sperro; they are on Callidus. As they walk past us, merging with the opposing forces, glaring back at us with hatred, Sperro gives a strained laugh. "Three hundred years of service and you step into my enemy's camp. Good riddance! Fools, every one."

"We are not the enemy," Callidus answers. "We work the same course."

"I have not forgotten Slatt Clave," Sperro spits towards Callidus.

"Slatt Clave will do you no service," I shout towards Sperro as one of the torches is relit, then another. "Remember the Pyre. Remember Ederra!"

As my words are stolen by the wind, the sound of a deep bell rings again over the Pyre: a sign of his tenth line being touched.

Turning to look in the direction of the bell tower, I clench my hands before me for the victory of it.

I have not yet decided, Sperro flashes into my mind with a tone of desperate anger. And I look back at him, unafraid of the honesty on my face.

Your tenth line is finding more resolve to live. *Not even you can deny the sound of the bell*.

"It is the appointed night," Callidus calls out, his voice again turning to falseness. "Confusion will grow like thorns in your path. You must decide, and I have come to help."

I flare the torchlight behind me, burning away his lies. Several of the cloaked figures shuffle in discomfort.

"Beware the Virtus Third beneath your roof," Meridaithe says, pointing her staff at me. "I warned you."

"Take the girl for your blood gain," Callidus urges. "Take her now. Deep night is approaching. Your power will be unmatched. We will all worship you."

"I will not forget the blood lines we drew!" Sperro answers back, motioning towards the ground. "I will not forget that we stand opposite, Callidus. You will not be part of my course, whichever way it falls. There are no lines here, but I—"

"And so I will draw them," Meridaithe interrupts, spitting on the ground. She drops her staff and lifts both her hands.

"No," Sperro says, lifting a hand. "Not here."

But the Witch pays him no heed. She moves her hands before her in harsh, inarticulate movements, and from her fingers comes an apparition of deep purple. A witchcraft of strange symbols starts to form, and I recoil, stepping away. There is no goodness in her work, and I'm loathe to have it touch the Pyre.

All eyes are on Meridaithe and her runes, but I glance towards Astrick. He's watching me intently, trying to convey some message. But each time he opens his mouth, it's bound by metal. Despite the weight of the shackles and chain weighing them down, Astrick lifts his hands, shaking them for emphasis. If his words are the tools of his calling, my hands are the tools of mine.

I look at my hands. There is something lingering about my fingers. It shimmers—like a memory—and as I move my fingers, it begins to gather. I don't understand what the Lights wish of me, but with a prayer, I lift my hands into the air before me, between me and the Witch's work.

At first, I'm uncertain what to do—I have no holy words to write—but then I remember the tree, the beautiful tree that shines over the Pyre's courtyard, heavy with harvest and strength. Lifting my hands, I begin to trace the tree in the air before me—a strong trunk, the heavy foliage of late summer, and the white, hanging fruit. The image glitters in the air, pulsing and twinkling like a line of stars. I push it upward with my hands, and the tree flourishes, growing tall.

Meridaithe is still intent on her own work, but as her lines try to extend towards the Pyre, they are repelled by the light emanating from the white tree. I continue to draw, extending out the pattern into an entire forest of trees; a significant token; a barrier against evil.

Shouts have begun, opposing my work. I ignore them. A rush races through my body, and whatever oppression had been filling my chest has now been banished. And I can see the smallness of Meridaithe and the shapeless form of Callidus, inhuman and wretched. Most of all, I can see the ever-growing light of the trees in the air before me, the sweet, blinding goodness radiating from the fruit. At my back, I can hear the servants of the Pyre on the stairs, adding whatever light they are able—more lanterns and more torches—until, finally, the light from the great window itself spills out over the courtyard.

In that moment, I hear the sound of a shout. It is Astrick. He breaks the false binding on his tongue and—with his eyes on the window—rises to his

feet, jerking away from his captor. He shouts again, and the metal falls completely away from his mouth. With a powerful word I do not know, he brings himself to his feet, despite his chains, and runs forward, passing through Meridaithe's dark magicks with a painful cry before breaking through the trees of light, letting out a sob of relief as he falls to his knees.

Celia runs down, as does Balint, kneeling beside Astrick, careful not to touch the marks cut into his skin. But I cannot turn, my focus on the fortress of light before me.

"So here we are! The lines are now drawn, the choice before you!" Callidus shouts, his once handsome face beginning to twist, to contort into a frenzy. "What is it going to be, Death Bleak? There will yet be a battle in this place. Our forces are gathering. This is a promise of things to come, the war to be waged," he rages. "Now, you must choose us."

Only then do I realize I have drawn Sperro outside of the trees. He stands in the middle, between the forest of light and the runes of darkness.

"No! Sperro!" I reach out towards him, but I cannot cross the lines to get him.

"You must decide now," Callidus shouts.

"Sperro Magna," I call.

"All the work," rages Callidus. "All the *sacrifices* you have made. You will accomplish nothing. The Lights will leave you weak. They will not accept such a vile creature back. There is no place for you amid their Continuancy!"

"Sperro!" I try to call above the noise. "He doesn't speak truth."

And all the while, there Sperro stands, in the thin no-man's-land between the wall of darkness and the wall of light. His mask slips, a show of struggle touching his face. A hunger. He stands looking not at the people but at what both Meridaithe and I have set before him: the one, deep, cunning and devious, beckoning with allure and whispered promises—what he has sought all these years; the other, tall, noble, an honest beauty. His eyes shift back and forth, and he begins to slowly shake his head.

"Sperro!" Callidus calls, finally using the Bleak's own name. But it is not said with affection; it is said with such hate that I have to step back. Callidus reaches his hand out and strikes the air. A wave of darkness breaks through the runes and hits Sperro in the chest.

Sperro stumbles backwards, falling to the ground. Catching himself, Sperro rises onto one knee. He stays bent down, his shoulders tensed. But

with the slightest lift of Sperro's hand—a show of power I've not yet seen—there is a jolt in the stone of the courtyard, and we all sway to keep our feet. Even Callidus, his feet catching in his velvet cloak. But his eyes are triumphant. For if Callidus can urge Sperro into rage, if Callidus can incite the violent use of his power, then I believe Sperro be lost to himself.

The wind increases, and Meridaithe's symbols begin to sway, creating a dizzying effect. My trees remain strong, only their leaves fluttering.

"Come back to the Pyre, Sperro!"

"Everything you are is a waste!" Callidus yells to counter my words. "Everything. Don't be a fool!"

"You must choose, Sperro," I cry, dropping to my knees as close as I can get to him. But I cannot pull him through the curtain of light. I can only beckon. "You must decide, Sperro. This is the day we've talked about. Choose to stand with me, with the Pyre. The Lights will see you through the rest."

The figures of darkness gather on the other side of Sperro, held back by the wall of Meridaithe's symbols. They call out a cacophony of despair and false promises. Meridaithe has begun to screech, and it's awful.

Sperro brings a hand up to his face. His mouth twists, the star-set cloak wrapped around the curve of his burdened shoulders.

"Focus on me, Sperro," I say, lowering my voice, hoping he can hear me through the din. *Sperro, the Lights want to claim you, heal you, save you for Their own, but you must choose Them.*

I don't know if he can hear me, but I keep trying, using forthright words to counter the mass of angry creatures opposite me. Someone drops down beside me. It is Astrick, half crouched, his head hanging from the weight of his many chains. He is speaking the prayers of the Light Binders as best he can, binding good to good, light to light, virtue to virtue.

The noise builds around Sperro, until I can no longer hear anyone's voice. There's too much sound. Finally, Sperro raises his head and lifts himself upright. His eyes are rimmed red with tears, and he looks at Callidus, the guide he has followed these many years. Then, slowly, he looks to me. I grip my hands before me, refusing to blink, giving him a steadiness to anchor to. Then he looks up. Clenching his fists, he closes his eyes and whispers broken words that I cannot hear, and then, with the feeling of a soul taking a long breath, he throws his body through the wall of light and crashes onto the stone beside me.

* * *

An angry scream splits the night. It's Meridaithe, standing before her magicks, screaming—her hands stretched out, dark smoke rising in front of her. Her face is contorted almost beyond recognition. The wall of light between us starts to flicker and bend.

"He's not breathing!" Astrick yells at me.

I scramble towards Sperro's side even as a tremendous gale blows through the courtyard. My hair flies in front of my face, my skirts whipping about my legs. I hear a voice calling forth dark things.

"It's Callidus," Astrick calls over the wind, and there is blood running down his chin from his efforts to speak. "You must stop him. You must counter it, Ember!"

"But what of Sperro!" I lay my hands on Sperro's chest.

"I'll bind his breath to his body; I'll do what I can." Astrick wipes his chin on his shoulder, determined to help despite the chains still wrapping his hands and his neck, despite the flesh of his arms having been cut in awful ways. "You must protect the Pyre! If the Pyre falls, Sperro has no chance."

I grip Sperro's shoulder. "Don't lose him, Astrick."

"I won't. Go!"

There's a crack, and a branch from one of the large fir trees falls into the courtyard. Smaller twigs are blowing across in its wake. So much grit is in the air that it's hard to keep my eyes open. Across the boundaries, Meridaithe and Callidus and all the others are gathered in a mass, each one performing a kind of twisted magick. The captain of the Stone Six sends his spells with venom towards me.

Standing, I lift my hands and try to shout, to say something to counter their dark work, but I can't find anything strong enough. I don't know what I am to say. The curtain of light is beginning to ripple, blinking unsteadily. The trees are growing fainter. Their leaves begin to fall. I put my hands up to steady them. This helps, but it is not enough. A torch is blown out, then another. I hear a shattering, but I don't look back.

"These are the prayers of the Line Sanctum," I begin, muttering the only prayers I know.

"Ember!" Astrick shouts from behind me. "You've got to do something. They're getting through!"

“Is he breathing?” I cry back.

“Only just! There has to be something more you can do!”

I remember healing Astrick, how the power had simply poured forth. “How am I to do this!” I cry to the Lights for help.

Someone else has come down to help Astrick. It’s Sylvain. Lifting Sperro in his arms, he heads for the protection of the Pyre. Everyone else is now huddling inside, frightened, watching from the doorway. Astrick, still bound by chains, looks helplessly after Sylvain and Sperro, then back to me.

“Go with him!” I shout.

“But what are you going to do?

“Go! Tell everyone to stay inside.”

Turning back towards the line of battle, I brush the hair from my face, feeling like a small child against such a destructive force. The spells and curses are building, mounting into a frightful creature, and I’m scrambling through everything I’ve ever learned to know what to do. My hands still gather light to them in the darkness but not as strongly as before. I’m tired.

“Help me!” I cry into the wind. but there is nothing to respond; no one hears me.

These are the prayers of the Virtus Third.

“What?!” I spin, looking behind me, but I’m now alone. The doors to the Pyre are all but shut.

These are the prayers of the Virtus Third.

I don’t know the prayers!

You know one.

The library. “These are the prayers of the Virtus Third,” I shout at the building spells of darkness, and the ancient words I’d learnt only hours before begin to pour from my mouth: “Veni, veni o oriens! Solare nos adveniens, Noctis depelle nebulas, Dirasque noctis tenebras!”

There is a sky-splitting crack and a flash so bright I stumble backwards. The trees of light shoot up. The sound of water and wind fills the courtyard, and light ripples almost violently as the branches grow, intertwining, gaining strength. The leaves fill out; the endless fruit becomes as vast and bright as the stars.

All the slant spells, trying to billow towards the Pyre, pull back like creatures in pain, and those on the other side of the white trees are forced to step away: some creatures fleeing into the woods; others disappearing into

the wind. Callidus has pulled his cloak over his face, looking away from the brightness growing in strength. Meridaithe is shouting something, yelling at the figures scattering from her side.

I regain my footing and lift myself, calling out the prayer once more. There is another torrent of sound, and I feel my cloak and my hair being pulled into a whirlwind as the light almost blinds me.

Scraping the bottom of my soul, crying out with whatever is yet in me, I again lift my voice.

A tremendous force comes falling down onto the Pyre, knocking my breath from my lungs. And as suddenly as the dark powers had come, they are gone. And with them goes the havoc and the madness and the wind.

I drop my hands to my sides, and from the great trees the fruit is released, a fountain of falling stars, crashing onto the stones of the Pyre. The last breath of their light lifts back into the air like a mist, glittering as it disappears, and the night gives itself over to silence.

It's just me, standing in the courtyard of the Pyre, trying to catch my breath. There is no sign of Meridaithe's spells. My own trees are now only a slight hint of light-lined smoke, rising upward like a gossamer curtain.

All is quiet.

I turn—all coherent thought drowning in the events of the night—and I mean to climb the Pyre's steps, but I cannot move. My body won't allow it. I am bone weary. Dropping to my knees, I mutter a prayer of thanks. Not until I've fallen onto my side do I realize how cold it still is.

The doors of the Pyre open, and there is the sound of boots on the steps.

"Come inside now, my lady," Sylvain says as he lifts me up, helping me to my feet. "Come inside. They are gone."

"What of when they come back?" I say, my eyes too tired to focus on his face. "They will come back. Callidus said they are yet gathering."

"It is not the day for that question. For now, they are gone."

"Is he—is he still breathing?" I stammer.

"Yes," Sylvain answers. "He's in his room, and Astrick has been working without taking a rest. He won't even stop for me to hammer those chains from his wrists or the shackle from his neck, though they burn his skin."

"You must take them off."

"I will. You must command him to let me."

Then Sylvain lifts me and carries me up the stairs of the Pyre.

* * *

When we arrive in Sperro's chambers, for the briefest moment it is like stepping into a sorrowful tableau. Celia is clinging to Balint near the hearth, and Sperro is lying in his bed with the star cloak spread across the foot of the bed as a talisman. He's been stripped of his clothing, only his arms and chest visible above the blankets. I can scarcely see evidence of a breath. Miranda is sitting on the far side of the bed, holding Sperro's hand, while Astrick stands at Sperro's bedside, his eyes closed, his hands resting gently on Sperro: one over his heart and one on his head. As Sylvain helps me regain balance on my feet, the tableau breaks.

"Ember!" Celia rushes over and grabs my hands, and Miranda looks up towards me. Sylvain holds me close to him a moment longer, and I feel the weight of his kiss on my temple.

"Give her space." Balint comes over, waving Celia away. "Look at her face. She's peaked."

Miranda snorts at the understatement.

"I'm fine," I answer, embracing each of them before walking, as best I can, to Astrick's side. "Will he make it through the night?"

Astrick does not answer immediately. Rather, he finishes the words he's whispering before he opens his eyes, standing as upright as the chains will allow.

This close to him, seeing the extent of his injuries, I cry out, almost gripping his arm, but symbols have been cut into his arms, and where the chains touch his skin it is severely burned. I pull my fingers away. "You need help now! We must get these chains off you."

"I think he'll make it, Ember," is Astrick's very tired reply. "But he's terribly weak. He needs rest. I should think to send everyone away so his sleep is not disturbed."

Miranda hears this, and she quietly adheres to Astrick's request, letting go of Sperro's hand and gathering the others.

"Celia and I will prepare food for the both of you."

"Balint will get the tools and I will be just outside the door," Sylvain adds. "We will figure out how to remove those chains."

"I'll follow in a moment," Astrick answers as Sylvain closes the door.

"You should go now," I insist, seeing angry burns spreading out from beneath the cursed metal.

“I will,” Astrick says, the tone of his voice trying to keep the pain at bay, the dark bruises beneath his eyes making him look startlingly grim. “But there is one thing I need to show you first.” He takes my hand and places my palm on Sperro’s chest.

I’m confused, and I open my mouth to question, but he shakes his head. Beneath my hand, I can feel the slight rise of his chest, the slight fall, and then I feel it. A heartbeat. Sperro Magna, the Death Bleak who has terrorized the nations, has a heartbeat. I close my eyes, and two tired tears escape, running slowly down my face.

“It’s still a mess in there, Ember,” Astrick says softly. “His lines are so mutilated, so wounded that it was hard to find anything to bind together. I tried to bind his mind and his heart, and I did so. But very weakly. Enough to see him through till the morning. You will be the one capable of doing this work, though I fear that trying any more tonight could prove too much.”

I nod. “Go find Sylvain, and release yourself from those wretched chains,” is all I say.

“I will. Then I’ll ask Miranda to see to my injuries, so you need not worry. You should be here. I wouldn’t trust leaving him all alone tonight.”

“Rest,” I say. “Promise me. We will speak in the morning, all of us at the Pyre.”

“If you need me—” Astrick says.

“I know.”

He looks right at me, his green eyes searching mine, and says, “I’m tired, Ember. I didn’t think—” And he steps back, the sound of metal beneath his movements, his head bowed from the weight of the shackle around his neck, fresh blood running over what has already dried. Astrick limps to the door. I hear Sylvain in the hall, waiting to relieve him of the chains.

“Life’s blood,” I whisper, sitting down on Sperro’s bed, flattened by the events of the day. I again place my hand over Sperro’s heart, counting out the measures of his heartbeats. They are not consistent, rather drumming to a troubled beat. But they continue—however weakly.

The fire in the room pulses, but everything is quiet in this deep night. The curtains are opened, and there are not only stars but also moonlight. Strange. I hadn’t noticed it in the courtyard.

Sitting here undisturbed is the first chance I've had to think about what's been done. Sperro has made his choice.

In that desperate moment, with whatever measure of faith he could find, he had thrown himself across the boundary that had been separating him from the Lights. He had chosen to spare my life and to plea, in some form, for a Continuancy.

Pulling my knees up under my chin, I rest my face against them, taking a long, trembling breath. I feel an unmatched joy over his desperate courage, and yet I am also very aware that the path ahead may require more than he or I have the strength to imagine.

But though he's lying here, as grey and hollow as before, it is with that one difference: The heart that had been stilled for centuries is once again beating beneath my hand. And in the tired aftermath of tonight's battle, that is enough.

Without worrying how any of us will get through what is yet ahead, I lie down beside Sperro, my hand still on his heart, and fall asleep.

XXIII

I wake before dawn with the sound of a bird outside one of the windows. My hand is no longer covering Sperro's heart, but my arm is flung protectively over his body. He's still not awake, but he's breathing, and it's steadier than last night.

Hearing a noise, the creak of a chair, I prop myself up on my elbow, squinting across the room. There sits Miranda, stitching, her experienced hands moving habitually in the dim light.

"Dear girl," she says with a sigh. "I thought you would sleep an age. He might still yet," she adds, nodding towards Sperro.

"Mmm," is all I answer as I pull myself up—body sore, limbs tired.

"It was a night if I've ever seen one," she continues, her eyes focused on her work, her mind clearly not. She looks at me, but it's with distance. Almost like she's making certain she knows me.

"Do you think he can do it, my lady?"

When I don't answer, she keeps talking, and I'm uncertain if she's clarifying or if she simply needs the comfort of hearing her own voice.

"We all saw him fling himself across that line."

"We did."

She takes half a dozen stitches then abruptly stops, setting her sewing down in her lap, and brings an old, arthritic hand to her mouth, looking at Sperro with all the concern of the most devoted. "I sometimes spend the end of the day sitting in a room. One of the hundreds that lie empty and quiet." She waves a hand absently. "I sit at those windows, watching the forest and the winter, and all these years, I've believed it could change. Through all the horrors, I believed, Ember."

"Your faith in him does you credit."

"Why is it this morning that I begin to doubt if it's possible? Even after all that we saw last night?" Her pale eyes flicker from the discomfort of revealing such private thoughts. Before I can reply, she steps away from her words of doubt, as if they were never uttered. "They were able to remove the shackles from poor Astrick's neck, and I cared for his arms, laying a salve and wrapping them. No poison set in, for he'd rejected it. All should be well."

I sigh with a full relief. "Was he able to sleep?"

"He refuses sleep," she says, picking up her sewing and returning to her work. "Claims he can't rest now."

"Of course he does." With a glance towards Sperro, to confirm that his breathing is indeed stronger, I ask, "Where is he?"

"Last I heard, Astrick was wandering somewhere about the eighth floor."

"Will you watch Sperro?"

Miranda nods.

I slide off Sperro's bed and reclaim my green cloak from the floor. "The moment he wakes, send Balint to fetch me back."

* * *

As I climb the stairs, I feel I've slept an age, and yet I wish for an eternity more.

The halls are empty. There is no sound in the corridors or coming from any of the rooms. I make my way to the hallway that leads to the room

where the memories of the Pyre are kept. What else would Astrick be doing on the eighth floor before dawn?

The door to the room is open, and I pause on the threshold. There is Astrick, sitting on the floor before the long stretch of wardrobes, their doors open. He's sitting cross-legged, one hand behind him, holding himself up, while he lifts the other hand, sifting his fingers through the varying shimmers of light in the air before him. He is sorting through the memories, unfolding them with only the wave of his fingers—searching for what, I don't know.

"Have you been through any more of these memories?" he asks me in a subdued voice without turning around.

"Only the few stray ones I've found about the Pyre," I answer as I take only a few steps into the room.

His shoulders shift as he lifts his arm to close one memory and open another. And although the back of his neck is burned, and his wrists and his arms are wrapped, his movements are graceful, reminiscent of the confidence he'd had the first day I had spoken with him. But the blood on his clothing sets us firmly in the shadow of last night's battle.

"Is your mouth recovered from the patch magicks?" I ask.

Astrick offers a wordless shrug—I think his lack of response is due to tiredness and pain—and he keeps moving the memories about in the air before him.

"If my father were here," I say, "he would paint you just so—a young man, clothing torn and bloodied, but sitting straight nonetheless, and about him would be shimmers of light—an incredible enough sight that one would think it impossible."

"Impossible at any place but the Pyre," he answers, and then he half turns, revealing his face and the deep bruises beneath his faded green eyes. "Would your father wish to paint the whole of the picture? There is not much beauty to be found."

"He would make you sit for a portrait just so and be thrilled for the chance. 'The marks of battle,' he would say." I close my eyes briefly. "My father thought tragedy and struggle were fitting subjects for art, arguing that they help us find empathy within ourselves."

"What did he usually paint?"

"He preferred figures. He painted men working in the field, women gathered about the wagons at harvest time, my brothers and I—"

“Sitting quietly, hands crossed in your laps, smiling innocently?” he suggests, knowing full well those are not the words I am about to say.

“Climbing trees, rather,” I answer.

Astrick smiles. “And was that your favorite painting?”

I shake my head. “No, actually. There was a particular painting, vibrant—almost shocking in its color—that hung in the hallway outside my bedroom. It was of a sunrise.”

“I think I would like to wake to such a painting every day.”

“I miss doing so myself.” I look towards the window, at the lightening sky. “It was burned the night that Sperro—as Death Bleak—came to our small nation. Strange, however favorite it was, I’ve not recalled it all these months. It begs the question if there will ever come a time when I cannot recall the painting. Will I grow old and lose its memory forever?” I catch on my own words. “Will I grow old, Astrick? It seems now that I might.”

Astrick’s gaze has returned to the floor now, a thoughtful expression on his face. Then he lifts himself to his feet, moving gingerly from the soreness of his injuries. “You must try to get it on canvas somehow, your sunrise, however different from your father’s.” Astrick looks towards the eastern window, his cheekbone casting a bit of shadow across his bruised cheek. “Is it clear enough this morning, do you suppose, to see the sunrise over the forest?”

“The moon shone clearly all night.”

“Will you be warm enough?” he asks, glancing at my cloak.

“We can find a blanket in the bell tower suite.”

Astrick nods, and after collecting the memories into the wardrobe, we leave the room, walking in tired step with one another. Unsure why I do it—perhaps from a desire to reassure myself that he is safe—I put my hand on his back. He doesn’t object and brings his uneven steps a bit closer to mine, responding to the weight of my steadying hand.

* * *

By the time we reach the roof, the sky on the far eastern edge of the forest has warmed to pink. It is frigid, and a relentless wind moves steadily over the towers around us. But the morning is clear, and a peace is about the place.

We sit down on the west side of the roof, our backs against the parapet, crouching to escape the cold air. We have two blankets between us and wrap ourselves up, sitting next to each other, trying to share and steal warmth as needed.

Astrick leans his head back on the stones and gives a weary sigh, his eyes half closed as he watches the light build.

"You should let me do something about the injuries they gave you," I say, feeling a surge in my chest at the sight of his exhaustion, the burns around his neck.

He closes his eyes all the way and smiles, the dimple on his face coming gently. "If you could see yourself, you would not extend such an invitation, Ember. You would save all your energy for the reclamation of your Bleak."

"Am I looking so poorly?"

He opens his eyes and turns his head, looking directly at me. "The wind could blow you off the Pyre for how transparent you look. When your brothers see you, they'll blame me for not being more of a help to you."

"When my brother's see you, they'll be worrying about more than just their sister."

The light breaks into my vision, and I look east. There the golden sun is searing the edge of the forest, rising above the distant line of mountains. The sky is illuminated into a window of orange and pink, streaks of light racing along the trails of thin clouds. What holy rituals, I wonder, are reserved for the sunrise? There should be at least one. There should be a prayer, a song.

I sink lower inside my blanket and turn towards Astrick to share my thoughts, but he is asleep, his face reflecting the glorious colors of the morning, his head leaning against my shoulder, breathing peacefully.

* * *

"I'm only asking why the hell his heart is beating when we're still stuck out of time?" Sylvain says. He's angry, standing with one booted foot on the bench before him as he leans forward, with his elbow resting on his knee. He looks around the room at all of us gathered, his eyes burning, challenging the tenuous peace we've carried in the two days since the attack on the Pyre.

Sperro has not yet awoken. We've coaxed a weak broth into his mouth —"Because if his heart is beating, he must have need of some food," Miranda insists—and I've prayed endlessly for him to wake up.

Seeing him as settled as he can be, I've joined the others down in the kitchens, where an informal meeting is taking place. We're all here: Sylvain, who has hung about the Pyre, keeping watch, reporting no sightings of Sperro's guards—they had fled with the others, it appears. Celia, her face a nervous experiment in hope and confusion. Miranda and Balint, keeping their own thoughts buried deep. Astrick. And myself.

Astrick has been essential these last few days. His presence makes Miranda fuss less, and Balint marvels at his artistry. Celia—well, is Celia and pleased to have a young man in the Pyre. And Sylvain seems to respect what Astrick has to say.

So I am relieved when it is Astrick who answers Sylvain's angry question.

"We don't really know yet what is happening with Sperro Magna, so I find it difficult to assess what will happen to all of you."

"We've been at the damning caprice of Sperro Magna for over three hundred years," Sylvain replies, his words filled with spite, none of the tenderness from the night he had lifted Sperro's body so carefully left in his tone. "My blood remains still, cold in my veins, yet I have done nothing to deserve such condemnation. Only remaining faithful to my post! Now I have to stand here waiting on the Lights, while they favor him with a heartbeat?"

Balint moves his head in agreement, but he doesn't look up, rather he toys with the end of his sleeve.

"It may take time," Astrick answers.

"But why not any time for him?" Celia asks. "It's strange, isn't it? Things suddenly change for him but not for us?"

"We don't really know what has changed," I say, speaking up for the first time. They look at me, all except Astrick, who bows his head, tapping his finger on the table as he purses his lips. "Sperro has yet to wake up, and we have yet to understand what his path towards redemption will be. I fear that may play a part in your fates. He is the one who holds you out of time. He is the one who stole your heartbeats, your reading—who knows what else? Perhaps he is the one who has to release it."

Sylvain curses and pushes the bench away with his foot, the scraping of the wood on the stone floor the only sound in the room.

"So we go on as before," Balint says, tired from the thought of again hefting the daily routine he's kept for centuries.

Celia looks crushed, and Miranda just gives her head a shake, then stands, smoothing her skirts before attending to the soup she's already started preparing.

"As soon as Sperro awakes, we will know more," I answer.

"Then get to work, Virtus Third," Sylvain answers, but he doesn't sound angry with me, just bitter from the understandable disappointment of still finding himself lost when all hope had just been found. "And we best be vigilant. I'm not so certain when our troubles will come against us again."

* * *

Later, Astrick and I make a plan. We are sitting huddled together against the east wall of the Pyre's roof, watching the sunset go up in flames.

We know the Pyre needs to be prepared, fortified; to continue to have its windows repaired, and whatever else that can offer it protection. A Light Binder can do that. As for Sperro, what is ahead for him is still a mystery. But I do know I'll have much work, not only to heal but also for whatever else we may face from those wishing to destroy him. It is as daunting as it is nebulous.

So it is decided between us—Astrick will take on the responsibilities of strengthening the Pyre and I will focus on Sperro. Once a day, at sunset, we will come together to discuss our progress and ask whatever questions we may have.

"When Sperro wakes up, it's going to be endless work," I say, yawning long enough for my eyes to water. "Today I found everything mangled, as if something crashed through his body. It's—it's a near impossible task to unravel the mess of dead lines, for it will require a good deal of power to rekindle them without causing too much strain before his body is ready."

"But the deep bell still rings true from the bell tower," Astrick says and then sighs, leaning his head against the parapet. "I heard it again today. That has to mean something, be some message, some hope for you to keep."

"Yes," I answer, gripping my blanket with my cold fingers to pull it closer beneath my chin, my ring catching a shine from the sunset. "There is

one piece of his tenth line that is illuminated more strongly than before, and to that I think the bell is tied. It remains beside his heart—probably what allows it to beat again."

"How weak do you think he will be when he awakes?" Astrick asks, the tips of his disheveled hair moving slightly in the evening wind. Astrick has slept, but he still limps, and his face looks pallid in contrast to the bruising beneath his eyes. The marks on his arms and wrists and around his neck are healing.

"Far weaker than he should be," I mumble, my head back as I stare into the endless sky. "I didn't expect it, Astrick. Whenever I dared imagine Sperro refusing Beast of Ten, he was always stronger, the falseness swept away, his old strength, that of a Lectus Born, returned. He would be strong and sure and reclaimed. I don't think I was ready for him to be so weak, so __"

"Wasted."

"So very wasted."

"His choice revealed the truth." He looks at me. "The Lights always begin with truth; that is what they build on."

"Yes," I say with a half smile. "The truth of the matter is that we're all worse for the wear. You're recovering, though you endured *such* a beating." I look towards him. "The bruises on your face were quite bad."

"That's because they broke my nose when they took me." He gives his head a single, quick shake, banishing the memory.

"How is it not crooked?"

Astrick begins to laugh, and says wryly, "Clearly a question rivaling the seriousness of our conversation."

"Hadspen has broken his nose twice. I know what it is supposed to look like."

"My hands weren't bound when they did it," he answers, fighting a tired grin, "so I set it back into place before the next blow came."

I cringe. "Awful."

"And the most pleasant memory of the experience."

I make a sound of agreement, then say, "I must get back to Sperro, to see if anything's changed."

Astrick stands, then offers me his hand. "If you need anything bound or if I need anything healed." Then he flashes a smile incongruous with his appearance. "Or obliterated by light from the heavens—"

"I don't think I can do that again."

"Celia says it was astonishing to see. I'm sorry that I missed it myself."

The sun has disappeared now, and I stand, shaking the blanket. "Who would have suspected I would learn my first prayer as a Virtus Third from Sperro."

"Who, indeed," he echoes.

"It's a beginning, Astrick, but I'm afraid I won't be enough."

"There's something I have learned as a Light Binder," Astrick says, as we walk over to the door leading inside. He reaches for the door and opens it for me, pausing to finish his thought. "You can't rip yourself into little pieces and give them away. You must learn to remain whole and let the Lights work through you. Some tasks do mean giving of yourself, but in a way that doesn't make you unable to finish them."

"Are you counseling that I pace myself with wisdom?"

"I am."

I laugh. "You will have to be patient with me, for none of this feels very wise."

I set my blanket just inside the door. Astrick does the same with his, and then we descend several staircases before parting to do our separate tasks.

* * *

December.

Sperro. Are you awake?

December. His voice sounds so tired—endlessly weak—like it's coming from a great distance.

I'm coming.

I run.

* * *

I'm not expecting a raging fever where, only an hour before, there had been cold, deathlike stillness. Sperro is writhing in his nightclothes, his face wet.

I say his name.

But he does not answer.

His lids are heavy over his eyes, barely open, just a bit of brightness coming through where his eyes have caught the firelight.

Are you there, Sperro? Can you hear me?

He gives no answer.

"Miranda!"

She enters the room, already bringing water. "I was here when he started mumbling, then the fever flared up like a wildfire. He screamed for you."

"He's burning up."

"Going to be a long night ahead," Miranda says with transparent worry. "I've brought whatever herbs we have in the kitchen, but there are too few. The merchants have not come through these many weeks."

I hear what she's saying as I'm leaning over him, but am too focused on his pain to pay much mind.

"I don't think his body is strong enough," is all I say.

Miranda doesn't answer. For a long while we work, making poultices of whatever herbs she has, our fingers getting burned on his skin. I fight the useless feeling of not knowing what to do.

"He's *got* to be strong enough," Miranda finally says, "for there's no way round. You can only go through."

During the long night, we are vigilant. Miranda watches me work, the unbearable weight of all her hope apparent behind her eyes. She forces me to eat some of the broth she's prepared for Sperro and then insists I get some sleep before the fire. But Sperro is too restless, and I can't be still. I try to work repeatedly on his light lines, but the fever beneath my hands interferes.

Celia seeks out Miranda sometime during the night, and after the two of them disappear, I curl up on the bottom of Sperro's bed, wrapped in the star cloak, watching his chest rise and fall. At some point, I sleep.

* * *

"I don't want it."

The words shake me from my dreams, and I open my eyes.

"Go. Go!"

It's Sperro, though I can tell speaking is a struggle for him. Lifting myself up, I see that Miranda is trying to feed him broth. He's lying there,

his skin unspeakably pale, but he looks—

"Life's blood, Sperro," I say. "You look almost *human*."

"Get," Sperro takes a breath, "her out, December."

"You must eat," Miranda says stubbornly.

"It tastes like rot," Sperro hisses.

"Miranda," I say, wiping my hand over my eyes, "let him be."

"He needs strength," she counters.

"If he has enough strength to be disagreeable, he certainly won't be fainting from want of broth in the coming hours." I am hoping to make Sperro smile, but he just watches me through low-lidded eyes, clearly in pain.

Miranda shakes her head as testament of her long-suffering and gathers her tray of food. "When you're dying of hunger, you'll be wishing you had my broth beside you."

Sperro closes his eyes with a desperate sigh.

After Miranda leaves, I sit up and move to his side.

He grips my hand. "December, I think I'm going to—"

Before he can finish, his body jerks, and he turns away from me and retches onto the floor. His hand is still grasping mine, crushing it so tightly I think my bones will snap. Then he retches again, and again, the lines of his wasted body exaggerated. When he's reduced to dry heaving, I place my other hand on his shoulder and pull him back.

"Lie down," I calm, settling him against the pillows. One of the basins filled with water from the night before is nearby, and I retrieve a cloth, cleaning it in the water before turning back to wipe Sperro's mouth.

"You vile woman," he answers, his eyes closed. He does not look comfortable.

"*Woman* is it?" I say, leaving his side to carry the basin over to the floor so that I might clean up the mess.

I do my best, grateful there's another basin filled with fresh water, where I might clean my hands. After I do, I come back and sit on the side of the bed. Placing my hand on his forehead, I find the fever has broken.

"Do you think you can sleep again?" I ask. But his eyes are already closed, and his breathing is lengthening out like a shadow.

* * *

He has too little water throughout the day and even less broth, claiming it all tastes like damnation. And he has no patience for Miranda. At times, what he utters is very cruel. Nothing that is a surprise coming from a Death Bleak, but coming from a malnourished Sperro, it is too much for Miranda, and she flees. Those few ugly utterances are as much clarity as he's had. The rest of his words have been merely the mutterings of the very ill. The fever returns at sundown. After speaking with Astrick on the roof, I find Sperro in much the same delirious state he'd been in the night before.

"He's sick. His lines are all but fractured, and he's ages away from the boy you knew," I tell Miranda later that night, when she dares return. "You can't think he will speak differently to you now than he has for the last hundred years." Seeing her face, I soften my tone. "That being said, he has changed. I don't think you'll have to wait too long."

"All of it's been too long, my lady."

I spend most of the night tending to the restless Sperro myself, with a few hours' aid from Celia. I repeat what we had done the night before, hoping the fever will break before dawn.

The following day, he sleeps without waking, and I offer what I can by working on his lines, though his soul is too raw to respond. Then I sleep on the rug before the hearth.

When the fire of fever comes again the following night, I know something more *has* to be done. Sperro will not take water, and—unsure how his body hovers between that of a young man and that of a Death Bleak—I am worried of the toll dehydration will take.

The hours of the night pass with me in difficult meditation, sitting beside Sperro, my arms about my knees, pleading for an understanding of what is to be done. When an image finally does present itself to my mind, I utter half prayers until I find the courage to try it.

Placing my hands over Sperro's heart, I begin to speak the words softly. "These are the prayers of the Virtus Third." And gently, ever so carefully, I say the words of the prayer.

Sperro's tenth line glimmers, then flares: a brilliant, morning glow. Beneath my fingers, I feel the tenth line lying straighter than before. The other lines are still lifeless, but they are not as broken as before, less brittle in their coldness.

Before the hour is up, Sperro's fever dissipates, leaving him in a more restful sleep.

* * *

"Is he in so much pain, then? Despite his fever abating?" Astrick asks as we stand on the roof of the Pyre. There is no wind tonight, so instead of huddling against the wall, we're walking the length of the roof as the day fades to night. My cloak is wrapped about me, and my boots make a crunching sound as I step on bits of old ice and snow.

"He spends a great deal of his conscious day in silent melancholy, until a flash of pain crosses his face," I answer. "It's almost unbearable for him when I work on his lines, and he usually begs me to stop before I've done anything." Astrick nods, and I continue. "He won't talk and hates it when anyone else comes into the room. But if I try to leave, he makes the most unbearable sound—angry and frightened and lost all at once. His dreams are as restless as ever, and he rages, speaking nonsensical words. But when he wakes up, he will not talk of what he has seen. He does, at times, still cry out for blood. He's hungry for it. None of the food Miranda prepares goes down well; he vomits nearly all of it onto the floor."

I look away from the forest to Astrick. He's better now, two weeks past. We've worked on all his injuries, giving them room to properly heal, and what hasn't turned to scars yet soon will. Astrick is standing straighter, his shoulders squared, his movements as controlled as ever. But in his eyes is a layer of troubled experience that wasn't there before.

"Are you still worried over your sister?" I inquire.

Astrick frowns and brings his hand up, running his fingers beneath his jaw. "They are unprotected. I do not know if Meridaithe can know Adele is tied to me, so it's a relief your brothers are there. Still—"

"But Thry was able to set some of those protections about your own house and village?"

Astrick and Thry had pored over the books I had sent home with Astrick, and found significant things. The books contain powerful prayers to set protections, teachings of all the orders of Lights, and Astrick had told me, more prayers of the Virtus Third.

"I was going to bring the book about the Pyre back with me so we could study it, use it to protect the Pyre," Astrick says. "But Thry came out as I was about to leave and asked me to leave the book with him. He's an Intuit. I wasn't going to counter his feeling. And Thry would not let me write down any of the prayers, either. As soon as I was taken by Meridaithe, I

knew why. They searched everything, tried to force out whatever prayers I had so they could desecrate them. Had I those prayers on me, Ember—”

We have talked many times since the battle about how we could get them, the other prayers of the Virtus Third, and if it would be worth Astrick leaving his work at the Pyre. We have also wondered if it would be safer for his sister, Adele, and for Hadspen and Thry if they were here. We almost thought it would be, but Sperro’s constant hunger for blood had made us decide against it.

“We still have to weigh if it’s worth you traveling back on your own to retrieve the book, if we can sacrifice those days,” I say.

“I don’t know if the Pyre could stand it; it’s so embattled,” Astrick answers. “Since the night Callidus and Meridaithe came, I can’t walk into a room without it begging to be strengthened.”

We planned to talk about it again, but Astrick has been consumed in the work of the Pyre. Not only is he fixing windows but occasionally aiding Celia and Sylvain, for there are candles to be lit and fires to keep burning. The making of more candles has fallen to Celia, and she and Astrick work in tandem to keep the Pyre supplied. When Astrick is not doing glasswork, or seeing to candles, he is walking from room to room, from window to window, binding the Pyre together. This requires a good deal of patience, as he must listen to hear the quiet intonations of what might be bound next and how it should be done.

He is endlessly strained, sleeps but few hours every night, and still there are hundreds of rooms in the Pyre he’s not yet seen. The others—Balint, Sylvain, Miranda—help as they can, but so much falls only onto Astrick’s shoulders.

Merchants have not come through the forest since weeks before the night of Sperro’s decision, and the food supplies for Astrick and myself and now Sperro—what little he eats—are growing low and unimaginative. Miranda keeps saying Astrick is getting too thin.

My work with Sperro has been no less daunting. Every time I am not with him, the current of his need pulls me back, like an anchor being dropped into the ocean, whispering just how much reparation needs to be made. But his body and soul are as unused, as empty as the vast Pyre. It could take me years, something I know we do not have.

“Pray to the Lights we get through this,” Astrick says, interrupting my thoughts.

I look up. “They have to know, don’t They?” I ask. “The Lights have to know this is beyond our abilities?”

“I hope so.” Astrick grimaces. “The one hope I hold onto when discouraged is the way the Lights used you to defend the Pyre: as if you opened the way, but They poured the power through it.”

And it had taken everything in me, everything I’d known. “When Callidus and the Witch come again,” I say, “they will know what to expect. I will need more than just the first prayer of the Virtus Third.”

Astrick makes a sound of agreement.

A moment later, looking over the forest, I ask, “Astrick, why do you suppose this place is called *the Pyre*?”

He shakes his head. But then he moves his mouth to the side in thought, and his eyes narrow as he looks around the roof.

“That,” Astrick finally answers, “is an interesting question.”

XXIV

Sperro’s nights are getting worse. He screams. He cries out. He whimpers. He lashes out in anger. And then, come morning, he’s almost delirious—asking for relief from the pain and getting angry when anyone tries to give it. The others all but stay away now, even Miranda, who has been ordered from the room too many times. I do what I can, but the work of sorting the chaos is too painful for him. He writhes, begging until I stop.

This morning, though, he seems more lucid and more desperate as he struggles to speak to me. “Every night. Every night I see—”

“Every night you see what?” I ask, bending over him, setting my hand on his hollowed-out cheek. The physical proximity is no longer strange; it feels essential. We’re both hungry for it: Sperro, for the comfort, and I, for the amount of heart I’m pouring into his worn-out soul.

“Every night I—I dream,” he stutters, gripping my hand and taking a rough breath, “of the people whose lives I’ve stolen.”

His words sink into my chest. “Oh, Sperro,” I whisper, moving my hand across his forehead.

"I see every ripple. I see the pain, the death, the way it's affected," he gasps, "generations. People and faces. Every night I relive another, then another, then another—they keep coming. Keep *coming*. The same faces. They come, and I live through hell once more. Then they come again, staring at me, watching with such an expression of— And the same man," he cries out angrily, grasping my arm, "the same man has the gall to come every night and wait for me to speak with him."

"Do you know this man?"

"Yes," Sperro says, propping himself up, trying to lift his head. "He was the first blood gain I ever took."

It feels cruel, but I ask, "And what does he say to you?"

"Nothing." Sperro lets his head fall back against the pillows, his eyes half closed from exhaustion. "Just looks at me, and then, like a stone, a ripple in a pond— You see, don't you?" Sperro grabs me. "They stretch out. Lives. Occurrences. I can't explain to you all that I see every minute of the night."

"But what do you say to this man?"

Sperro gives a dark laugh. The sound is nothing good. "What could I have to say to him? That I'd have done it again?"

"That you're sorry."

His eyes fly open, their colorless depths searching the ceiling, and a crease appears between his eyebrows.

I frown. "You are, aren't you?"

I don't know.

"But—" I feel a prick on the back of my neck, paired with a great tiredness. "You flung yourself across the line. You made the choice to take the road back. Sperro? What is it you want?"

"I want a blood gain," he says. "I'm so hungry for it."

I recoil. "Are you not sorry for what you've done?"

No answer.

This defeat crashes too heavily on my shoulders. Without another word, I leave him to his own, self-inflicted misery.

* * *

"It isn't over!" I cry.

I've been weeping, distraught. My chest aches as I sob, so bitterly overwhelmed. "How *can* he? After making his choice? After everything? Everything he's been given, all the chances—how can he not see the great wrong behind what he's done?"

Astrick sits beside me, letting me weep, not burdening me with the comfort of an arm over my shoulder. He just sits there as I sob and rage and hit the stones beneath me with my fists.

What a grief it is to realize Sperro may not wish to finish the journey.

After much time, after I've cried myself hoarse and raged and wept for the pain—my face buried in my arms—Astrick speaks.

"Darkness does not let its former captives go easily. It must try to destroy them first, to pull them once again into oblivion."

"But he has no strength left, Astrick." Tears that long should have dried up are running down my face. "He can't—he's already so weary, and I am *so* weary."

"I know." Astrick threads his arm through mine, pulling me close to his side. "I know. And I can feel it mounting, the battle ahead."

"I can't face even the whisper of another battle."

"When the time comes, you will be armed. At least," he breathes out, "that is my hope."

I wipe the back of my hand beneath my eyes and lean my head back. "After my mother died, I was so bereft. So…utterly disillusioned. It shook my faith in happiness for a while. I refused to be comforted. I haven't felt that since, not even when I first came to the Pyre. But I feel it now."

"After my parents died, I don't think I felt anything for months. Just blankness. The pain came later."

I sniff. "How old were you?"

"Fifteen."

"Was it the Bleak?"

"No. Accident and sickness, three months apart."

"I'm sorry."

He accepts the words silently, then, "Remember your hope and courage have been bound. If you are willing to pick up one, the other will follow."

I sniff, and let my head fall against the wall behind me with a sigh. "My hope was lanced very thoroughly just now."

Astrick clears the tiredness from his eyes with his fingers. "Courage it is, then."

“Yes.” I sniff again. “Courage it is.”

* * *

That night I don’t sleep in the bell tower suite. Instead I go to Sperro’s bedchamber. He’s asleep, but I am not here for Sperro.

I am here for my wisp.

Sitting before the fire, I hold out a hand, my fingers touching the edge of the flame. It flares in familiarity and I smile at my old friend. I can feel my own light lines soothing, clearing of disappointment, and I give room for the comfort of hope. Lying down before the fire, I curl up, warm enough that it doesn’t take me long to fall into a deep slumber. My dreams are filled with images and faces, incongruous treatments of all that has transpired these many months.

But then they settle and I see the picture of Sperro, lying in his bed, and before him stands person after person, an endless train of men and women. They pour out of Sperro’s room. They fill the hall. They crowd the stairways. All the people affected by him in any way making a silent, endless parade through the Pyre. It’s almost unbearable.

Yet standing at the head of Sperro’s bed is a figure, in robes as bright as the white fruit in the courtyard window, who quietly invites Sperro to speak with each person: the maimed, the terrorized, the killed. Sperro cries out. He angrily turns away. But the same figure tries again, gently but firmly inviting Sperro to speak with each of his endless victims.

When I wake up in the morning, a light snow is falling. It’s blindingly white, and it reminds me of the figure that had been standing at the head of Sperro’s bed, patiently asking, despite all of Sperro’s protests, to face what he’s done.

* * *

It seems Sperro has been waiting for me to wake up. He has propped himself up on a few pillows, and there’s a half-eaten bowl of soup beside his bed.

“Did you eat that of your own volition?” I ask, standing and brushing the wrinkles from my dress. I’m feeling better than I have in weeks. My

night by the fire has done me well.

Sperro's eyes are trained on mine. He takes a weak breath. "I'm so hungry, December. Desperate for the want of blood." When I flinch, he lifts his hand. It's trembling. "No, don't—you don't know how much this body of mine cries out for it. Don't leave me again. I need your help."

I make a weary sound and walk over to sit on the end of his bed, looking at my Bleak. I have no words for him.

"I saw you here last night," he continues. "You stood by the hearth when they all came, cloying," he waves a hand, "crowding around me."

"Strange. I dreamt of it."

Sperro does not respond.

"Why didn't you speak to any of them?" I ask.

He closes his eyes tightly and shakes his head.

I feel the last tension inside me deflate. "It must be overwhelming, Sperro, all those people you must face."

"The chasm is too great," he says. He takes a deep breath and looks at me, his lungs clearly struggling, his eyes sunken. His eyes. They flash in color, then fade again to grey.

"If the chasm were too great for the Lights, They would have left you where you were."

He shakes his head. He does not believe me.

"I saw that there is someone beside you, asking you to speak with those who seek an audience. He wasn't demanding, he was rather…gentle."

"Won't," he takes a breath, "leave me alone."

"Of course not," I answer, giving him a tired half smile, "for he must know the way across the chasm."

"There is no way."

We sit in silence for a long while, and Sperro closes his eyes, but I know he's not sleeping. Miranda comes, pleased to see Sperro has eaten some stew, and mutters something about Sylvain and Astrick being down in the courtyard, playing with fire.

"I don't know what I'm to do with all these boys," she says, sounding more like her old self. And before she leaves, she turns to look at Sperro, who lies still, eyes closed. "This one in particular, my lady. I always said he'd *be* the death of me. Now I feel to thrash him soundly that I never got one, all thanks to him."

And Sperro smiles.

Miranda sees it, and her own mouth twists. “You know very well I always find you out, Master Sperro,” she answers with obvious affection, before leaving the room.

Sperro opens one eye and then turns onto his side, his smile lingering as he falls asleep.

* * *

“I need some clean water from the river that runs beneath the Pyre,” I say, as I walk into the kitchen.

Celia is there, fussing with an enormous curtain.

“Good heavens,” I add. “What’s that for?”

“Astrick wants it done,” Celia answers, frowning as she inspects the lush fabric across her lap. “He wants all the curtains on the windows and all the art on the walls. Everything back in its place. ‘Be joyful,’ he tells me,” Celia says as she stabs the curtain with a needle. “‘Welcome it back, like a celebration,’ he tells me.”

When she stabs the curtain again in a joyless way, I can’t help myself, and I laugh. “Be joyful?”

“Yes.” And Celia glares at me, but it’s with humor. “I spend all night making candles, hauling those bricks of wax up to the gallery, and working until my fingers are covered in it. And then I’m supposed to make the curtains of the Pyre feel joyful.”

My continued laughter is infectious enough to get her to smile.

“He must know why he’s asking it,” I say, wiping tears from my eyes with the back of my hand.

“If he weren’t so kind—and handsome—I’d tell him to be as joyful as he wants by himself,” she complains. But I can tell she’s pleased that he needs her help. “And he’s busy with Sylvain, so I do it. The trouble is,” she admits, “I’m having a hard time remembering. You’d think I’d know which paintings hung where, which curtains were for each room, but I don’t. I can remember a few. Then I think, ‘But what if I’m wrong?’ Balint is busy, and Miranda can’t rightly remember either. Some she does, but not many.”

“Perhaps you could ask Sperro.”

Celia’s face goes blank, and she shakes her head. “No.”

“I don’t think he—”

“I don’t want to,” she interrupts.

“What if I ask him? You could come every day and ask after a few things.”

“Would you be there?”

“I would.”

“I’ll think about it,” she answers. “Now I’ve really got to finish this curtain.”

“Where does this one go?”

“I’ve not yet remembered, but I keep trying to force joy into it all the same.”

Coughing to conceal my laugh, I gather an empty bucket and walk to the back of the kitchen and then down the steps to where the well is. It takes effort, pulling the crank that winds the rope, but it gets done, and soon I’m carrying my bucket full of water, with a clean rag draped over my shoulder, all the way to Sperro’s room.

After I arrive back at Sperro’s bedchamber, I try to negotiate the lounge by myself, arranging it before the fire as we’d had it before.

“What is that infernal racket you’re making?” he says weakly from the bed.

“I’m going to help you to get up,” I answer, out of breath for my work. “And you’re going to lie before the fire while I bathe you.”

“You will not,” he says vehemently. “I’m fine as I am.”

“Sperro, you’ve been very ill, and you need to be clean. Don’t you want to get out of that bed? Just come lie a few hours before the fire. This has been on my mind. And I think—I think it’s a ritual. A symbol.”

“Like when you washed my hands?” he asks quietly.

I glance towards him, pleased and anxious and wanting to clear his way forward as best I can. “Yes.”

He considers me, both my expression and my open thoughts, and then lets his head relax fully into his pillow, looking up at the ceiling.

Fine.

Walking over, I lift the star cloak from the foot of his bed. “You can wrap this around yourself for modesty, if you wish.”

Struggling to sit up, he starts laughing. “You’re such a wretch.”

“I know.”

Sperro accepts the cloak, and I make a comment about his contrition, which causes him to laugh again, albeit a bit darkly. He lets his legs hang over the edge of the bed and wraps the cloak about his waist while propping

himself up with one arm. His skin is so pale I can see lines of blue vein, as if they had been drawn all over his body. “I don’t think I can do this,” he says, trying for a deep breath.

“I’ll help you. Here.” Bending down, I let him put his arm over my shoulders, and then I grab his hand to hold him steady. “One, two—” I stand, taking him with me. He grips the cloak about his waist as we take a step.

“It’s too far away.”

“Almost there.”

“It was a dangerous idea,” he breathes out.

“What?”

Giving you so much power.

Laughing, I help him sit down on the lounge. He slouches, breathing heavily.

“You need more food,” I say, helping to lift his legs up as he adjusts his position and lies down on his side, facing the fire. “I shouldn’t be able to move you about so.”

“You are a hellhound today,” he balks. “I’ve the form of an athlete.”

“A very sick athlete,” I answer.

He makes a contrary noise but then lies quiet, his eyes closed.

I bring the bucket of water over, setting it nearby, and then, after tying my hair into a knot at the nape of my neck, I push my sleeves up to my elbows and place my hands into the fire. The viscous flame wraps warmly about my fingers. Once I withdraw them from the fire, I place my hands in the bucket, feeling the cold river water begin to warm. Slowly, in the quietest of whispers, I speak the prayer of the Virtus Third.

“I don’t think I can do this, December,” Sperro says when I have finished.

“Bathe? You don’t need to; I’m doing it for you.” When he doesn’t answer, I stop teasing and look at his face. I can see it in the lines gathered at the corners of his closed eyes, a self-doubt, a fear. “I’m here to help you,” I say quietly. “Can you lie on your back?”

Grimacing, Sperro turns, his shoulder blades looking like clipped wings until he relaxes enough to fall against the cushion. His chest rises then falls, one hand resting on his stomach, the other hanging off the lounge.

I put my dry rag into the bucket, watching it grow heavy as the fabric absorbs the water. Then, lifting it out, I wring out the excess.

“It’s warm now.”

His mouth twitches, but he keeps his eyes closed.

Placing my hand along his cheek, I hold his head steady and begin. I first wash his face, carefully, so as not to leave any part unclean. Across his forehead, down the bridge of his nose, over his closed eyelids and cheek bones. Placing the cloth in the water, I swirl it twice and rinse it once more before following the artist’s line of his lips and jaw. I move to his neck, then down to his shoulders.

It hurts.

Does it?

It burns.

"Do you want me to stop?"

He gives a quick shake of the head.

I continue. Beneath my hands, I feel the contours, the muscles, the tendons and ligaments. It's with great care that I wash him. And almost as if the water is powerful enough to purge the greyness, his skin starts to give the barest illusion of color.

Sperro opens his eyes. "Is this water from the river below the Pyre?"

"Yes."

"It always had a particular taste."

I nod. "It's incredibly sweet."

"I'd ordered that well closed years ago." Sperro shakes his head and looks past me. "I suppose Miranda opened it. I wonder when she did…" *So long. So long since.* He's wandering now, in his mind, and I leave him to it, washing his worn-out body.

When I speak again, it's to ask if he can sit up.

With great effort, he shifts, swinging one leg down to the floor, then the other, leaning forward, facing the fire. His hands grip the edge of the lounge as if he might fall.

I wash the back of his neck, his shoulders, his back.

"Your hair should be cleaned," I mutter. I soak the rag in the water again and wring it out partially, so I have enough water. Rubbing hard, I press against his scalp. A few drops of water begin to run down his temple, then along his cheek. I wipe them away with my fingers.

"I have no dignity left," he says.

"Were you really under the illusion that you had any to begin with?" I laugh.

"Shut up." But his shoulders move in the attitude of amusement, and he sighs. He's worn through. "I need to lie down."

"I'll be finished soon," I say as I kneel down between him and the fire. I wash his feet. When I finish the left and am reaching for the right he moves it away. I glance up. Sperro is looking at me, jaw clenched.

"You should go," he says.

"I'm almost through."

Sperro's hand moves faster than I think possible in his state as he grabs my forearm and yanks me towards him, his fingers pushing into the soft

tissues of my arm.

"Sperro!" But he grips harder.

"That's enough," he says, his voice graveled. "I'm so hungry, so very hungry, December. I am asking you to go." He closes his eyes, and I'm aware of his thumb pressing against my vein. He's marking my pulse.

"Sperro."

"Go." He flings me away, and I fall backwards, crashing against the stones of the hearth. "Go now, December. Go. Come back when I'm sleeping. I swear to you, I'll be myself again."

"Yes," I say, scrambling back, keeping my eyes on him.

Gripping the cloak about himself, he tries to stand. He wavers, uncertain, and then is forced to sit back down.

"Stay there, Sperro. Rest where you are." I take a careful step backwards. "Sleep awhile, and I will help you back to your bed later. When __"

His eyes are heavy, and he's muttering something about not wanting to sleep, about wanting to disappear.

* * *

I find Astrick outside, in the back garden of the Pyre. He and Sylvain are both holding torches, and it looks as if they're about to light one of the frozen trees on fire. Astrick's voice, carrying over the snow, sounds excited. When he sees me across the way, he waves.

"This is an unexpected surprise."

"What are you doing out here?" I call, absently rubbing my arm.

"Sylvain and I have an idea—" Astrick pauses, his eyes taking quick note. "What happened to you?"

"Sperro's hungry," I say hurriedly, for I don't want him to look at the words too closely. "He sent me away, until he can control himself."

Astrick draws in a breath. "By the Lights," he says, his face turning anxious.

Sylvain says something less repeatable.

Handing his torch to Sylvain, Astrick closes the distance between us.

"I've been worried about this," Astrick says, his face taut. "He's been satiating himself on blood for so long that it's only to be expected."

"He had enough control to stop himself."

“A small miracle of little comfort,” Astrick answers, looking straight ahead, the winter air freezing around his warm breath. Then, “It’s cold. Let’s talk inside.”

We turn towards the Pyre and enter through the back door, Astrick still frowning.

“You’ve always been in this much danger. I don’t know why I’m so rattled by it today.”

“It’s how I felt when Sperro went after you. It’s how I felt when Meridaithe went after Sperro.” I release a breath. “What an exhausting round.”

My comment claims a smile from him. “This hasn’t been the safest of ventures.”

“Which is why I came to find you, Astrick. I think you should take extra care to stay out of Sperro’s way. He—I think there’s enough of an attachment between Sperro and myself that he can manage his appetite. But I don’t know if the same protection is extended to you.”

“You’re probably right.” Astrick stops walking and brings his hand up behind his neck in nervous habit. “The two of you have…well, he sees you. And he’s decided to try to honor some part of it—as miraculous as it sounds,” he says, more to himself than to me. “When do you go back?”

“To Sperro? When he’s sleeping.”

“Come on, then. Let’s go bother Miranda for something to eat. It’s been a while since we sat in the kitchen, pretending we didn’t have any worries.”

“Have we ever pretended we didn’t have any worries?”

Astrick grins. “That’s why I said it’s been a while.”

Miranda is happy to have both of us in the kitchen, and she commands us to sit at the table as she fusses a meal together.

Astrick sits across from me, leaning his elbow on the table. The bruises on his face are gone, and his wrists and neck have fully healed.

“I have a thought,” Astrick says, “something that came to mind before. But I wasn’t sure if I could ask you or if it was the right thing, seeing as how I’m such a young Light Binder.”

“What is it?”

“In the higher orders, individuals are often bound to their offices. I have been bound as a Light Binder in a ceremony. A Line Sanctum would not be, but a Virtus Third? I would argue it’s essential, but, as you’ve had no formal training, there’s never been the opportunity.”

Miranda sets a bowl before each of us. “Eat. It’s simple, but will suffice. When the next merchant train comes through, I can feed you better.” She rests her hand on Astrick’s shoulder, then her hand rises, like she would muss his hair, but she pulls away and returns back to the counter to clean up.

I watch her a moment before looking back at Astrick. “And you can give such a binding?”

“Yes.” He hasn’t yet touched the soup before him. “I’ll need to prepare myself. But I’ve been thinking about it, Ember, what else would I have been sent here to do? Strengthening the windows has been very important, and binding the Pyre just as significant. But binding you to your calling? The stronger you are, the less we have to fear the forces Meridaithe and Callidus are gathering against us.”

“And only a Light Binder can perform the ritual.”

“Yes.”

“And the Lights sent a Light Binder.”

“Yes, They did.”

“When is the best time?”

“Anytime, but I wouldn’t mind a few hours to,” he makes a small motion with his hands, “be in the right state of mind.”

“Sunset?” I suggest. “Up on the roof?”

Astrick smiles, his dimple making him look younger than he’s seemed in days. “Just the place.”

We finish our soup and part: Astrick, to his preparations, and I, to Sperro.

* * *

When I’ve returned to Sperro’s room, I see he’s managed to get himself over to his bed. He’s lying there, eyes closed, breathing slowly. I think that he wants me to think he’s asleep, but I know he’s awake. The room is dark —the curtains have been pulled—and the woodless fire is burning with the illusion of beautiful coals. I sit on the end of Sperro’s bed and watch him breathe.

“Do you know why I brought you here?” he asks without moving.

“Was it just because you could hear my thoughts?”

“No, though that first caught my attention. I also knew, somehow, that you were my end, one way or the other. Not clearly—it’s all rather hazy. You confused me. But I think I always knew this.”

I press my lips together, then say, “Our lives were woven together that night.”

“I think they have always been bound.” He shifts, just opening his eyes enough to see me. “Perhaps that’s why you can’t capture reading. I’ve been wondering if I stole it when I set the curse on the others in the Pyre. All of my curses, the bent or slant magicks I’ve set, were to stop anyone who would oppose me. Your task as a Virtus Third must have always been the Pyre—”

“And you.”

He lies very still, and I can feel the heaviness in his heart as easily as I can hear his thoughts.

“Can I tell you something else?” he whispers.

I lift my eyebrow at his confessional mood. Pulling my knee up beneath my chin, I watch his face.

“You may tell me anything.”

“The feeling of you—it reminds me of the feeling of her.”

“Do you mean Ederra?”

“Yes,” he answers. “There’s no explanation, except that the way I remember her being in a room is the same way it feels to have you here. But not the same, for you are different, December. It’s…disorienting. I’d nearly managed it, you see. Nearly erased her existence, what she’d meant to me. What anyone,” his voice turns sharp, “had meant to me. But you began to walk these halls and I was reminded. And now I don’t know what to do with you.” He swallows and then brings a hand up to cover his face. When he speaks again, his voice sounds less like a Bleak’s and more like the voice I hear in my head.

“What a strange hell this is.”

* * *

XXV

The forest has an atmosphere of waiting. The air is thick with it.

The snow is stiff beneath my feet, crunching as I step slowly beneath the trees nearest the Pyre. In only a few minutes, I am to meet Astrick on the roof for my binding. There hasn't been time for me to prepare. I brush my cold fingers beneath my eyes, and they come away wet. Sperro had only slept a few minutes before he'd awoken from ripping pain in his chest. I'd done my best, easing the sting around his tangled lines. He'd stopped crying out, but he had been breathing hard, his face in a cold sweat. Miranda had brought some soup, and I'd sat beside him, forcing him to eat a few bites before he had again fallen asleep.

Sperro.

I reach my hand out, laying it flat against the rough bark of a tree, pressing until my skin is marked with the pattern of it. When I pull my hand away, I stare at the lines in my skin and wonder about all the ways the Pyre has changed me.

Stepping back, my eyes following the great tree as it points upward, I find myself gazing into the clear sky, which is holding on to the last moments it has with the sun. Absently, I spin my ring around my finger. Then I do something I have not yet done: I take the ring off and hold it up to the light.

Hope. Thry had told me that my ring was the substance of hope, wrapped around my finger. A tangible promise. Feeling the smoothness and the strength of it a moment longer, I grip the ring firmly in my hand before sliding it back onto my finger.

I turn back towards the Pyre.

Astrick is not waiting for me near the door when I come onto the roof. Rather, he is standing a way off, having stepped up onto one of the distant parapets. It's clear enough for a sunset, and Astrick cuts a striking figure silhouetted against the horizon of gold and pink. He lifts his hand to the back of his neck and then drops his head, perhaps in thought. I don't wish to call out and startle him, for his tenuous placement. So I wait, watching.

Shaking his head, Astrick says something to himself as he paces along the wall, his back to me. He crosses his arms, watching his feet as they walk the line between life and a death from falling ten stories to the earth. Occasionally, he stops to gaze up at the western horizon.

Now, giving the roof a wider canvass, his eyes find me, and he raises a hand. I wave back and wait as he jumps lightly from the parapet onto the roof and walks towards me, a perplexity in his face. His eyebrows are knit; his eyes, a veil between me and the private considerations of his heart. But the feeling is manifested in the movements of his entire body. He is a force, to be sure—almost how I would think immortals in their Continuancy would feel.

"I'm never certain if I should ask after your thoughts," I say as he comes to a stop before me.

Astrick raises his eyebrows, his way of saying, *Is that so?* Then, "Have you been crying?"

I muffle a thin laugh as I close my now dry eyes, and draw a finger beneath them anyway. "Yes, but for hope more than anything. Sperro is… better today. Perhaps even changed."

Astrick makes a confirming sound, his smile quick and sincere. "I'm glad of it."

I nod, emotion still rising too near the surface. "Well," I fold my arms, "you were looking very serious. Is that part of your preparations?"

His grin is more grimace. "I was wrestling with weighted thoughts."

"Weighted. That's a good word for you, you know. Not simply a Light Binder, but something more."

His lips move slightly before he answers, "Is a Light Binder not enough?"

"More than enough. But sometimes you feel wrought out of a different metal altogether."

"Well, a Light Binder meeting the Virtus Third whom he will serve is no weightless thing."

"It's not only that," I respond when he continues to look at me, offering nothing. "Your very presence holds things together. It is why Balint throws his arm around you in the way that he does. Why Sylvain listens to you when he won't countenance listening to anyone. Why Celia follows you with her eyes."

"It is a kind thing for you to say, Ember."

"All true, although I can see you don't believe me. Anyway," I dismiss the thought with a wave of my hand. "I'm glad you're here. As is Miranda. I think we can both guess as to why her affection is as strong as it is."

"Phillippe," he says.

I nod.

Astrick looks towards the sunset wash of pink and orange on the horizon, squinting from thought rather than from the light. “My family has been on the western edge of the forest for a long time, at least a few centuries. Do I wonder if Philippe was my ancestor? Yes. Do you remember Sperro claiming he had never killed Philippe? Perhaps he didn’t. Your guess makes as much sense as mine, but it does feel as if I belong to the place. Perhaps he didn’t kill Philippe after all.”

“You must look like him a great deal—it’s hard to believe there is no connection.”

His mouth opens. He wants to say something else, but he gives a quick shake of his head.

“Do you feel ready for this binding?” he asks.

“Yes.”

“And do you accept it? This calling?”

My smile is wistful, and I brush a strand of hair away from my face. “I think I’ve already done that.”

“Then let us begin. Lift your arms before you—not quite like that, rather like you’re carrying something.”

I bend my arms at my elbows and extend my forearms and hands. Astrick nods. Then he does the same, but his forearms rest on top of mine, his hands wrapping around my arm, just below my elbow. Once our heads are bowed, Astrick’s fingers tighten.

“Seeking blessing of the Lights, we seek to bind this Virtus Third unto her calling. By inheritance, by grace, by requirement…” Astrick proceeds, speaking in old words still tied to antiquity and ritual long forgotten.

I pay special attention, feeling him binding my body and soul to the order in which I’ve been placed. This binding is not as dramatic as the last. Rather, it feels like things being tied together and hung in place; the weight I’ve been carrying on my shoulders not so heavy; the path ahead not so dark. After he speaks the words of the binding, he asks for the protections that come with such a work, then seals them irrevocably together.

I open my eyes, not having realized I’d closed them, sensing the power of what has been done. Wishing to remain in it.

“That’s it,” he says. His fingers loosen, and we separate.

“Thank you.”

Astrick lifts his hand to the back of his neck and smiles. “I’m finishing another window tonight, if you’d like to come see it once Sperro is sleeping.”

* * *

A few days later, I wake to the picture of Sperro sitting on the edge of his bed, his shoulders burdened, defeated, his profile set dramatically against the darkness of the room.

I’d fallen asleep on the lounge by the fire and am about to speak, when I hear a sound that stops me.

Sperro Magna, Death Bleak that has terrorized the nations, is weeping.

* * *

Are you going to tell me what he said?

Sperro and I are sitting in the library, he in his chair, and I in mine. He’s been silent and agitated the day long, and I’d not been able to do any work on him because of it. Finally, with my arm around his waist as I held him up, we had made our way to the library, where he collapsed into his chair.

Sperro pulls the star cloak—spread over him like a blanket—closer to him. His hands are shaking. But his body is no longer grey. It hasn’t quite found color either, but it is trying to, in a washed-out form.

I’m still not used to the changes in his appearance. Perhaps the strangest moment of the morning was when he’d been shouting—he still rages like a Bleak—and I’d seen that the gums around his teeth were no longer black. They were, well, closer to the coloring of my own.

Are you going to tell me what he said? I again press, for Sperro had told me, on the long journey to the library, that upon returning to his dreams —“Among all those other bastards who won’t leave me alone”—was, again, the first blood gain he had ever claimed.

“I asked him what he wanted,” Sperro answers me now, and he grimaces. It is as painful for him to sit up as it is for him to lie in bed.

“Do you need something to rest your feet on?”

Scowling, Sperro shakes his head.

“And what did he want?” I ask.

To drag me to hell.

I pull my legs up, hugging my knees and resting my chin on them. When he leaves off being annoyed long enough to make eye contact with me, I say, “We both know that’s not the truth.”

Sperro’s smile is grim, but it’s a smile nonetheless. Then it fades, and he makes a strange sound, a pitiful sound. “I saw his life, December. He told me things, showed me his wife, his children, all the generations—” Sperro lifts a hand in a movement that makes me think of infinity.

“And what did you do?”

Anger and sorrow are both present in his face, and he’s fighting between them. “I told him I didn’t care. I raged. I said I’d do it again. And then—” Sperro shakes his head, sinking further into his chair. “And then I wept.” For the second time today, I see his face give way, and, soundlessly, tears come at his anguish. “Damn him,” he mutters, his voice choking. “Damn him to hell; he forgave me.”

I go still, registering the gravity of what he’s just said.

“The man had the *gall,*” Sperro spits the word out, “to say he *forgave* me.”

“Did you take it,” I whisper, swallowing around the emotion in my throat.

Sperro shakes his head and muffles a cry. “I wept.”

* * *

As night draws near, Sperro begins to shake uncontrollably. I can’t get him to eat and neither can Miranda, who stands at the door as he thrashes about on his bed. Sperro begs me to keep him awake, begs me for solace. He grips my hand and pleads as if a sleepless night is mine to give. Finally, weary of the fight, he gives way to his exhaustion and lies still. His breathing slows, and his eyes close, yet the grip on my hand does not weaken.

“Don’t be afraid, Sperro,” I whisper. “I will work on your lines as you sleep.”

He squeezes my hand once, and it is not long before sleep lays claim to him.

I place my hands on his chest, finding the steadied light of his tenth line. The light spreads softly from the center, near his heart, soothing along the entire line. It is far more stable than I would have thought possible mere weeks ago. Settling the tenth line, I can finally inventory the state of the

others. They're still dead, bitter and broken. Less confused, but nothing in them has yet come to light. Focusing as much as I'm able, I find the ninth line and slowly explore. Nothing. The same as it was—wait. I go back. There is a flicker, a small spark where the ninth line almost comes into contact with the tenth. It hadn't been there before.

"Life's blood," I whisper, relieved. The light is so young, it is raw and unstable. And as I focus the light from my fingers spreading towards it, it blinks, like a candle, and almost goes out. Sucking in a breath, I hold very still until it stabilizes again. Asking for help of the Lights, I try again, picturing a soft ripple moving out from the tenth line, until blending with the light of the ninth. It takes all of my concentration—and two hours of repeating this soft repair—for the spark to stabilize and flare. When it feels strong enough I'm certain it won't go out, I open my eyes and lift my hands from off his chest.

Two lines with light. Sperro Magna is making progress.

Sitting on the edge of his bed, I let my shoulders fall into an ungraceful slump, and look out the window at the stars. It is then I realize that, in the struggle of the day, I'd forgotten to meet Astrick on the roof.

* * *

In the morning, Sperro is quiet. I'm curled up on the end of his bed, having slept but little.

"Like a vile cat," he mutters when I open my eyes. Then he asks, "How did your work go?"

Yawning, I sit up and brush my hair back from my face. "There was a speck of light in your ninth line that hadn't been there the day before." I yawn a second time. "It's a very good sign. Your tenth line is stable enough for us to reclaim the other nine from their deaths, restoring light and order as they will accept them. It's no small progress." I tie my hair back in a knot. "How did your work go? Did you speak with anyone else last night?"

He shifts, resettling himself, but does not answer me.

Miranda comes in, sees my state, and insists I go to my own rooms and sleep. "Sperro will be fine. I'll keep all in order."

When Sperro shows no sign of protest, I give a sleepy nod and find my way up to the bell tower.

* * *

The first time I wake is to Miranda telling me that the day has ended and that Sperro has gone to sleep without resistance. “Keep resting, my lady. I’ll stay with him through the night.”

The second time I wake, the new day is beginning, and I see a familiar figure lying on the soft rug before my hearth.

Sorry. His eyes are curiously luminous, glimpses of the long-abandoned Lectus Born. *I was having trouble sleeping.*

I don’t mind. I sit up.

The Light Binder said you were here.

My face, in a show of disloyalty, reveals my panic.

I didn’t hurt him, December. I only asked him where you were. He helped me up the stairs.

“Why am I suspicious that Astrick would let you enter my room as I was sleeping?”

That’s probably why he’s been sitting outside the door all night, freezing.

I lift a hand to my face. “I swear, Sperro—Astrick?” I call. “Are you there?”

After almost a full minute, the door is pushed open and Astrick comes in. Closing it behind him, he leans back against it. He’s rumpled, only a blanket for warmth, and his hands are bright red from the winter cold.

“What were you doing there all night?”

“This is a merry party,” is all Astrick answers, his voice thick with morning.

Philippe did the same thing once. Sperro doesn’t move, just lies desperately limp, but he keeps talking in my mind. *He was worried I would hurt Ederra. I’d already begun hurting the others. He sat right outside all night and cursed me. He looks remarkably like Philippe, your Light Binder does.*

I look towards Astrick. He’s let his eyes half close, and his breathing is slow, like he’s already fallen into a doze.

What happened to Philippe, Sperro?

I didn’t kill him.

So you’ve said.

Sperro finally closes his eyes. *He left. He had tried to convince his mother and father that I had fallen, that they should go. Ederra knew, but she wouldn't leave. Philippe found me in the woods taking a blood gain. When he saw me, it was as you could imagine. We fought, but I let him go. He left, ran to the west countries.*

I've wondered if Astrick is a descendant, I think.

He is, Sperro answers swiftly. *It's the same blood. It's also why, despite everything, I didn't take his life that day. It was the same blood on my hands.*

I'll have to tell him. He will be pleased to know. And I ask aloud, "And what of Ederra?"

Astrick stirs at the sound, apologizing under his breath, but not really hearing. Soon he is again dozing.

And Sperro looks at me a long while before answering, in a broken voice, "Miranda says Ederra died of a broken heart, from watching my descent, but she'd actually fallen into the winter river. That was when spring stopped coming to the Pyre."

"But," I shake my head, lifting a hand in confusion, "didn't you save her?"

"No," Sperro says, closing his eyes, a sorrow so strong filling his mind that I wish to weep. *I was worried about losing my new patch magick cloak*.

* * *

"It's all circles," I tell Astrick a few evenings later. We're sitting on the parapet, our legs dangling from the roof of the Pyre. It feels like the roof of the forest; it is at such a great height. "Circles, circles, an endless round of the same thing. Over and over and over again. I am overcome by hope, and *faith*," I give all my emphasis to the word, "trusting the progress to come, and then I hear of another thing he's done and—"

"He is a Death Bleak," Astrick says.

"Was a Death Bleak."

"*Was. Is.* Who's to say?" Astrick answers, uncharacteristically curt.

"You said it yourself, only yesterday," I counter, "that the whole Pyre can feel the change."

"I did. But yesterday I wasn't as worn thin as I am now. I broke three pieces of glass today, Ember, trying to bevel the edges. Three."

My expression says there are worse things. His disagrees.

We can't help but smile, and he shakes his head. "You said earlier he faced another person in his dream last night? Does that make five, now?"

"He says it's hell, but that he is not left to face it alone. Today he seemed lighter, and, when he spoke of the woman he'd dreamed of, he actually sounded sorry: for her, for himself, for the whole mess."

I throw a small stone down into the forest, watching it fall until a moment of sounds marks that it's hit a tree. The stone throwing was Astrick's idea. We'd both been so tired, after the night Sperro had come to my room, that Astrick had searched for an entire bucket of stones in the gardens, where the snow was thinning, and we'd spent an hour throwing them off the roof: me, venting my complex emotions, and him, throwing all his exhaustion out, giving out the occasional yell just to hear how his voice traveled across the valley. Celia had eyed us strangely when we'd come down, and Sperro had complained about the noise, but it had done wonders to set us both back firmly on our feet.

"I should go in," I say, throwing another rock.

And then the sounds of bells. Bells. Not just a deep rumble of the bell that had tolled for his tenth line, but others, two or three more, ringing out —bright and clear.

"Life's blood," Astrick says, and we scramble back off the parapet and race into the Pyre to see what is happening. I grab my skirt, running apace with Astrick, down the stairs and through the corridors.

Miranda is in the Mirror Gallery.

"The bells!" I cry.

"I know, child, I know." And she's trying to keep her mounting expectations contained. "He's in the Long Hall."

I'm there before Astrick, but he's right behind me. Celia is watching from the shadows of the doorway, and she moves her eyes to mine, shaking her head in question. Astrick stays back and exchanges a word with her, while I approach Sperro.

He is crouched in front of the fireplace, his mind mumbling nothing that makes any sense. But in his shaking hands are papers filled with dark runes and symbols. And, one by one, he is throwing them into the fire and watching them burn.

* * *

There is an impromptu celebration in the kitchens that night. Sperro is asleep, and we all gather—Balint, Miranda, Celia, Astrick, and myself. Even Sylvain comes in from patrolling the woods, having been called by the bells before he had known why.

Balint pours drinks found in the underfloors that none of them can even taste.

"I can taste it," Astrick says and grins, asking for another glass.

The bells, three of them, have been ringing throughout the evening. Unfettered. And that's not even been the most shocking thing. Celia, after I'd seen Sperro to his room, had come up to me in a panic.

"Ember, I swear, if this is only in my head—but look!" And she'd grabbed my hand, placing it over her heart.

It had taken me a moment, but then I'd felt it. "Celia." My eyes had gone wide. "Celia! Your heartbeat!"

"It's moving, my blood, and I can feel it. My fingers are tingling something awful, and I'm frightened." She'd clutched my hands. "I didn't do anything. I swear."

"But this is wonderful!"

"It's terrifying. And I can't tell if it's real, but I think I'm hungry."

I had laughed until I'd cried.

And so the celebration in the kitchen had commenced, not only for the bells but also for Celia's heartbeat. She's looking bewildered, and Miranda's forcing a good dinner into her before she will let her have anything to drink.

"You'll be sick come morning," I say.

"I know, but I just can't care right now," Celia says, closing her eyes. "Bread."

Across the room, Sylvain—who complains that he doesn't even feel intoxicated—begins to sing a loud drinking song, holding up his glass. Astrick, in the middle of taking a sip, points at Sylvain knowingly. He swallows as fast as he's able and then joins Sylvain in singing the same song. Sylvain, pleased, sings louder.

Balint starts clapping, and Miranda chuckles. Celia's face is flushed as she watches the men, chewing her bread slowly. Then there is the burst of a chorus, and Astrick is doubled over, laughing when his song lyrics are different than Sylvain's, their being three hundred years apart.

I'm sitting quietly, watching my people, this crew of the ancient and the present, all clinging to the faith that things can be made right. And the happiness of it feels so much like home I want to burst. Things will be well. Things will be good.

We are finding our way to victory.

XXVI

I know better than to expect the happiness to last.

I've just returned from one of the hallways on the third floor, feeling perplexed. Astrick was supposed to be doing work there, but I can't find him. I come down the spiral staircases into the Great Hall, pausing to think where he might be, when I hear a scream.

It's Celia.

The front doors of the Pyre burst open. "They're in the stables! And he's covered in blood."

I don't bother to ask Celia who. I just run.

I cross the courtyard, nearly tripping as I barrel down to the front of the stables. Sylvain is coming from another direction, in a panic, but I am at the stable door first.

I rush inside, and there, by the open door of a stall, is Sperro, and Astrick beside him, both covered in blood.

I make a terrible noise, and Astrick turns his head.

"No, Ember. Get back."

"Astrick!"

There's an awful sound that I don't understand.

"Ember, stay back. He's—"

"Where are you hurt?" I ask.

"I'm not."

Sylvain is beside me now, placing his hand on my shoulder for a moment before he steps past me.

"Which one did he get?" Sylvain asks.

"The gelding."

"Astrick—"

“I’m fine, Ember. It’s the horse. Sperro tried to take a blood gain from the horse.”

My knees give way, and my hand grips the side of the stable to catch myself. I’m hearing something but I can’t understand what the sound is. My ears are ringing with it. Astrick moves, and I see that he is holding Sperro in his arms. Sperro’s face is hidden, buried against Astrick’s chest, but his shoulders are shaking.

Sylvain looks into the stall, and his face pales. “That’s a sight.”

Swallowing, I pull myself up and walk towards the stall.

“Ember,” Astrick says, looking up at me, “you don’t—”

“I do,” I answer. I want to know.

Sylvain says something, but I step to his side anyway and feel his hand on my arm to hold me up. I look inside the stall and realize what the source of the noise is. It’s the horse, screaming. I look blankly at the suffering creature, then back at Astrick—his expression pained as he holds Sperro in his arms—and then I walk from the stable.

* * *

There are no words or thoughts. Sitting on the end of my bed, I stare at space, focusing on nothing, needing the haze. I cannot lift a single thought tied to the Pyre. I cannot pray to the Lights. I want numbness, for endlessness to end, for existence to turn into oblivion. I feel—no, I *want* to feel nothing. For the alternative is beyond my capacity. Where once lived struggle and effort, I now find…blankness.

I am aware, sometime later, that Astrick has come into my room. I hear sounds but can’t distinguish one word from another. I feel the bed shift as he sits beside me, his hands covering his face. And I look at him and wonder—disconnected as I am—why his grief looks the way I feel.

We sit. Time passes.

Then he says something I don’t understand, and he stands. His hands are on my arms; he is coaxing me back, helping me lie down. There is a tug at my feet, as he removes my boots, and then more words. He pulls the blankets over me, tucking them close. I feel him near, feel his hand on my cheek and the way he presses his lips to my forehead. There is a promise of some kind, a slight pause, and then he is gone, closing the door softly behind him.

I continue to stare.

* * *

Astrick comes to find me in the morning. I'm walking the corridors of the second floor, cleaning away spent candles, leaving fresh ones ready to burn.

"Sperro is settled back in his room," he says.

"I can't even countenance the thought of him right now," I answer as I keep walking.

Astrick follows, grabbing my arm and spinning me around to face him. "He can't just be left alone, Ember. Someone needs to be there, someone that can work on him. Miranda can't, Celia can't."

I grip the basket in my hand, refusing to answer.

Astrick shakes his head, running his fingers through his hair. "I wasn't the Virtus Third called to help save him."

This pulls me up short. Astrick and I have so rarely ever been sharp with each other.

He softens his voice. "It was a horse, Ember. In his weakness, he tried to take a horse. He didn't even finish the blood gain, and he's racked with guilt for having given in."

"It could have been you—or even Celia."

"He's drowning," Astrick says, gripping my shoulders. "You should *hear* him, the desperate fool. What penance do you need him to make before you will go to him?"

"Can you please not ask that of me now? I only need a day, just one day."

He looks down, still holding onto my shoulders like I'm keeping him from falling. "Fine. I'll do what I can for him. Sylvain is bringing more firewood this morning. You'll need to direct him to where it's needed."

So our strange reversal begins, me spending the morning helping Sylvain and Celia, Astrick taking care of Sperro. At midday meal Astrick tries to speak with me about what he has been binding together inside of Sperro's wasted body, but my expression is miserable enough that he stops.

I'm up on the eighth floor, searching the memories for any records of the Virtus Third, when a weak voice calls out.

December!

It feels like a hammer nailing me to the floor. But the scene from the stable won't stop flooding my mind with the brutal reminder of all that Sperro has done, and what he is trying to come back from. This is accompanied by the opposite and overwhelming reality that he might not make it. These opposites are too difficult for me to lift today. I love him too much for it.

I do not answer him.

* * *

That night Ederra comes in a dream. I am sitting on the front steps of the Pyre, and she sits beside me. We look at each other, not speaking. I give her no answer; she offers no solace. We just sit. At one point, after an age of silence has passed, she puts her arms around me. Deflated, I rest my head on her shoulder.

"Were you angry? When he wouldn't pull you from the river?"

"As you are angry now?" She squeezes my hand. "I had already endured the pain of his fall."

"What if I cannot bear him falling again?"

"Did he fall, Ember? Or did he finally…see." Then she's gone, and I'm lying awake in the dark.

* * *

Before the sun rises I am sitting in the Mirror Gallery, my bare feet on the cold stone, a basket of spent candles by my side. There are voices and footsteps, Astrick and Sylvain walking through. Astrick claps Sylvain on the shoulder, then comes and sits beside me instead of following the woodsman.

"I hadn't realized how many candles Celia has made," I say when he doesn't speak. "It's a relief she was so diligent. For now that she needs more rest, it will be harder to get all the work done."

Astrick gives a nod. "Things with Sperro remain—"

"I don't know if I can hear it yet."

"I need to get back to the windows, Ember."

"I know."

He leans forward, elbows on his knees, and brings a hand up, pinching the bridge of his nose as if he has a headache. “What guidance comes from the Lights?”

“A dream. Ederra came in a dream.” I lift a shoulder, my eyes stinging. “He was doing so well.”

“He still is.” Astrick angles his head to look at me. “The Lights have been holding him up, doing all that he could not possibly do for his own miserable self.” Astrick’s tone softens. “He woke this morning looking almost relieved. Sobered, some understanding of the cost in his face. He’s brave enough to enter that hell every night, and I think he’s starting to hold the belief that, at some point, he can gain some Continuancy. Hope, Ember. The hope you spoke of.”

My eyes fill with heavy, warm tears. “You’re stronger than I.”

And Astrick gives a depleted laugh, his green eyes challenging mine. “Think that, if you wish. But it’s not true. Every night since Meridaithe tortured me, I have bound my courage to my dreams. You are not the only one to have spent a night weeping at the Pyre.” I find his hand and squeeze it with a fierce camaraderie.

“But here you are.”

“Yes, here I am. And here you are.” Astrick stands up and walks a few paces away, circling around and meeting my eyes. “I don’t have the answer for the difficulty of this, but I can’t help but question, what is to challenge hope if not despair? Can we claim the first without battling and dispelling the second?”

Neither of us answers for several minutes.

When I venture words, they come at the price of releasing my anguish. “I never could have known, before this, what the Lights are willing to do to reclaim a soul.”

“Nor I,” Astrick sighs. “And I’m not certain this journey was ever meant to end with us.”

I snap my head up. “What do you mean?”

“What if we were only meant to help start his journey? He’s so frail. His body is so unsupported now by the darkness he’d thought would hold him up that he’s wasting away. It takes time to build lasting strength. Perhaps the Lights mean only to begin their work here and finish it once they’ve taken him.”

It’s as if he has struck me. “No. No! That *can’t* be.”

“And when Sperro is lifted out of your charge,” Astrick says, listening more to his own words than to mine, “there will be some relief, yes, but I wonder if it will not be a terrible separation.”

* * *

I return to my post.

Sperro’s asleep, and since the curtains are all pulled open, I settle myself in one of the deep, stone window seats, watching him. I know I need to go over and see if his light lines have acquired any more clarity, but instead I sit, noting each breath, thinking how much like a young man he looks.

You’re here. His voice startles me, for he hasn’t stirred.

I am, I answer.

I was worried you wouldn’t come back, and I’ve wanted to tell you something.

I was worried I wouldn’t come back either. What was it you wanted to tell me?

That book. The one I burned in the library the day that you told me redemption was new as the morning and fresh as the day. He pauses. *There is another copy. I just wanted you to think it had been destroyed.*

I laugh aloud. I can’t help myself. *Now who’s the wretch?*

I never claimed I wasn’t one.

* * *

We make more progress today than we ever have before, with not only the ninth line partially stabilizing but also a small segment of the eighth. The seventh has been nearly obliterated, so I have to stand for hours with my hands on his chest, feeling for the remnants and how they might be reattached.

“What did you do to your seventh line?” I ask. “It’s shredded, like flesh and tendon just hanging from the bone.”

Sperro makes an uncomfortable noise. “I’ve not yet had the courage to face that,” is all he says.

As I feel the light from my fingertips coaxing the sad remains of his seventh line, I ask, “Sperro, why did you choose this course to begin with? You were Lectus Born, heir of the Pyre. Why did you first set your feet on this other path?”

“Is it so hard for you to mind your own business, December?”

I flick my finger at him, and his lips curve into a smile. But then he blinks and looks upward. I don’t think he is going to answer me, but he clears his throat.

“It was alluring. Enticing. What Callidus spoke of was something different. It wasn’t power through patience or trust, it was power through might and aggression. A satisfying thought, the vision of such control; no need to humble myself before anything or anyone. And so I began experimenting on the magicks that Callidus whispered in my ear.”

“Did you ever look back?”

“I had myriad chances,” he confesses. “But power is intoxicating. The most insatiable appetite I’ve ever known.” A pause. “Now just look at me,” he adds, giving a weak, sick laugh. “If you had told me one year ago I’d be reduced to this—”

“Not much to look at, to be sure,” says a voice from the doorway.

I look over my shoulder and glare at Astrick. He leans against the doorframe, a smirk on his face.

Sperro makes a noise like a groan and then answers, “I thought nothing could ever drive me to pray to the Lights, but this miscreant could.”

“Ah, miscreant. That’s one you haven’t yet called me. I’ll write it down with the others.” Astrick turns his eyes on me. “My favorites, thus far, being villain, thug, reprobate, and corpse.”

“Take care you don’t become one,” Sperro warns.

“A reprobate?” Astrick asks.

“A corpse.”

Astrick laughs, and there’s a smile on Sperro’s lips.

“He humors me,” Astrick continues, “because no one has been willing to go head-to-head with him in centuries. He finds my conversation sporting.”

“Save for the Witch. She went against me,” Sperro answers. Then he makes a slight motion with his hand, towards me, and says, “And this one.”

“Better to tangle with the Witch than the Pyre’s own Virtus Third,” Astrick asserts. “You can defeat a Witch. But our Ember is a force from

another realm."

"Finally, something the letch and I can agree on."

Astrick laughs out loud. "*Letch*? Now, I take great exception to that."

I open my mouth, but no sound comes out. Of all the things I've heard at the Pyre, Astrick and Sperro's bantering is the strangest.

"I'll never forgive you for leaving me to his dastardly care," Sperro growls, trying to lift his head from his pillow.

"I graciously offered to make a new window for his chamber," Astrick tells me, "replacing this austere glass with something more picturesque and warm, like a meadow of flowers or a pink sunset with the stars just beginning to come out."

Damn you, December, for letting this Light Binder near me.

"Are both of you finished exhibiting your wit?" I ask dryly.

"I came to ask you if you'd like to eat dinner with me, down in the kitchens," Astrick says, looking at me. "A small merchant train came through this afternoon, and Miranda has fresh supplies. She's prepared a feast. Celia can hardly wait."

"I—" I look towards Sperro, who has sunk further into his pillow. "Will you be fine?"

"Of course," he snaps. "I'm no pathetic cripple."

Astrick makes a dubious sound and Sperro glares at him.

"Would you like me to bring something back?" I ask. "You've eaten hardly anything today."

"It all tastes like rubbish."

"I'll return with some soup, then," I reply. "We wouldn't want to waste a good meal on someone who's only going to taste rubbish."

"Go," Sperro orders, his face twisting in annoyance. "And take this devil with you."

Astrick has stepped farther into the room, and his smile has faded into a very focused expression, the most serious look I've ever seen on his face. He comes to the foot of Sperro's bed.

"Are you fighting it?" Astrick asks. "The bloodlust?"

Sperro makes a noise that almost sounds like a creature in pain. "Get out. Weak as I may look, I could take your throat so fast you'd be left for dead before you realized it had all ended."

Astrick crosses his arms and nods. "I am very aware of that, Sperro Magna. I know it only too well. But you must answer me. That was the deal

we made, and you agreed to it. Are you fighting it?"

"Yes," Sperro hisses. "Burns like hell."

"I'm certain it does," Astrick answers. "The horses have been moved farther into the forest, as per your request."

Sperro's eyes drop, and he begins to mutter a curse, but I see a strange relief there, a small faith in whatever trust he and Astrick have built between them.

"I'll be out in the hall when you're ready, Ember."

I look from Sperro to Astrick and nod. "I'll be but a moment."

Spreading his star cloak over his blankets, I say, "I'll return soon. There's more work to do."

I don't want any more tonight.

Still, I'll return to be with you while you sleep.

Sperro makes no answer, but he lifts his hand ever so slightly, and as I reach for it, I feel the rush of a thousand starlings taking flight inside my chest. He grips my hand with his. "Thank you. Tell the Light Binder the same."

"I—I will.

I leave the room, closing the door quietly before catching up with Astrick.

"What?" He says when he notices that I'm stealing glances at him as we make our way towards the kitchen.

"What in the history of this world was that?"

"You mean our exchange?" Astrick says, trying to look innocent. "We developed a grudging method of interaction while I cared for him, that is all."

"There's more to it, Astrick. Tell me straight."

Astrick tilts his head and lifts an eyebrow. "I decided I wasn't going to be afraid of him."

I wait, both of us knowing he has not yet told me the complete truth.

"Fine. He mentioned how much I resemble Philippe—admitting a connection there—and spoke of how Philippe had tried to stop him. But he hadn't listened. Then I suggested that perhaps I could help fill the role that Philippe had tried to play."

"Is that the deal you spoke of?"

"In part," Astrick answers. "He knows how damning it will be if he does it again—take a blood gain, that is. I promised him I would ask him if he

was keeping things under control so that he knows he has to be accountable. And he agreed to go along."

"In exchange for what?" I query. "The Sperro I know isn't one who'd agree to a show of camaraderie simply to feel its warm glow."

Astrick's laugh is quick confirmation. "You're right. He did extract a price."

"Which was—?"

"My own promise to keep. Now, if you'll consent to laying the matter aside, there is a tremendous amount of food waiting in the kitchen, and I am famished."

"Consorting with the enemy does make one hungry," I grumble, admittedly curious.

"Indeed it does."

"Have you told Miranda and Balint? About Phillipe? Strange, isn't it, to think they are your great-great…?" I wave my hand. "Well, you see the picture."

Astrick makes the sound of a half laugh. "I'm astounded, really. Though, I think we all knew. No, I haven't told them yet. I think that is a conversation for another time. But seeing them, knowing that their blood runs through my veins while it sits silent in theirs is—well, what an unfathomable world it is, Ember."

* * *

Celia is sitting at the table when we join her in the kitchen, her hands holding something with great care. I drop down beside her to see what she's protecting so carefully.

It's a ripe peach.

"Celia, you got your peach!"

"I can't eat it," Celia says, shaking her head in disbelief. "I've been dreaming of it for too long; it won't taste the same. And I can't bear the thought of it being anything less than what I'd imagined. It's what I've been holding on to."

Astrick, standing over by Miranda, laughs, and the old woman rolls her eyes.

"Here," he says, grabbing a paring knife and walking over. "I'll cut a piece out and try it. If it's horrid, I'll tell you so you can wait for the next

merchant train to come through. If it's ripe, you can finish the rest."

Celia stares at the peach a moment more before offering it to Astrick, her eyes acquiring the glossy sheen of coming tears. "What if I've been remembering a lie all these years?" After she hands the peach to him, Astrick takes the peach and, letting his smile fall, cuts the fruit rather ceremoniously. One piece for me, and one piece for himself.

I lift my piece to my mouth as he does, and my tongue is instantly met by the perfect glory of it. "Oh, Celia," I say, closing my eyes, "it tastes like summer."

Astrick eats his peach slice, nodding as he runs the back of his hand across his lip to catch the juice. "She's right. Here." He hands her the entire remaining half. "Claim the biggest bite you can."

Celia holds it in her two hands and—with all the hope that life will be what she remembered it to be—takes a bite of the peach. The juice runs down the side of her mouth, and she makes a sound that is like laughter but is really leading to tears. She nods, her eyes watering as she takes another bite.

"Don't ruin your appetite for stronger foods, child," Miranda says, watching affectionately from across the room.

Celia sniffs and takes a third bite. "My hands are so sticky," she says after she's swallowed.

"Something to celebrate," Astrick answers softly, a smile on his face. "The first peach."

"Am I interrupting?" a voice says from the kitchen doorway.

"By the Lights!" Astrick shouts. "Thry!"

I'm up, almost tripping over the bench as I run to my brother. He comes down the steps, the same as ever—angled, quiet, a shock of dark hair falling over one eye.

"What are you doing here!" I ask, gripping his arms with my hands, shaking him.

"One can only abide Hadspen for so long, Ember," he answers as he gathers me into his arms.

I laugh—from joy more than anything.

Then Astrick is there. He and Thry shake hands, and then pull each other close for an embrace.

"Were the roads safe?" Astrick asks.

“Fine,” Thry answers. “There’s more to say on that.” Thry looks around, his eyes catching Miranda and Celia. “But it can wait an hour.”

“That’s right,” Miranda says. “You sit down, and I’m going to feed you, skinny child. Look at you. All elbows and angles.”

I drag Thry towards the table, and he sits beside me. Astrick sits near Celia on the other side. Thry nods to Celia, but he’s never been very social with strangers, so I introduce them, but Thry simply turns back towards me.

“I need to speak with you and Astrick—soon as I’m able.”

“You can talk before Celia,” I answer. Celia’s cheeks are a touch red, and I think she feels uncomfortable.

“I need to be getting along anyway,” Celia answers. “Things I’ve got to finish before day’s end.”

As she makes a quick escape, Miranda watches her leave from across the kitchen, a worried frown on her face.

“What brought you here, Thry?” Astrick asks, leaning across the table.

“These.” Thry withdraws four books from the satchel thrown across his shoulders: the book about the Pyre; the book of those within the orders, both light and dark; and the seventh and eighth books of the Curatorium.

Astrick sighs from relief. “Thry, you’re brilliant.”

“How did you know?” I ask, picking up one of the books, feeling a pang of envy as I watch Astrick reach for one of the others, knowing he will be able to read it.

“I’m not an Intuit for nothing,” Thry answers. He turns his eyes to my face and wraps his arm over my shoulders. “Look at you, Ember,” Thry says, pulling his arm away and leaning back so he can see me better. “You’ve been run ragged. Are you eating anything?”

“Of course I am.”

“Not as much a she should be,” Astrick says.

I glare at him. “Astrick,” I say, rather unfairly, as Thry pulls his arm away, “got himself caught by the darkest powers on the continent. I think he should focus on keeping his own head intact.”

“That’s rather ungallant of you,” Astrick responds. But the side of his mouth lifts in a smile. I smile in return, though our eyes reveal how close we came. He looks towards Thry. “The Witch Meridaithe and the Thrasher Callidus are bent on destroying the Pyre.”

Thry looks to Astrick, then back to me. “By the Lights,” he mutters, setting his elbows on the table and gripping his hands together. “Things are

moving. I knew something had happened here—I could sense it—but I didn't know what. Then there were rumors. Do you know the place, just below the West Fell, where the river falls into a gorge?"

Astrick nods, his eyebrows knit in concentration.

"There are rumors of a congress there," Thry continues, "a company of dark powers, gathering for a fight. All my intuition said they will be coming here. I knew that you needed to know and that you needed these books."

Astrick and I glance at each other.

"We've already suspected as much," I answer. "Sperro has refused Beast of Ten."

Thry moves his hand across his face, losing grip on a deeply held emotion. "So—so he's *not* going to take you for a blood gain?"

"No," I answer.

And I can see Thry collapsing a little beneath the shifting weight of many days.

"But that doesn't mean you won't be a temptation, Thry," Astrick says. "Fresh blood in the Pyre could drive him mad. You can't stay here."

"No, it wouldn't be safe," I agree. "He's fighting as best he can, but we still have to be careful."

"I can't leave you here again, Ember," Thry says, his voice almost too low to hear. "I will not leave this forest without you."

"You can go with Sylvain, to the woodsman's cottage," I answer, looking towards Astrick. "You can help him and be close enough for whatever help we'll need."

"What else have you heard—about those gathering below the falls?" Astrick asks, his eyes unsettled.

"Just that there's been a gathering. The local people think it's because of the Death Bleak, that he is to lead those gathering in some unholy pursuit, as he has in the past. But I kept feeling it was a company to go against him. A local, a young man, has disappeared. People whisper he was taken as a sacrifice."

"And Adele?" Astrick trains his eyes hard on my brother. "Is she safe?"

"The prayer lines set down before you left still hold. There is a protection there. And Hadspen stayed. They both keep close to the cottage and try not to be on the roads, in the event that they encounter anyone bound for the congress. Hadspen knows that if things prove unsafe he is to take Adele north, into our nation and under the protection of our father."

“Life’s blood,” Astrick says, dropping his voice. He looks towards the windows. “Can we bear it if either of them are taken?”

Thry and I look at each other, neither having an answer.

Miranda sets a plate of food before each of us, then says something about getting Sperro fed. “Now eat. All of you.”

And we do.

Thry tells us lighter stories of life with Hadspen, making me laugh and Astrick frown just a bit. But Astrick loosens when speaking to Thry about his own work here, at the Pyre.

Suddenly, a sharp pain rips into my head. I grip the table.

I can’t. I can’t, comes Sperro’s voice in my head.

Another wave of pain, and I gasp aloud.

“Ember! What is it?” Thry’s hand is on my shoulder.

“I need to get to Sperro!” I answer, pressing my hands against my face, trying to relieve the pressure. I hear Sperro’s voice in my head, calling out almost savagely.

Stumbling away from the bench, I’m up and running out of the kitchen before Thry can stop me. I run up the stairs and through the gallery, my reflection racing with me through the mirrors on both walls. Within minutes, I’m entering his room.

Sperro is not in his bed. Rather, he is collapsed on the floor beside it, gripping his head, making the most terrible noise.

“Sperro.” I drop down before him, putting my hands on his face, forcing him to look at me. “Are you hurt?”

“I can’t—!” He shakes his head and yells in terrible pain.

“What is it?”

I get no answer—only another scream as he twists. Placing my hands on his body, I search for his light lines, but I can’t find them. There is a great trembling inside of him, a chasm, and it’s splitting further.

“What’s happening?” I cry. “I can’t find your heartbeat.”

He opens his eyes. They are dilated, unfocused. I gather him into my arms.

“These are the prayers of the Virtus Third,” I say desperately. “Veni, veni o oriens, Solare nos adveniens, Noctis depelle nebulas, Dirasque noctis tenebras!”

I repeat the prayer twice, then a third time.

Nothing.

Please, I pray to the Lights, *do what I cannot*. *Banish the chasm*.

There is no mighty rush, no sweep of power. But after a prolonged pleading on his behalf, his body gives a tremor, then lies still. He's still breathing. Closing my eyes, I hold him to me, pressing my forehead to his as I search again for his light lines. The chaos inside Sperro has settled, but, while the chasm is not growing, it's still there, gaping, the rubble of stolen years collapsed inside it.

Astrick comes in just as I'm trying to lift Sperro onto his bed. He helps me.

"I stayed with Thry as long as I could, then told him to wait in the kitchen until we return."

"Thank you."

Once Sperro is lying on the bed, his blankets arranged, I explain to Astrick what had happened. "What can you sense?"

Astrick sits on the side of the bed, while I pace nearby, marking the concentration in his face.

"I understand what you mean," he says. "Something is unbound, split within him."

"I can't find his light lines," I reply. "They're buried beneath it. Can you help me?"

We work in tandem, standing alongside each other, our hands over his chest.

Several moments pass before I feel a rise under the rubble. "I believe there's a line buried here."

"Let me try binding his heart with the native matter of his body," Astrick answers. "To see if it uncovers what you're looking for."

In the long pause, I mark Sperro's breathing.

"There. Does that help?"

A distant warmth responds beneath my fingers. "Yes. It's his ninth line. Let me stabilize it. That might give you something stronger to bind."

We work until Sperro feels steady beneath our hands.

Miranda enters just as we finish. She has a small pot of broth that she sets beside the fire. "I'll sit with him while he sleeps. You best get back to your guest in the kitchen. If I need you, I'll send Celia."

"Tell Thry I'll be down in a few minutes," I tell Astrick. "I want to try a few more things."

After Astrick has left, Miranda asks me what had happened. I answer as briefly as possible, as I walk to the fire and place my hands inside the flames. After a moment of watching the flames wrap around my fingers, I return to Sperro and place my hands again on his chest. This time I feel a jump—a reaching out between his few flares of light, buried beneath the rubble of darkness.

"I can't close the chasm," I mutter. "What is happening? Is all our work merely leading to Sperro ripping himself apart? It can't—" I press my face into my hands. "It can't be the Lights burying him alive. Is it himself? Is he ripping himself apart?"

"Some things are his alone," Miranda answers, lifting her hand to Sperro's face, brushing a strand of hair away from his forehead. "Perhaps it's part of breaking down a Death Bleak. Perhaps there is still darkness he's been unwilling to release. He'll likely continue to have decision points all along the way, my lady. And on the day he fully gives himself over to the hands of those who would work for his good, there will no longer be any division."

Miranda's words take their place between us, and we sit for several minutes in silence.

"He looks more like a young man now," I finally say.

"More like his old self, in many ways," Miranda answers.

* * *

Just before I reenter the kitchen, I pause on the stairs. Standing at the far end are Astrick and Thry. Astrick has one hand on his hip, lifting the other to his forehead, moving his fingers along his brow as he says something to Thry. He looks burdened, but—as ever—alive in the most incredible manner. Thry is standing beside him, arms crossed over his chest, the book of the Pyre in one hand, answering Astrick with the open expression he saves for only the people he finds worthy of gathering into his life.

This makes me smile, and I watch a moment longer, enjoying the camaraderie. Thry mumbles something reluctantly, in response to a question Astrick has posed, and upon hearing Thry's answer, Astrick begins to laugh. Thry shakes his head, a flush coloring his cheek for only a moment before he mutters something else. Then he looks towards the door and sees me. He

doesn't speak as I come down into the kitchen, and in his attempt to appear unconcerned, he comes off looking like a tense crow.

"All is well?" Astrick asks.

"As well as it can be."

Thry pinches his mouth to the side. "Is running off like that usual for you, here at the Pyre?"

"I wouldn't be so bold as to pair the word usual with your sister," Astrick says, trying to lighten Thry's worry. "Constant turmoil wherever she goes."

"If I recall, you were the one recently labeled reprobate of the Pyre," I reply.

"You throw stones off the roof."

"Foul! You started it."

We grin at each other, Astrick and I, but Thry doesn't smile. He's too far removed from the work of the Pyre to realize how much we need the humor, and too much on edge for banter, so I say, "It hasn't been an easy transformation for Sperro, and we don't always know what we're to do."

"How much longer will it take, Ember?" Thry asks.

"The books you brought should help."

"Who's this?" Sylvain says as he enters the back door of the kitchen with a stack of wood in his arms.

"My brother, Thry," I answer. "We were wondering if he could stay with you, in the woodsman's cottage?"

Sylvain puts the wood down, brushing his arms off as he turns and considers my brother. In response, Thry narrows his eyes, carrying out his own assessment of the woodsman.

"I see why he shouldn't stay at the Pyre," Sylvain answers, "but you've yet to answer why he should stay with me."

"Because I'm an Intuit," Thry answers, before either Astrick or I can, "and the news I bring is that there is a dark congress below the West Fell. Astrick tells me you are the man who patrols the forest at night. I could help, for I would know when they've crossed the forest's boundaries."

Sylvain's face creases in suspicion. "What do you know of the boundaries?"

I glance towards Astrick, who lifts a shoulder and gives his head a single shake—he doesn't know what they are talking about either.

“Just what I learned from this book,” Thry says, holding up the volume in his hand. “And, of course, from what the trees were saying.”

“You can hear the trees?” Sylvain says, and it sounds like a challenge.

“Not as well as you,” Thry answers. “I’m merely an Intuit, not a Steward.”

Astrick and I exchange another glance. Sylvain has never claimed to work inside the orders of the Lights, let alone as a Steward.

“What have they been saying?” Sylvain asks, stepping towards Thry, his eyes narrowing.

“They wait to burn,” Thry answers unblinkingly.

This answer confuses me, but Sylvain’s reaction is instantaneous.

“I’ll take him,” he says. “But we leave in an hour. We’ve work to do.”

My heart trips over itself. “An hour? Must it be so soon?”

“We’ll be in and out of this place, my lady,” Sylvain answers. “It isn’t as if you’ll never see him.”

“I’ll be close at hand,” Thry promises, his grey eyes on mine. “Close enough to know how you fare. Far enough away to keep a bead on Hadspen, when we work towards the west.”

“Is it possible to send messages to you, through the trees?” I ask. “I mean, if you can hear them—”

Sylvain laughs. “The trees are older than you, my lady. They are not too fond of doing anyone’s bidding. Not even their Steward’s.”

* * *

Once it has been settled that Thry will leave with Sylvain, Astrick and Sylvain take that time to counsel while Thry and I walk outside in the frozen gardens, talking with the little time we have.

“Astrick will have to go through the prayers of the Virtus Third with you. Not all are in that book, but a few are, enough to be helpful until you can train in your calling.”

After I tell him the events at the Pyre, he tells me about the small village to the west, where he and Hadspen are guests of Adele, Astrick’s sister.

“Is she as beautiful as Astrick claims she is?” I grin, thinking about Hadspen falling over his own feet for the girl.

“Some would say so,” Thry nods, more interested in asking about the Pyre than in speaking of his time in the West. “We’ve heard back from

Father. He's been going mad from not knowing, but when we wrote, we assured him you were well."

"Has the work on Hill House finished?"

Thry shakes his head. "He didn't say. That isn't his greatest worry at the moment."

"Hmm," I answer, stealing my tone from Sperro. Looking about the cold garden, I reconsider Thry. "Can you really hear the trees? Occasionally, I've thought I understood their feelings, but do you hear more than that?"

"Whispers is all," Thry answers. "Though my abilities grow stronger and more varied the closer I am to the Pyre. It's a…strange place."

"Quite ancient."

Thry looks up at the building. "The forces gathering against you are tremendous. And if the Bleak is as weak as you say, I'm worried he will be the chink in the armor of this place. Will it withstand the next assault?"

Before I can answer, there's a call from the back door. It's Balint.

"Sylvain is waiting by the stables," he calls towards us. "Says they need to be on their way."

Thry gives a small sigh, kicking at the tired snow of the garden with his boot.

"I'm close," he says, "if you need me."

We walk back to the Pyre and see that Thry has enough food from the kitchens to get by until Balint can bring him more supplies, and then I walk him to the stables, where Astrick and Sylvain are in conversation.

"We have to move fast," Sylvain says. "You'll have to keep up."

Thry doesn't answer, but his bearing does. He will keep up.

"Take care," Thry tells me, and he gives me an embrace and kisses my cheek. "Rest more than you have been. Make that scoundrel of a Binder do more of the work."

I smile.

But Sylvain has already started into the forest. Thry gives me one last, close look—a show of his quiet, fierce affection—and then follows the woodsman into the forest.

* * *

On the roof at sunset, Astrick and I begin to work on learning the prayers of the Virtus Third. There's wind, and we duck down beside the parapet to block it, the book lying open between us. There are four prayers recorded here: the first one I already know, and the other three are in the same ancient language. They cross my tongue smoothly, a beautiful sound.

"Would that I could speak with such language, pray with such words," Astrick says, after I've repeated them aloud over and over.

"Do the Light Binders not have their own prayers?"

"The language is not so ancient," Astrick explains, closing the book before him. He looks up at me, the pale colors of evening between us. "Neither is there the same proximity, nor the same longing, as what we've found here. Can you say them back to me from memory?"

I close my eyes and breathe in deeply, before repeating first the prayer I know: "Veni, veni o oriens, Solare nos adveniens, Noctis depelle nebulas, Dirasque noctis tenebras."

Pausing only a moment, I begin the other three. "Veni, veni Adonai, Qui populo in Sinai, Legem dedisti vertice, In maiestate gloriae." Then, "Veni, O Sapientia, Quae hic disponis omnia, Veni, viam prudentiae, Ut doceas et gloriae." And finally, "Veni, Veni, Rex Gentium, Veni, Redemptor omnium, Ut salves tuos famulos, Peccati sibi conscios."

I open my eyes, to ask if I've remembered the prayers correctly, but the expression on Astrick's face tells me all I need to know. He is crouching before me, the book closed in his hand, and is leaning against the parapet, his face holding the same expression he had worn when we'd first lit up the courtyard window with candles.

"Beautiful," he mutters. "May the prayers be heard, and may this all be over soon."

XXVII

Sperro has woken up, but he's too weary for speech. Too weary for thought. When I'm not sitting on the foot of his bed, I pace about the room. It is deep night, and there is no moon, for tonight thick clouds lie between

the Pyre and the stars. I keep Sperro's cloak covering his body, hoping this helps. His light lines still feel partially buried, though the chasm is closing. I'm uncertain what this means.

I have not yet used the other prayers of the Virtus Third, not confident when one is sanctioned by the Lights to say them all together. I've repeated the first one, yes, the one Sperro had taught me in the library. But the other three?

My thoughts wander towards the bell tower. The deep bell still rings, with the accent of the other two ringing above its depth. It has remained like that—three bells, no more—three light lines rekindled, no more—and I wonder. Am I only to wait for their freedom, or are they to be shaken out of their sleep?

Picking up my own cloak from where I'd discarded it near the fire, I wrap it around my shoulders and leave Sperro's rooms. It is dark save for the candles in the windows; there are a few memories about tonight, but I encounter no one as I walk the familiar route to the bell tower.

As I come to the outside corridor, instead of entering my rooms, I turn right, into the narrow bell tower. The path is precarious without a light, but I move forward slowly, until I am standing before the rope of the tenth bell. Reaching my hand out, I grip the old rope, worn smooth with impossible age. I pull, but it does nothing. "Come on," I mutter, "you've been ringing for weeks." Gripping the rope with two hands, I pull again. I feel a movement but hear no sound. Again and again I pull the rope, until there is finally enough momentum. "Doooom!" The deep sound of the bell shakes me. "Doooom!" I give another hard pull and then move on to the ninth bell's rope.

"Clang," comes the sound after a few tries. I move on to the eighth bell, and its ring comes faster. In the ink black night, the three bells ring together in a patient interchange of sounds.

Now I move to the seventh bell. The rope is stuck, and it does not move, as stubborn as Sperro's seventh line. I grip the rope with both hands and pull, dropping my weight into it.

Nothing. The emptiness as hollow as the chasm inside of Sperro.

Flinging my doubts aside, I plant both of my feet squarely and say, "These are the prayers of the Virtus Third."

As I speak the words of all four prayers aloud, I feel something gathering: images beginning to flash through my mind. They are bright and

beyond what I understand. But when I finish, as the last ancient word is leaving my tongue, I open my eyes and see light shimmering about my hands, just like on the night of conflict weeks before.

With determination, I take the rope of the seventh bell and pull as hard as I'm able. The rope gives way, and there is a tremendous ring, which falls on the forest below. Again and again and again, I ring the seventh bell. And then the sixth. And the fifth, the fourth, and the third.

Each time I reach for a rope, the light about my hands grows brighter, flares up, and leaves particles—like embers being blown from a fire—floating through the bell tower corridor. The second rope seems almost eager to join the others, and then, finally, I reach for the rope of the first bell. Pressing my lips firmly together, I pull.

Sweet sound breaks, high and clear. I ring the bell again. Again. I return to the second, and then the third, all the way down to the tenth. The bells are perfectly in tune with one another. They weave a sound that I'm certain can be heard for miles throughout the forest. Their song is beautiful. It's exultant.

The sky begins to lighten, darkness giving itself over to the coming day. I leave the bell tower and return inside the Pyre and to Sperro Magna—the final rings a slow parade at my heels, the light around my hands fading into the promise of dawn.

* * *

When I enter Sperro's chambers, he is sitting up, wide-eyed, his hands pressed flat behind him to keep himself from falling back into bed. He's not wearing a shirt or tunic, so I can see the lines of his upper body move as he breathes deeply, blinking, the pulse in his neck visible even from the room's threshold.

When he looks towards me, his eyes are clear. They hold their color. They are the eyes of the Lectus Born.

"Your eyes," I say almost numbly.

He takes another breath and then shakes his head, lifting a hand to his face and rubbing his eyes. "By the Lights, December, *what* have you been doing?"

His voice freezes me into place. I don't answer. I can't. I'd never thought—

“It was the most tremendous jolt,” Sperro continues, still looking dazed. “A rush.” He shakes his head. “Almost as if it were a quickening.” When I still don’t answer, he brings his eyebrows together in concentration. “December?”

“You sound like yourself,” I manage to say, the words floundering in the air between us. “Your voice. It sounds just like it does in my mind. Sperro Magna, look what’s happening to you!”

Sperro draws his eyebrows closer together, looking about the room like he’s been gone from it a long time. “I feel—” But the unfinished words remain such, as he lets himself down, resting his head at an angle on the pillow so he can still see me. “Will they mind if I rest? There’s nothing they need me to do now, is there? I can be about my duties later, but I can’t seem to—I was up late, you see, mapping the stars.”

“Rest then, Sperro,” I reply, wondering if his mind is entirely all right. “They want you to rest.”

“I will,” he sighs, closing his eyes. “If you’re not granting audiences or seeing to the pilgrims, you could stay with me, if you wish. The life of a Virtus Third at the Pyre is very demanding, I know.”

“Of course I will stay with you,” I answer.

A smile breaks across his handsome face. “I was hoping you would say that,” he mutters.

I walk to his bedside and sit down. His hand finds mine as his breathing slows, and then it deepens and fades into the cadence of sleep.

* * *

“And when he woke up later, how was he?” Astrick asks.

Astrick, Celia, and I are in the Long Hall, dipping candles.

“He didn’t speak much,” I answer, “but he was no longer confused, he was just thoughtful.”

“This whole business,” Celia says, shaking her head, staring dejectedly at the candles she’s just hung to dry. “I can hardly bear to be patient in it. Changes are starting, and I want them to happen, and then to finish, that we might be done with the mess. I’m sick, just sick of it all.”

Astrick laughs, but it’s with a look of sympathy. “I can’t even imagine, Celia.”

“Well, having started and not finishing is even worse than waiting for it to begin.”

“What will you do,” I ask, “when it’s over?”

Celia crosses her arms as she settles her weight onto one leg. “None of us know what’s going to happen. We could all die when the Witch returns,” she says practically. “We could all die if Sperro doesn’t make it. We could all die if he does. Or we could be stuck like this forever.”

“I refuse to believe that,” I reply. “Now that you have a heartbeat, it seems like you might be able to live out a normal life.”

“But where would I go?” Celia asks in a way that warns against giving an answer.

“You would become fast friends with my sister, Adele,” Astrick answers anyway. “And you would have all of us.”

The idea quiets Celia’s expression. “Perhaps.” Then, as if embarrassed, she says, “I’m going down to the kitchen to see what’s there. I’m starving.”

After Celia has left, I look towards Astrick. “Speaking of Adele, did you have a chance to ask Thry more about how she was faring?”

“Of course,” Astrick says, the corner of his mouth moving ever so slightly up. “He’d left Hadspen alone with my sister. Certainly, I had questions.”

“You don’t have to worry, you know,” I answer. “Hadspen will respect her. Did Thry say if she is fond of Hadspen in return?”

A strange expression comes to Astrick’s face, and he laughs to himself. “Adele is quite fond of Hadspen, but after my last visit home, I suspect that she may fancy another.”

“Poor Hadspen.”

He makes an odd expression. “Poor Thry.”

“*Thry*? She fancies Thry?”

He nods.

“Oh dear.” I laugh. “Poor Adele.”

* * *

Although his eyes have kept their color and his voice has retained its golden timbre, Sperro grows more and more tired: he is too thin, the circles beneath his eyes growing deeper. In his waking hours, he wishes only to

read. I bring him books from the library, for he's too weary to go there himself.

"Will you read to me?" I ask one afternoon, when he is lucid.

"What would you like to hear?"

"Whatever it is you wish to read."

Sperro spends the afternoon reading an ancient history of all the nations, followed by the epic poem of a poet long dead. It's vague and symbolic, and as Sperro comes to the end, after several trailing stanzas of the poem's victory celebration, he reads the final lines:

Yet, while the trumpets blew their cause
And banners aft and fore were flown,
The traveler looked at pillared halls
And highest honors carved in stone.
He thought, though ended struggle be,
The burden gone to victory;
To marvel how the journey, more
Than laud and triumph, claimed to own.

Sperro closes the book and sets it aside. "Have you dreamed of this coming to an end, December?"

"When I've dared to, yes."

"Are you weary?" he asks, and his voice is strange for how much its tone sounds like empathy.

I don't answer.

"I will give you whatever ending I can," he says. "But promise me you will remember the journey if it ever leads to victory."

"I don't think there's any risk of forgetting." I smile, rising to see he is comfortable before falling asleep. "We will laugh over this, one day, and recount stories to those who will not believe a Death Bleak once stalked these halls."

"Tell the stories, Ember. And be generous."

* * *

Sylvain and Thry come just as the day is ending, to bring wood and relay the happenings of the forest, both of them looking grim. I've come from Sperro's rooms, and Astrick has left some glasswork he's been doing on the

sixth floor. The four of us stand in the courtyard, our arms folded against the cold, a solemn circle.

"The trees are getting ready," Sylvain says.

"What of the pitch?" Astrick asks.

"It's the same on all the old trees."

"The pitch?" I ask.

"It's something Sylvain and I have been experimenting with," Astrick answers. "I forgot we've never talked. I'd meant to tell you the day you found us burning torches in the garden."

"The pitch of this forest burns without consuming whatever it's on," Sylvain says, looking at me. "We're wondering how we can use that for our aid. What protection would it offer if we spread it on the stones of the Pyre? What protection would it offer the forest?"

"It would burn without consuming?" I confirm. "Like the fire in Sperro's hearth?"

"Yes," Sylvain answers. Then he gives his head a shake, his earring catching the light. "How is Sperro Magna?" he asks.

I don't bother to hide my surprise at Sylvain's sincere tone. "Only yesterday I found traces of light in all of his lines, which is, well, what I would have thought impossible. But he's growing physically weaker."

"I'd suspected as much. Look," Sylvain says, holding his wrist out to me. "Go on. Wrap your fingers around it."

I take Sylvain's wrist in my hand, looking at Sylvain strangely.

"Can you feel it?"

"Do you mean—?" I press my fingers into the inside of his wrist. There it is, his pulse.

"Sylvain!"

Astrick laughs, and Thry smiles.

"Thry told me it was coming," Sylvain says, his deep voice conceding Thry's victory.

"How does it feel?" I ask.

"I'm starving," Sylvain growls. "That's one of the reasons Thry and I came back in. He might not eat much, but I certainly will. Especially if I have to defend this damn forest against the likes of Callidus."

"Do you know how much time we have, Thry?" I ask.

"It won't be in the next few days," Thry says, kicking the stone beneath his feet. "Beyond that? I don't know. It's been hard to sense anything."

“What of Hadspen and Adele?” Astrick asks.

Thry shakes his head. “I know nothing beyond the fact that they are still west of the forest.”

“Are you all going to dawdle the day through?” Balint calls, coming from the stables. “We’ve wood to chop, if none of you have anything better to do.”

Sylvain looks at me, ignoring the old man. “Can you do again what you did that last time, to save the Pyre when they come?”

When I don’t answer immediately, no one speaks. They just let the question hang in the air between us.

“I don’t think the Pyre will fall,” I answer slowly. “Although, I think it will be a battle like we’ve not seen.”

“Here’s to hope,” Sylvain breathes out.

* * *

Thry and Sylvain stay at the Pyre, working around its perimeter all night long, spreading pitch on the foundation stones. Astrick helps them, and so does Balint. I sit, during the long night, in a windowsill of Sperro’s room. Occasionally, I can hear a laugh from outside, where the men are working, and it makes me smile.

Come morning, Sylvain and Thry have packed several supplies, and they head into the forest. I stand there, gripping my cloak about me, watching Thry leave once again, feeling as if he is leaving home.

After they have gone, I check on Sperro, but he’s sleeping, and his light lines are quiet. And so instead of disturbing him, I find an upholstered bench in the Mirror Gallery just below a window, and lie down. I can see the light and dark of the ever-changing clouds through my closed eyelids.

* * *

The sound first makes me think of pebbles, small river pebbles and the noise they would make when tossed against a tree. It’s comforting and steady and round. It’s soft. Then my eyes blink open, and I sit up. The light in the gallery is shifting, moving, but that is not what had caught my attention. I look at the windows.

Rain.

It is raining.

I run through the corridor and into the Great Hall. The doors have been flung open, and Miranda, Celia, and Balint are knotted at the doorway, staring and whispering.

Celia bravely steps out onto the steps, extending her arms and lifting her face. Then she begins to laugh, her beauty awash in a soft, lovely expression. Balint makes a noise and then steps into the rain himself, a touch nervous, as if he thinks he will melt away. When he doesn't, Miranda joins him. They walk down the steps, holding out their hands and opening their mouths. They shout and talk.

Miles away, the sun breaks through the clouds, even as the rain continues to fall. This is what brings me outside, the slanting light of afternoon turning the rain into bright sheets that break on the stones of the courtyard. Wet through, I can't help but feel as giddy as the rest of them. Racing back inside, I am soon through the doorway of Sperro's rooms.

"Sperro!" I try to shake him awake, sitting beside him on the bed. "Sperro. Wake up."

He groans. The skin around his eyes pulls tight, then he opens them.

"What is it?"

"It's rain, Sperro. It's raining!"

His face looks from mine towards the window. "Rain?" he says, like he doesn't remember what it is. Now he notices my wet hair and clothes. He lifts his head, and moves a hand towards my arm, then pulls back. "What does it feel like?"

I smile. "Like rain."

Sperro drops his head back onto the pillow. "I can't remember what rain feels like, December."

The wave of sound builds as the rain falls harder, heavier, against the glass windows. I lift my hand to Sperro's face, my thumb smoothing the lines on the edge of his eye.

"Come outside," I whisper. "Come and see it. Everyone is in the courtyard."

He just lies there, and I wonder if he is going to leave me, disappear into his own mind and go back to sleep.

"No, Sperro. Come outside and feel the rain. You've not—" I place my palm on his cheek. "You've not felt it for over three hundred years. I will

help you walk. I am strong enough."

* * *

It takes more time than I think it will to bring Sperro down the corridor from his chamber and through the galleries to the Great Hall. He only just keeps himself up; it is I who have to provide the balance.

I can hear all their shouts now, especially Celia's, her laughter exuberant. So much rain has fallen that, through the open doors, I can see great puddles around the courtyard—and still it falls. Astrick has joined them, grinning while he splashes Celia by crashing his boot into a nearby puddle. No one shows any inclination to go inside.

Sperro's arm is around my shoulder, and his hand grips my arm. I hold him tight in return, with my arm around his waist, as I bring him to the top of the stairs. The shouts stop as soon as we are seen, their laughter washed into the puddles, and they stand still. It's the first time Celia and Balint have seen Sperro since the night he'd made his decision. Their eyes are wary at first, but then Balint's lips part as he sees Sperro's eyes.

Slowly, one step at a time, we walk down the wide stairs of the Pyre. When we're standing in the courtyard, Sperro tilts his head up, blinking as the rain hits his face.

Celia, still breathing hard from excitement, brushes the wet hair from her face and says, "Well, look who decided to finally join the gathering after three hundred years, Sperro Magna himself."

Balint looks nervous. Everyone seems to be waiting.

I lift my free hand to Sperro's chest as he stares at Celia. She lifts her chin and waits for him to respond, as if daring him into it. I feel his chest expand and then fall before he says, "You've not had anything worth gathering for, Celia. I can't waste my time on half thoughts and silly schemes."

Celia's face breaks with a smile. And as I look to his face for interpretation, I see that they are privy to some old exchange that I am not. Celia makes a snorting sound and waves her hand dismissively, but her eyes draw up in emotion, and she pulls her mouth tight.

"I always came to your fetes, Celia," Sperro says sincerely.

"You did," she answers, her voice choking with emotion. "This one is particularly fine."

“You always were wild for rain,” Sperro says. She smiles, her eyes bright. But Sperro can’t seem to smile in return. I see him swallow and stare, pressing his lips together as he tries to keep some composure. Then I feel him fall more heavily against me as he looks over his shoulder at Miranda and Balint. Sperro clears his throat and ducks his head, wearing the first expression of open shame I have ever seen on his face. He mutters something that no one can hear and takes a step away from me, struggling to stay on his own two feet, still avoiding their eyes.

“Sperro, I—”

He waves me off, clearing his throat and looking at those who’ve stayed, pressing his tongue against the inside of his bottom lip, even as his eyes rim with tears and rain.

“Whatever happened to Sylvain’s wife and child?” he asks.

Miranda makes a muffled sound and looks away, her own eyes visibly wet.

“She left.” It is Celia, brave Celia, who gives the answer. “Taking the baby away soon after you let Callidus convince you to kill the Pyre Council. She swore she was taking her child as far away from you as possible. She followed the road north, and Sylvain never heard from either of them again.”

Sperro nods, clearing his throat again and again. “And your aunt, Celia?”

“Gone, with all the rest.”

“I’m—” his voice breaks, “I’m sorry…to all of you. You had no reason to stay.” Pausing, a half sob is all the sound he lets escape, but his face has fallen in full anguish. “After all that I’ve— And you few are still—” He turns away, walking on unsteady legs towards the western arch, his hand covering his face.

“I’ll go with him,” Astrick says from near my shoulder. “I’ll walk with Sperro until he’s ready to return.”

I turn and look up at him. “Are you sure?”

Astrick nods.

“Try not to let him go too far.”

* * *

It's nearly dark when they return, Astrick holding Sperro up. Celia finds me and tells me this as I'm lighting candles and placing them in windows on the second floor. Then she offers to help.

"Sperro said you should rest tonight, that Astrick will help with anything he needs. They're—well, they have things to talk about."

"What things?" I ask, balancing a candle before lighting its wick.

"Sperro said you would ask that."

I look at her with an arched eyebrow. "Oh, did he? And what was to be your reply?"

"I'm supposed to tell you that it's none of your business." Celia grins, reveling in her role as messenger.

"Why would he say that?"

Because it is none of your business, says Sperro's voice in my mind.

I guffaw. *Celia and I are talking*. *Go away*.

He laughs, but then he is gone.

After Celia and I have finished, I go up to sleep in my bell tower rooms. In the strange time between rest and awareness, I feel the truth of two things: First, that this work, which I've given everything to, is almost at its end. And second, it feels like there is someone near me, someone I know well, whispering of a new road ahead.

* * *

"How was last night?" I ask Sperro, when I arrive at his rooms the next morning. He's sitting up in bed, staring at the open windows, the light tracing his profile like in a portrait. "Did you and Astrick keep each other up late?"

He answers without looking at me. "Not very, no."

"And did you sleep?"

"Yes. I dreamt but once," Sperro answers. "A strange mercy, I suppose."

"What was the dream?"

He turns his face to look at me. "I was being held in someone's arms. I thought it was you, at first."

"Really?" I answer, sitting on the side of the bed. He motions with his chin, and moves over enough so that I can come sit. I settle beside him, in the pillows against the headboard, and lean my head on his shoulder.

“It felt,” Sperro continues, “as if we’d covered a great distance. But I was relieved for the journey. I wasn’t sorry.”

“That is a singular dream.”

“Yes. I’ve—” he shakes his head. “I’ve never known anything like it.”

“Where did you go?”

But he doesn’t answer.

“You look stronger today. Like each light line is reclaiming its place.”

“I’m feeling stronger,” he answers. “Would you humor a desperate soul and see how far we can wander in the forest?”

“You walked a long while yesterday.”

“And feel better for it.”

I look up at his face, wishing he wouldn’t tire himself. “I’d be happy to, if you truly think it will help.”

“We won’t go far.” Sperro looks towards the window, his chin brushing my temple. “I’ve been in this room for weeks, with little reprieve. It was such a liberation to be outside in the rain, and I wonder what it’s done to the snow in the forest. I want to see the changes.”

“The snow is melting,” I answer, wrapping my arm across his chest. “We’ll muddy up the hallways when we return, and Miranda will have our heads.”

Sperro sighs. “How that woman could yell over a bit of mud.”

* * *

After Sperro has sent me from the room, firmly insisting he can manage to dress himself, I go change into a plain dress, for walking, and put on my boots and cloak. When I return, I can hear him swearing through the door, and I can’t help but laugh.

I’m not humored by the fact that I can barely adjust my trousers, and I’ll be damned if I’m going to let a Virtus Third dress me.

I wasn’t offering.

Once Sperro has finally managed both his trousers and a shirt, I enter anyway and help him secure his boots, then his cloak. We walk through the Pyre—his arm around my shoulders, mine about his waist—and go out into the back gardens.

Sperro stops, and closes his eyes. “Do you taste that?” he asks.

“Winter is shifting,” I answer, feeling the new air on my face.

“It’s been an age since I smelled a forest spring.”

We start down the path and into the trees. Sperro finds a steady enough walking stick that he can take his arm from about my shoulders and walk on his own, however slowly. The path is quite melted: just patches of snow amid the mud and layers of damp pine needles.

“At Hill House, there were spring flowers in the field leading down to the river,” I tell him. “My mother said they were the promise that winter had fled. And after she died, my father did a painting of them, which he hung in the study.”

“Burned now,” is Sperro’s reply.

“True,” I sigh. “But the flowers still grow.”

Sperro tilts his head as he raises an eyebrow, conceding the point.

We haven’t gone very far, but when I notice how slowly Sperro is moving, I ask, “Should we go back?”

“Not yet. I just want a moment more to—”

But he doesn’t finish his sentence. He bends over, picking something up. With a twist of his fingers, a feather catches the sunlight, gleaming silver.

“The silver feather of a female Spry,” he says.

I watch the light ring along the length of the silver feather as he moves it. “You told me once that it blesses you with a life of happiness. Is that true?”

Sperro nods. “According to all the old tales.”

“Claim it, Sperro,” I say so fiercely it catches him off guard.

But he grimaces, extending the feather towards me.

“You take it, December.”

“Never.” I step away. “I would sooner take my breath. I want this for you.”

“Don’t say that.” Sperro reaches out to steady himself against one of the trees, his palm pressing against the trunk, trapping the feather. “You know that I’ve made bargains, December. Many. The things I’ve sacrificed for power—”

“And you’ve been giving them up, burning the symbols, abandoning the runes, forsaking the blood gain—”

Sperro lifts his other hand. “There was another power I’d wanted, the ability to damn the way of anyone who would try and take me from my path. I’ve spoken of it before. It’s why you cannot read. Reading was one of

the things it took from anyone who could possibly sway me. And all the servants who remained would be taken from time, their pulses stolen. But there are other things tied to it."

"What things? What did you give to make it so?"

"One of the conjures I manipulated," Sperro continues, not answering my question, "was a slant spell to crack the defenses of the Pyre. With this, no matter how much light the Pyre would build up, a crack would continually drain away the power for good. It would become an endless task, keeping the Pyre the sanctuary it should be. Inevitably, it would fall."

"The spells are starting to weaken, Sperro. Celia has regained her pulse; Sylvain is finally—"

"But there are other things too." He leans more heavily against the tree and stares at the ground. "A great many things are tied to this oath. It has caused anguish in many lives."

"Sperro, what did you give?"

"If I break with it, the strength of the Pyre will be enough for whatever comes your way; there will be no desecration on this land. The Lights will have full sway. The servants will all be back into time. And you will have reading—the letters no longer playing you false when you stare at the page." He lifts his eyes to mine. "I want that for you."

"But what will it take?" I ask again, almost desperately. "It must have been something terribly important to you for such a—"

"I promised my life, December."

"Your life?" I choke out.

"To break with this curse, I must forfeit my life. That is what I offered as security for it, to ensure that no one could interrupt my path against my choice. Because the selfish creature I am knew that I would never offer myself as a sacrifice, rather, I would guard my life as a miser with his gold—never thinking that even a Virtus Third would be strong enough to shake my commitment."

"But the servants, Sperro. They are coming back into time!"

He laughs bitterly. "But not all, December, nor completely. I am responsible for that."

I shake my head, refuting his claim. "The Pyre is being strengthened. Astrick has worked so hard to bind it together. It is stronger, strong enough!"

“And yet a crack in the Pyre’s strength remains.” He scans my face, his eyebrows drawing together. “And you will never be able to read.”

“I don’t need words!” I bring my hands up before me. “Let the Lights continue their work. Things are changing. There is no need for this sacrifice!”

“December.” And his eyes fully meet mine.

I open my mouth to speak, but a murmuration of starlings bursts through the forest, flying low and wild between Sperro and me. He’s holding himself up against the tree, and I am standing root fast on the path, and between us is the swirl of a thousand birds.

Then there are more birds, many more, and a strange smell rises in the air.

“December!” Sperro shouts, and he stumbles in the direction of the Pyre.

I rush to catch him, failing, and we’ve both fallen to our knees. Then I look over my shoulder. There, rising above the forest, are great billows of ugly, black smoke.

The Pyre is burning with slant magicks.

XXVIII

It’s a hard return journey. Sperro is limping as fast as he can, collapsing against me for his efforts. And I try to hold him up, try to keep us moving forward. We watch the billowing smoke, more birds than I thought were in the forest flying about us in panic.

The smoke has a foul smell, and it burns my lungs. Wild sounds fill the air around us, unholy shrieks and wails.

“To the back door,” Sperro gasps. “We must get inside.”

“I didn’t think they would come so soon!”

“Nor I. I couldn’t sense them. I’ve no idea what illusion they—”

I pull us up short. We’ve come to the edge of the garden, at the top of the stairs created by the weaving stone, not far from the back door. But something is wrong.

“Do you feel that,” I ask, jerking my head around.

“No.” Sperro’s breathing is too heavy as he withdraws his arm from my shoulder and sinks down onto one knee. “I’ve been losing my sense of the forest.”

But the very air is calling out a warning to me. I straighten my back and take a step forward. Between me and the Pyre, something lies in wait. I cannot see it, but I can feel that the very air is parted, as if loath to touch whatever hides inside the resulting vacuum.

Black smoke is rising from the front of the building, and I’m uncertain what I should do.

“You must get us inside,” Sperro orders through his broken breaths. “December.”

“Reveal yourself,” I demand, throwing these words into troubled air.

Nothing moves.

“You can command it!” Sperro shouts from behind me.

“How?”

“The masters of the Pyre can command their enemies to reveal themselves.”

I spin around to face Sperro. “Then you must do it. Quickly!”

Sperro shakes his head. “The Pyre has claimed you. I told you this months ago.”

“I don’t understand.”

There is a loud crash from the west side of the Pyre, and the smoke increases, blowing through the back garden, choking off our breath.

“Just command it, December!”

“As Virtus Third of the Pyre, I command that you reveal yourself,” I shout.

A shadow appears in the smoke, not twenty feet from where I stand, and as it moves forward, I begin to see a crippled, bent form stepping towards me through the haze. I recognize her staff before she is fully revealed. The Witch Meridaithe.

“Callidus had assured me it would be no simple thing to draw out the withered Sperro Magna, to say nothing of the Virtus Third.” She grins. “Yet here you both are, very outside the protections of your stronghold.”

“Away with you, Witch,” Sperro growls, standing.

“Not so,” she answers, lifting a gnarled finger. “You can no longer siphon out my prophecy. You’ve stepped away from the path of slant powers and are too weak to stop anything. I had promised Callidus you

would be his in the end if he would leave me the girl, but he is not here in these gardens; he's going after the Pyre. I'll take both of you easily enough. There are yet spells I would strip from you myself."

I step between her and Sperro. "He is under the protection of those more powerful than you."

"You know *nothing*," Meridaithe mocks. "Do you think I'm merely a decrepit Witch?"

"I think you must go or be destroyed," I challenge. "These are the prayers of the—"

As Meridaithe shrieks, from the base of her staff, a thick, purple fog billows out, eating away the stone under her feet. Sperro curses and quickly pulls me back a step, but I can feel him shaking from simply holding himself up.

I begin again. "These are the prayers of the—" But before the words are even off my tongue, Meridaithe has taken three steps towards me and disappeared into the air.

Sperro grips my arm and swings himself around. But it is too late. She materializes between us, throwing us apart. Before I can raise myself up, I am caught, tied up by something whipping about me so fast I cannot move. My limbs have been lashed together, and I can scarcely draw breath. I try to fight, try to break free, but cannot stand. I look over towards Sperro. He's been flung several feet away, towards the forest.

Meridaithe is upon him now, shrieking, her rotten mouth gaping as she forces him against the earth. I writhe but I cannot stand. I shout, but my words cannot be heard. Sperro struggles, trying to throw her off him, but then she brings her staff down on his face, and his head falls back.

"You could banish me now," she yells at him, bringing the staff down hard once more. "You know the utterances. Say them. Speak the curses. Tear me to pieces with the rage that fills you."

December.

Sperro!

You must listen to me.

Meridaithe hits him across the face again. Then she stands up, laughing, and places the staff on his chest. "Look what you have let yourself become. You cannot even defend yourself."

What do I do?

“I don’t need to defend myself,” Sperro says to the Witch. He coughs, then grins up at her, crawling to his knees. “You won’t get what you want by taking me.”

“Lies,” Meridaithe howls. “You have centuries of blackness in your blood, and I will draw it all out.”

Sperro looks up at her. “You cannot take my blood yet.”

Meridaithe laughs.

December, Meridaithe is going to come for you. She’s going to try and force entrance into your body so that she might take it. It’s what she does. Stripping away everything she wants, at an elemental level. It’s more powerful than the blood gain.

How do I stop it? I ask.

She’s going to try to disorganize and obliterate you. Then Sperro looks over at me. *Which will be a mistake.*

Why? How will it be a mistake?

He looks back up at Meridaithe, a stillness on his face. “You cannot claim from me what you wish, until you have destroyed the stewardship above me.”

Meridaithe falters. “You’re the Lord of the Pyre, and you broke with your stewardship.”

“Until,” Sperro answers, “I gave myself over to the protection of the Virtus Third. While she yet lives, you cannot take *anything* from me—only remnants, only whispers.”

The Witch shrieks and whirls around. Within three strides, she has disorganized herself into darkness before me. Sperro supports himself with a weary hand, looking at me in full confidence. I blink at him. Then darkness explodes inside me, ripping my chest apart, fracturing my bones. Confusion. Deceit. Desperation. She means to rip me apart.

But she cannot.

For my mind is not tied as is my body, and my heart is not stayed as is my tongue. I am bound to my calling of a Virtus Third. And I am not hers. Meridaithe has forced open doors that were never opened unto her, and I will not allow the trespass. Raising my heart to the Court of the Most High, I dismiss my fear and clear the way.

The light, when it comes, is blinding. The Witch is burned out of me as if she is no more than a dried leaf, the false bindings falling like ash from my body.

She screams, and I open my eyes to the image of Meridaithe writhing in the snow.

Sperro drags me onto my feet. “Into the Pyre!” he yells.

I’m up, dizzy but clutching Sperro’s hand as we run. Hearing the sound of something cracking, I look up. A dark smoke is still pouring out around the Pyre, but the rush of sound is from behind us—the trees of the forest are burning in a mighty flame. As the fire rushes from tree to tree, the heat is swift, forcing us to run faster, the fire reflecting in Sperro’s eyes as he looks over his shoulder.

“Sylvain and Thry must be burning the trees, trying to burn Callidus out,” I yell. Looking over my shoulder, I see Meridaithe dragging herself towards her staff.

We reach for the doors of the Pyre and yank.

“The doors are stuck!” I cry out, trying again to pull the doors open. I look over my shoulder just as Meridaithe is rising.

“Astrick bound them against danger,” Sperro yells over the deafening noise, still watching as the fire consumes the forest. “You are the Virtus Third; the Pyre will open for you.”

“Open the doors!” I shout as I place both of my hands on the door, trying to remember the words of the first prayer. Then, forcing my voice to be confident, I repeat, “I command these doors to unlock!”

It is a struggle—to reach for light and power through the bitter smoke and noise—but the unbearable heat at my back transforms into warmth in my hands, and then the doors give way.

Sperro and I stumble inside. As soon as I’m able, I close the doors behind us and lean my body against them, breathing in the air of the Pyre.

We are up the stairs and through the servants’ hall, entering the corridor leading to the Mirror Gallery just as a tremendous crash shakes the Pyre. We both fall to the ground, the sounds of a window breaking above us.

I try to lift myself from the floor. But I cannot. Blood is puddled on the stone around me, a fire burning across my face. I lift my fingers to my cheek, and they are soon wet with blood. Numb from the shock, I explore the gash extending from my cheek bone down to my neck. My lips part in pain.

A shadow shifts above me. Sperro. His face twisted in worry. He’s almost kneeling, trying to keep himself up as he reaches out and touches my face. As reflective as any gem, the blood on his fingers catches the light

filtering through the shards of the shattered window above us. His eyes meet mine. They are filled with nothing but concern, a care born of anxiety.

"You must go deeper into the Pyre, where it's safer. Find the others!" He starts to sway, looking faint.

I scramble to my knees, gripping his shoulders to keep him steady.

"Go," Sperro says to me as he collapses back against the wall, all his strength gone. "A moment is all I need. I will meet you in the Great Hall. Meridaithe will reassemble, and she will join Callidus and the others. You must go!"

"But are you well?" I cry out, ignoring the fire racing down my cheek. "You shouldn't have—"

"Yes," he answers, waving me away, and the brightness of his eyes is the argument that finally convinces me to leave Sperro lying among the broken glass of the corridor.

* * *

As I run, the air in the Pyre is dimming, and I hear great sounds of stone breaking and of glass being smashed on each of the Pyre's floors.

"Astrick!"

Seeing no one, I run faster, begging the Lights. There is a weight on my chest, as if I will be ripped apart and sent into oblivion.

"Astrick!" I shout again as I race through the Mirror Gallery. The glass is breaking, shattering. I protect my face and continue to run, feeling the blood down my neck. Then I see Celia ahead of me, rushing down the corridor, towards the Great Hall.

"We're in here. Are you all right?" she yells back when she sees me, her eyes so wide from fear that she doesn't look like herself.

Just as I cross the threshold of the Great Hall, there's a massive shudder, like one of the towers has crumbled into itself. The floor shakes beneath my feet. Throwing my hand out to steady myself, I manage not to fall.

Astrick is here, as are Balint and Miranda. Someone outside is shouting, but I understand nothing of the words. The front doors are being battered, the wood making splitting sounds as the hinges scream.

I yell, running forward, and throw myself against the doors, raising my hands to them and calling out, "Veni, veni o oriens, Solare nos adveniens, Noctis depelle nebulas, Dirasque noctis tenebras!"

I feel a tremor beneath my feet, and a light flashes before me. The battering comes again and another sound of a crash. I can hear Astrick, in the middle of the Great Hall, calling out the prayers of a Light Binder, binding glass to lead and stone to mortar.

Taking a ragged breath, I continue, “Veni, veni Adonai, Qui populo in Sinai, Legem dedisti vertice, In maiestate gloriae!”

There is shaking from beneath me, not of destruction, but rather of strength shooting upward.

“Veni, O Sapientia!” I yell. “Quae hic disponis omnia, Veni, viam prudentiae, Ut doceas et gloriae. Veni, Veni, Rex Gentium, Veni, Redemptor omnium!” I gasp for breath. “Ut salves tuos famulos, Peccati sibi conscios!”

The sound of a mighty wind rises, an almost blinding heat filling the Pyre.

“It’s burning!” Balint calls, pointing at one of the windows. “The entire forest is burning!”

Astrick breaks off from his binding work to rush to a window. “All the trees are on fire!”

“It will burn us!” Celia yells.

“The forest means to burn Callidus out,” shouts Balint.

“It doesn’t matter if they destroy the Pyre first,” Astrick answers back, his voice hoarse. “The Pyre is failing! It’s being rendered powerless.”

I feel another battering against the Pyre and hear a raging shriek.

“Hold the Pyre!” I shout. “They’re trying to collapse it!”

The feeling of smashed stone beneath me is awful. I close my eyes, asking the Lights for deliverance. Each time the assault shakes the Pyre, I struggle to continue, to hold up this weight that would crush me.

I yell. My tongue feels like lead in my mouth, and I cry out the prayers of the Virtus Third again. And again. The words come, but with difficulty. “Please!” I cry for help. “Please.”

Something shatters, and I hear Celia scream. Then I feel glass fall around me, crashing onto my back and breaking on the floor, flying off the stone in an upward spray. I can feel the glass cutting my face.

“It’s the great window!” Astrick cries out in dismay. “Ember! It fell on Ember!”

More glass falls as another rumble shakes the building. I open my eyes and see blood on the ground near me. I try to stand up, but my body cries out.

Something is raging outside, and the doors are about to give way.

I lift myself up onto my knees and crawl towards the doors—as if my being near them can prevent entrance. The doors are battered again and again, splinters falling among the glass around me, and as the wood splits, an oppressive smoke pours into the Great Hall. I lift my arm before my face and peer past the smoke. Standing in the midst of the blackness is the figure of Callidus, a legion of shadows gathered behind him.

He does not look like the man I had seen before, for his illusion has completely fallen away, and I see before me a figure from another world, one without light, without life. Almost without form. A terrible nothingness. The smile on his face is trembling, drawn with his desire for power. I shrink from his rage, fearful of falling into the vacuous depths that surround him. He lifts his hand and makes a striking motion towards the Pyre. The doors buckle; I can hear the angry cry of a hinge. The stones beneath my knees tremble. The whole building is going to come apart. Callidus laughs, and the foundations of the Pyre shudder. It's insidious, how fear seeks to take hold inside me. I glance over my shoulder, scarcely able to find the others through the smoke.

Then I see Sperro. He's dragging himself into the Great Hall.

No matter the pain, I lift myself up and run to him, banishing all fear. I will not let Callidus harm Sperro. Falling again to my knees at his side, I pull him as best I can into my arms, shielding him with my own body.

"Sperro! It's too dangerous for you! Callidus is—"

"The Pyre will fall before him," he answers, his voice weak. "I have to __"

"No!"

"I'm so happy you will have the Pyre," Sperro gasps, his hand gripping my wrist. "I want you to have it. You must bring—" He fights for a breath. "You must bring the gardens back and raise your children in these halls."

"It belongs to no one but you," I answer fiercely, placing both my hands to the sides of his face, forcing him to look at me. "You must stay here! The Lights will aid us. The Pyre will stand, and I will stay as the Virtus Third, but you must regain your place."

I hear another crash and the sound of more glass breaking. Astrick is yelling against it with everything in him. I grip Sperro harder. "I must go and fight!"

But Sperro reaches again for my wrist, then tightens his grip. “You must read all the books, December.”

I can only give a muffled laugh from the madness of it all. The Pyre is going to split into ruin around us, and he’s concerned about his library. “You will read them for me,” I argue. “I can’t. I don’t wish to.”

“Yes, you can.” His hand surrounds mine. “I fully break with my associations of darkness. I want none of them. I remove my curse upon the Pyre. I hedge up the way of Callidus.” And before I can stop him, he mutters a string of other words—good words, beautiful words; words that rise above the impossible noise of destruction, words that are strong. He is sealing up the Pyre—giving back the lives he had taken from time, giving back years and heartbeats and reading—and it will take all the life left in his tired, broken body to do it.

I grip his shoulders, shaking him. “There must be another way.”

His eyes half close.

“Sperro!” I pull his body against mine, protecting him. “Sperro!”

Through all the battering and glass and fire, a sound rises up and fills the Great Hall. It roars. Its rush is mighty in my ears. For how long, I cannot tell. It feels endless. Then there is a shriek, and Callidus raises his voice against the Pyre one last time as all his fury is consumed, all his darkness banished from this world.

A current moves through the Pyre—a breeze that carries the scent of thawed earth, the sweetness of grass tumbled over by blossoms, the clarity of new, green leaves, making way for the taste of warm sunlight.

I feel Sperro taking one last breath, one final claim, then it is slowly released. His body ends its struggle in my arms, and he slips away from the life of this world.

An empty wail fills my mouth, and I try to call him back. “These are the prayers, Sperro! These are the prayers—” I press my face against his, clinging to his body, touching my lips to his mouth, shaking.

The master of the Pyre is dead, and I can feel no way to endure it.

XXIX

Thry is here.

I do not know how long this stillness has been over the Pyre, but Thry is here. He wraps me in his arms while I sob against his shoulder, spilling out a messy collection of words for my misery. He smells of the forest and of fire.

"Sylvain has gone, to send Hadspen for Father," Thry whispers, gripping me in his arms.

I nod, my face hidden against his shoulder. I want to thank him for staying with me, but I can't manage the words.

Thry knows, for he says, "I'm never leaving you again."

* * *

I am taken to the bell tower rooms. Miranda is here. She washes my body with water. She sings old, sweet songs. She weeps. I am sore and run through and separate from this world. I feel that part of me is lifted out of my bed, pressing against the glass, wishing to rise beyond and follow Sperro. Thry and Miranda are worried, and they ask Astrick to come. Then he is at my bedside, binding my heart to my body. My corporeal lightness changes, becomes anchored. I feel a greater steadiness and the beat of my own heart, but with it comes a profound grief.

* * *

I cannot claim that the stillness now settled over the Pyre is empty. It is not. It is so beautiful it hurts. Breathing it into my lungs is painful, and though I feel surrounded by the unseen—ministered to, mourned with, mourned for—there are hours where I cannot open my eyes for the unbearable sorrow.

Sperro's death had called forth a power so great that some of the broken towers had been lifted up and made whole. Yet others had remained tumbled, waiting for repair.

Many of the windows, too, had been bound up. The great tree above the courtyard was immediately restored, and the cuts on my arms and face from its glass healed as if they never were. But other windows had not been made whole. They'd been weaker, I've heard Astrick telling Thry, and their

reclamation impossible. They will have to be built again. And Astrick has promised they will be even stronger.

The state of the Pyre seems to be a symbol for all of us. While some immediate strength has been granted, other wounds are subject to healing over time: a combination of grace and understanding and mortal frailty.

The fire that consumed the forest had spared the trees even as it had burned away Meridaithe and Callidus and all who followed them. And after the fire died completely, the gardens of the Pyre were found to be in late-summer, the limbs of the orchard's trees hanging heavy with fruit, their leaves thick and sweet.

And flowers. There are flowers everywhere. Climbing around the windows are vines of clematis and rose. The beds about the gardens are filled with phlox, echinacea, and bronzed rudbeckia.

In the numb days following, I sit looking at the flowers for long stretches of time in the warm gardens, moving little, saying nothing. Being. Breathing.

* * *

We do not bury Sperro. We burn him.

We, the women of the Pyre—Miranda, Celia, and myself—wash his broken body and wrap him in his cloak of midnight blue and threaded stars. If Celia had been waiting for the gift of mortal tears, she does not spare their use. She washes his body, fighting her shuddering sobs, tears endlessly falling onto his pale skin. Miranda keeps clearing her throat, her eyes red, her hands refusing to cease the ordinance of preparing her master's body for purification.

When all else has been done, I wash Sperro's face, pushing his hair back from his forehead, and then wrap his cloak about him for the final time. Afterwards, I turn to Celia and let her cry against my chest, my own throat burning.

We take him to the roof. Sylvain insists on carrying Sperro's body himself, and the rest of us follow. Balint asks Astrick to offer a prayer. He does, with words as clear as light through a window. And then, one by one, the servants of Sperro Magna bid their farewells. I hang back until the last, and when all the others have said goodbye, it takes Thry's hand on my back before I dare step forward.

Would that I could speak, but there are no words. No words that I can say here, beside this funeral pyre. They had all been burned away in the sacrifice, both his and mine.

In the end, I take Miranda's small paring knife from my cloak, cutting a twist of my long, brown hair, and remove the ring from my finger, stringing them together with a simple, loose knot. Then I place it over Sperro's heart.

It is the ring that starts the fire, not the torches being held by Thry and Balint. And its flames are of a different substance than any we mortals can cause. The fire spreads, covering Sperro's body without consuming his form.

Once it has been burning for almost an hour, there is a mighty sound, and all is turned to ash.

* * *

One night, Ederra comes.

I dream that she is sitting beside me, running her fingers through my hair in a comforting way.

"How is he?" I ask.

"Oh, December." And she looks about her old room, not focusing on anything in particular. "He has much work yet for the legacy he left in your world."

"He did come back," I say, "to the Lights."

"He did." Ederra smiles. "Which is why the road is open before him. Do not worry," she says when she sees my face. "The Lights are ever present. Many have waited so long for him to come."

"Do you believe he will be able to find his way?"

"Yes," she answers. "For he finally trusts the Lights, and They are the way across the chasm."

"Will I ever see him again?"

"Not in this world. But he leaves to you the one gift he can offer. He said you would understand."

"Do you mean the Pyre?" I ask. But she has already gone.

When I wake the next morning, there, beside my pillow, is a perfect feather wrought of silver—the promise of happiness in all that is to come.

Epilogue

The first time my father sees me is hard for him. Although I haven't known exactly when he would come, a sense had been growing in me, an understanding of who is in the forest. And I wake one morning knowing it is the day he will arrive.

I hear the shouts of my brothers reuniting—they have never yet been apart so long—and I rush out the mended front doors of the Pyre, pausing atop the staircase. Father has just embraced Thry, and when he pulls back, he looks up the stairs at me.

There I stand, looking taller, no longer the girl who had been carried off by a Death Bleak, but rather someone grown, someone who has battled.

I have become a woman he does not know.

"You looked so very much like your mother," he tells me later, "standing on the threshold of your home, welcoming the guest."

"Never a guest, Father."

My father has aged. And his left hand has—as he phrases it—the talent of an unpromising apprentice. But he continues to teach his hand to paint and spends hours sitting about the Pyre, working on his craft. Whenever he grows tired, he wanders the halls and studies the great works of art that once again fill the Pyre's galleries. He also spends hours sitting beside me, at times asking questions, trying to comprehend what happened here. Of Sperro I speak haltingly, and he understands as best he can. It is not many weeks before he sends a letter north, to the Hills of Avaine, informing a cousin that he is to inherit the lordship of our faraway nation. My father will not leave his children, and he knows I will not leave the Pyre.

The future of the Pyre is slowly pulled together with what we have learned of its past: from records, from the remembrances of Miranda and Balint, of Celia, and of Sylvain. The Pyre will once again be a place of gathering, of knowledge, of strength. There will be room here to welcome the weary, the seekers, the creators, the rulers of nations. There will be a court and a council, and the restoration of the Pyre's place in the world of ideas and statesmanship.

Word begins to spread, a tale of a Virtus Third who has defeated the Death Bleak and is reclaiming the Pyre for that which it has been intended. The first time I hear of this, Thry has to hold me up, for the pain is as fresh as the forest is immense. For I want the nations to know how, in reality, Sperro Magna died on his way to redemption.

More merchants start coming through the forest. They travel the roads with greater confidence. Then artists, philosophers, and a few holy men and women send letters, gifts, and tokens. The first missives arrive from the lords of the great houses nearest the Forest of Naeethe: requesting audience or asking for the wisdom the Pyre used to offer, hundreds of years ago.

There are many discussions between us—Balint and Miranda, Celia, Sylvain, Astrick, my father and brothers—about how we will accomplish this great thing. These conversations stretch out the days and burn through the nights. And everyone looks to me—as Virtus Third, as the Lady of the Pyre—to know the ends of every question.

So I learn how to better hear the counsel of the Lights. And I continue trusting the wisdom of those who have gone on this journey with me. Finally, we draw up a simple plan to prepare for two years before formally opening the gates of the Pyre. Then, after a prayer to the Lights for guidance, we go to work.

Hadspen stays awhile but then grows restless. As fascinated as he is by the Pyre, his feet are full of wandering. He begins to head out towards the West and then goes to the ports of the East, returning with stories of what he has seen and the people he has met.

It soon becomes clear to everyone that Adele does not suit Hadspen's bright boldness, nor anything else about him. And each time he returns, they greet one another amicably, but it is Celia who sits for hours, listening to his adventures.

One day, Hadspen decides to sail across the Sandavee Sea, to Amperea. Celia goes with him.

Adele is a private girl with determination. She understands what those around her need and sees it done. Her loyalty is as strong as her brother's; and her beauty, equal to match. She gives to those around her, and views her care of them as sacred. Despite all this, adjusting to the Pyre has been difficult for her. She knows Astrick has work here he cannot bear to leave, but she often mentions their small home in the West Fell, covered in trumpet vines and grapes.

At breakfast one morning, when the loneliness shows clearly in Adele's face, Thry offers a suggestion. The meadow, not half a mile north of the Pyre, is filled with flowers and sweet grass and has two streams running through it. Thry explains that he and Astrick, with the help of Sylvain, can build a cottage there, where she and Astrick can live just as they had before. I'd never seen Adele's quiet, green eyes light up in such a way.

As the work commences, she toils alongside them, carrying stones from the river with Thry, ignoring Sylvain's complaints of having to build a second floor, and chiding Astrick whenever his artistic vision doesn't match her own. Seeing Astrick's scowl as he takes offense makes me smile.

But when the cottage is complete and the trumpet vines have been planted in the garden, Astrick keeps his room above the stables, and Thry—after asking Adele what she thinks of the binding ceremony—moves into the cottage with her.

Sylvain stays as the Steward of the forest for another year. But I often find him looking towards the West and speaking of the road his wife had taken three hundred years before.

"I've always wondered what she saw and what happened to the baby," he tells me one day. "What came of their lives?" He brings his hand to his beard and runs his fingers along it. "I've questioned myself often. Did I stay because of my stewardship…or my cowardice? I feel to remedy that now, my lady."

"You should go, Sylvain," I tell him. "And whenever you wish to return, you will have a home with us." I look wistfully towards the forest. "There was a life stripped from you that perhaps you will find on the road ahead."

"That seems the case for all of us," Sylvain answers. "Enough so that I no longer believe our lives aren't meant to be more of a circle rather than a line: the beginning and the end tied together in some cosmic way we can't understand."

Soon he takes his leave of the Pyre. In my mind, I walk with Sylvain through the forest, and, three days later, I can feel him come to its western edge. I can sense that he hesitates, then lifts his hand to a tree along the border, and then—with a deep breath—Sylvain steps out of the forest, following the same path as his wife.

Miranda and Balint begin to look older overnight. Their movements have slowed. Most days, Balint struggles to keep up with the horses and, as Miranda fusses in the kitchens, she often sits down for a rest. Astrick spends

many hours in their company, sharing stories of their common blood. They had been here to see Celia and Hadspen off. They had celebrated the marriage of Adele and Thry. Sylvain's satchels had been filled with food from Miranda's kitchen, and she and Balint had seen the woodsman to the gate of the Pyre for their farewells. I remember seeing Miranda walking slowly up to Balint as they watched Sylvain walk away from the Pyre. When Sylvain was out of sight, Miranda had looked at Balint, reached out, and taken his hand. It is Astrick who finds them both lying quietly on their bed, having passed away in their sleep.

* * *

During all this time, I haven't yet reentered the library. I haven't had the courage to open a single book. Sperro's sacrifice, his final gift, which had saved the Pyre and had unlocked words for me, is yet too raw.

Instead, Thry brings me books he's found in the library, reading them to me out loud in the orchard or the Mirror Gallery. We study the histories, the callings, the writings of learned men and women, the wars between the nations, and how peace was brokered. We seek for wisdom and find ourselves with a greater understanding of the generations of this world. Listening intently, thinking, reviewing the prayers of the Virtus Third, I am coming to understand what it is to be, this life yet before me.

Astrick pulls away from me. Or perhaps it is I who need the distance. We do not speak alone with one another in the weeks and months after Sperro's death. I think, perhaps, it is because both of us were pushed far beyond our native capacities, over an edge and into a foreign place, and we are not yet ready to speak of it. Nothing has been lost between us—we claim the singular tie of a journey no one else will quite understand—but weariness will carve its place, and grief is never cheated. And so we do not fuss over the silence. Astrick—ever enamored with his windows—gives himself to his work as I give myself to mine.

But I watch him in discussion with my father, one artist to another. Astrick stands with his shoulders back, his arms crossed, looking into the distance, intensity dancing in his green eyes. He asks my father questions and listens to the answers. They talk of color and form, composition and medium. My father throws his arm affectionately about Astrick's shoulders, and they laugh together over my father's efforts to paint.

When I see this, my heart claims a portion of the picture—Astrick, this Light Binder who makes my father laugh when I know he so desperately wishes he could weep for what he's lost. I believe it is Astrick who spurs my father to paint another sunrise; wild, bright, and strong. When the painting is finished, my father delivers it to my bell tower rooms. But Astrick does not come see where it has been hung.

Astrick leaves the Pyre twice. The first journey he travels to the West Fell, to inquire after those he knows who would wish to come work at the Pyre and restore it, in preparation for its reopening. He brings back men and women to run the kitchens and stables and help bring the Pyre back to life.

His second journey comes in the cold spring, when he travels east to inquire after materials he needs for the windows. He is gone for several weeks, and it startles me how wide his absence feels inside this building with hundreds upon hundreds of rooms. It startles me even more how wide his absence feels inside my own chest.

One afternoon, as I walk through the forest, spinning the stem of an early blooming wildflower between my fingers, I realize that, although the forest is again steeped in the turning of the seasons and the Pyre is filled with those I love—those whose blood beats according to time and pulse—Astrick is still the most vibrant, the most vital life in these surroundings. It is Astrick who gathers the light and memories around him in the most significant ways. He is as genuine in his grace as is the Pyre itself, and he is missed—by all of us.

On the night he returns, I am sitting on the front staircase, bound in my green cloak. He comes through the eastern arch on foot, leading two horses carrying supplies, his head bent in thought. When he looks up towards the Pyre, he slows, his eyes catching the light of that great window. The horses grow impatient before he does, and only after a nudge in his back does he drop his gaze.

Then his eyes find me sitting on the stairs, waiting. He seems surprised, shaking his head just so, a half a smile touching his lips.

"Are you waiting for me?"

I stand up, brushing my skirts as I nod down at him. "I knew you would be arriving at the Pyre tonight."

"You no doubt could feel my anxiety to be about those windows," Astrick replies, and this echo of a past conversation makes me smile. "How did you know I would arrive tonight?" he asks.

“The same way I know my cloak is green. Welcome home, Astrick. I have missed you.”

“And I you.” He hesitates before saying, “Are you—? How are you, Ember?”

The words wait between us.

“I’ve not been left alone.”

And I speak true. The Lights have not left me, making what had happened here more bearable, making the air I breathe clearer. And there is an undercurrent gifted me: the promise of happiness to come.

Astrick nods—in understanding, in camaraderie. “Yes. I’m glad for it.”

* * *

One day, in early summer, Thry and I are in the meadow. He’s reading an ancient volume concerning the laws of men, and I am pacing through the grass, repeating the words with him, we’ve studied them so often.

“And will you truly have the courage to tell this to the face of a king or a lord bent on war?” Thry asks. “A law most of them have forgotten or forsaken?”

I look back at him, lifting my hands to the top of my head, my face wrinkling in thought. “I’m not afraid of any kings, though, to be sure, one can’t escape the humor of me standing before any great rulers, advising them to do anything.”

Thry runs his fingers through his dark hair. “I don’t think you see yourself clearly, Ember. Not who you are now.”

“That’s not what Hadspen would have said,” I answer wryly.

“Hads can go bury himself.” Thry grins.

I laugh and drop my hands, reaching for a piece of meadow grass and looking about me. And then I remember it. I wake to the memory of—after having experienced Astrick’s remarkable healing, having understood space and time and order in a different way—I’d glimpsed what my life would become in this world, were it not to end with Sperro Magna. That there was a life before me, ordained, my path as a Virtus Third.

I lift my hand to my chest as this thought overpowers me—a quickening, an understanding. Looking about, the majesty where I stand is overwhelming. The joy—

“What is it, Ember?”

“I wanted this,” I whisper. “I mourned that this might not come. I wanted my work to be in *this* sphere, in *this* wild world.”

Thry doesn’t speak. But he looks down at the book before him, then back at me, and smiles.

* * *

Months later, as a full summer ends and the air twists into the crispness of fall, Astrick finds me while I am standing on the roof of the Pyre at sunset, throwing rocks into the forest. He walks to my side without saying a word, then bends down, reaching his hand into the bucket, and fishes out a smooth pebble. With ease, he stands up, leans back, and then throws the pebble far into the forest.

“I’ve finished my repair of all the broken windows of the Pyre,” he says to me. “And I’ve counted them.”

“How many are there?” I ask.

“Five thousand,” he answers.

“Five thousand?”

“Five thousand,” he repeats. “No more, no less.”

I glance towards the sun for a moment—burning itself low in the distance—before I look back at Astrick. “I think we’re going to need more candles.”

He smiles, and a dimple comes out on the side of his face like a wishing star at dusk. “We’ve not—well, we’ve gone about our work separately, you and I.”

“We have,” I answer.

“Thry tells me you are making progress in your studies. I’ve read some of the books, the ones that Thry thought I’d be interested in. Those on statecraft, on ancient laws and the works of the Lights among men, the histories of the other Virtus Thirds. I would have said something, but—”

I cross my arms in front of me. “He told me he’d given them to you. But with you being so busy yourself, I’ve—”

“Yes.” He lifts a shoulder and looks away. “We will talk, you and I, when—”

“We will,” I say.

He makes a sound of agreement.

The next day, my mind wanders towards Astrick and the coming sunset. Perhaps he will not be there again, but I go anyway. When I open the door to the roof, he is standing on a distant parapet, the renewed gardens of the Pyre's roof between us.

I walk towards him. When he hears my footsteps, he turns, then steps back down to the safety of the roof.

"I saw the window you installed on the third floor," I offer as greeting. "The one that looks like an orchard at harvest. It's one of my favorites that you've done."

He looks surprised that I've noticed it. "Thank you."

"The people who come here will marvel at your skill," I say.

"Will you?" Astrick asks, not looking at me.

I think back to Astrick's arrival at the Pyre and to the first time I saw his lanterns illuminated. I think of the night he taught me to make candles, remembering how his jacket had been thrown over my shoulders when I had fallen into much needed sleep. I think of his face when he had stood bound and beaten, but still determined. I remember the times I had cried and raged and broken, and he had set his jaw and had listened, then had spoken of courage. I think of the way he had held Sperro in the stables. Their private conversations that Astrick has honored. Everything Astrick has created is beautiful, yes, but it is really the power he has carried with him that I have marveled at, always extending beyond himself for whoever had needed it.

"I think it is you that most causes me to marvel," I finally say. "As remarkable as the first glimpse of your lanterns was, filling the Long Hall with the heavens we could not yet see, they were simply a reflection of who you were determined to be."

Astrick clears his throat, his green eyes looking past me. And I understand, watching as he squints, letting out a slow, careful breath.

"That's kind of you to say, Ember."

"Sometimes truth is kind," I answer softly.

And that night, alone in my bell tower suite, I find sleep does not come easy. Each time I open my eyes to the stillness, I wish him to be here, breathing quietly next to me, a finger's width away.

* * *

On the third night, I'm there waiting for him. The sun is all but gone when he appears. And it is a relief when he does.

"Hasn't it been an age," I ask, "since we had a habit of meeting here for every sunset? Huddling in our blankets to keep ourselves warm?"

"To keep ourselves sane," he answers. "Wondering if those days would ever end. Or if they would end us."

I laugh a full, unencumbered laugh. As I look towards the sky, I'm intoxicated by all of the colors, the beauty, and the wind pushing the clouds along, and the tall strength of the forest, extending for miles beneath it all.

Astrick stops a few feet away from me. "I almost don't believe it."

"What?" I look back at him.

His voice is thick as he says, "It's *very* good to see you, Ember."

The sound of this stings my eyes. "Have I been so very far away?"

When he gives no reply, I take a step towards him, reaching out my hand in a simple way that asks every question. Astrick's eyes trace my movements, and he steps closer, his fingers entwining with mine. And just as every time we have touched before, the strength of his pulse against my skin is more vibrant than anything else.

I look up, no longer surprised that it is always courage I search for in his face. It is there now. And as his eyes find mine, something inside me shifts. I suppose I could describe it as a homecoming.

We each hesitate but a moment. Then Astrick lifts a hand to the side of my neck as I tilt my face towards his and kiss him softly. He responds, lifting both of his hands to my face, prolonging the kiss.

When he pulls away, I open my eyes. I remember then to breathe. Only it is so human. And for this moment, I am not the Lady of the Pyre but a girl on the edge of her life, all possibilities before her.

As carefully as I am able, I lift my hand to his face, touching his skin with my fingertips. And then I wrap both of my arms around his neck as tightly as I can, my cheek pressed against his pulse. I want him to be a part of me. Astrick lifts me up until only my toes are still touching the stones of the Pyre, until his heartbeat reverberates through us both, his pulse beating true and alive.

With Astrick comes a sweetness, the beautiful taste of something good and tempered and proven. And it is his words that give me the courage to finally decide to enter the library.

* * *

I push open the library's doors and let myself in. The room is still—holiness abides here that is not quite found anywhere else in the Pyre. I walk forward slowly and sit down in my chair, looking about at the endless shelves and at the curtains now pulled open, letting in the sun. The hearth is empty, but it is not cold. Simply quiet. Simply waiting.

Sperro's chair is the true mark of his long absence, stirring the part of my heart that will ever hold him fast. Leaning back, I feel the cold trace of a tear down my cheek and onto my neck. I brush it away, but another comes.

When I am able, I open my eyes, moving my fingertips across my wet cheeks. Then I see something waiting on a side table near me, a small volume. It is rather worn and is bound in faded, red leather. I reach my hand towards it and pick it up, holding it between my two hands. It feels like an act of faith to open the cover. As I allow my eyes to focus on the words of the first page, the letters stay where they belong, crisp and clear. I catch my breath. Without struggle, I read the words,

"*There once was a witch king who fell into darkness, reclaimed for the Lights by a forest maid. This is their tale*."

I swallow, catching the emotion in my throat as more tears fill my eyes. Almost I close the book. Almost I set it aside. But just visible is a piece of paper pressed between the pages. Opening the book once again, I stare at a single line of text, written in a fine but tired script.

There once was a Death Bleak who fell into darkness, reclaimed for the Lights by a Virtus Third. This is their tale.

Sperro Magna

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* * *