



ALEXANDRIA WARWICK

THE
WEST
WIND

Obedience. Purity. Devotion.



THE WEST WIND

ALEXANDRIA WARWICK



ANDROMEDA
PRESS

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For the frightened and the fearless

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PART 1
THE PIOUS

CHAPTER 1

A man lies prone on the ground at my feet, and if I am not mistaken, he is dead.

Dead, or close to it. The skew of his limbs reminds me of a broken branch, the pieces scattered. His back is still. There is no rise and fall, no moving air within the lungs. A mess of gold-streaked hair clumps the curve of his skull, insects slithering among the tightly coiled curls.

Setting aside my basket of foraged pearl blossom, I step closer. A gust rattles the ancient wood where the mountain stands alone, its snow-capped peak thrusting through the canopy swamping the surrounding lowlands. Carterhaugh, this vast tract of moss and fern, is so dense that as soon as the wind dies, the world quiets. Sound does not travel far here. No birdsong. Not even screams.

I nudge the man's leg with the toe of my boot. No response. The man obviously strayed from the trail—his last mistake. If he is dead, the abbey must be informed. At the very least, he will receive a proper burial.

I kneel. The earth, moist and spongy from frequent rain, softens beneath my weight. After settling the skirt of my ankle-length dress around

my legs, I reach forward to check his pulse, yet hesitate. Right. I had nearly forgotten.

Quickly, I don my slim leather gloves, and only then do I allow that brief touch.

Warm. Even through the leather, the heat of his skin bleeds through.

With a great heave, I shove the man onto his back. A gasp slips free. I was mistaken. The man is not dead, but he does not appear particularly alive either.

I swallow down a surge of distress. Two blackened eyes bulge grotesquely above a horribly broken nose. Thin, chapped lips surround a glint of white teeth. Then there is his sun-kissed skin, barely discernible beneath the abrasions, the bruises edged in yellow-green. Dried blood clots his hairline.

As for his attire, it has seen better days. A heavy green cloak fans beneath the mud-spattered tunic. Trousers, torn at the knee, encase a pair of strong legs ending in battered, calf-high boots.

I perch on my heels with a frown. Smoke clings to my dress, reminding me of the blades awaiting completion in the forge.

“Judge what you know,” I murmur. “Not what you perceive.”

I do not know this man’s story. He could be a traveler. Maybe the darkness disoriented him and he lost his way to Thornbrook. Kilmany lies only ten miles southwest—half a day’s trek by wagon. But it appears as though someone dumped his body and left him for dead. Where does this man hail from? More importantly, who hurt him, and why?

A great resonance rings off the mountain peak. Seven tolls mark the sacred hour, and I am already late, having wandered too far to collect the medicinal herb.

Another glance at the man’s motionless form. My hands curl into fists atop my thighs. The echoes begin to die, rippling far and wide,

brushing the shivering leaves of this evergreen place. A shaft of brightest light arches westward. The day wanes.

Who can say whether this man encountered the fair folk? It is not uncommon to hear of mortals dragged beneath the earth, held captive by those who dwell within Under, a realm choked by rot and deceit. Mother Mabel insists our doors remain open for those in need, but there's a problem: he is a man. Thornbrook acts as a religious sanctuary for women great and small. As such, no man may enter the grounds. I cannot risk my safety, nor the safety of my peers, to help him.

After a time, I rise, belly cold with the understanding that my departure will leave this man alone, vulnerable. But it must be done.

Snatching my basket, I fly across the sloped earth, navigating the winding footpath leading back to the abbey. And there are the gates, the church spire, the moss-eaten walls.

Thornbrook is a climbing triumph of pale stone. Iron points jut upward like blackest teeth along the top of the wall, which encompasses the spreading grounds. According to the Text, the Father's most devout acolytes built this wall themselves, dragging the massive stone up the mountain, stacking it three stories high. Ferns cloak its base and crawl through cracks.

The gatehouse offers two methods of entry: a wide archway for carts and horses, and a narrow doorway for those traveling on foot. I wave to the porter, and she promptly lifts the gate.

The open-aired cloister comes into view as I dash across the grassy yard. Slipping through a side door, I hurry down the south passage, then turn left to enter the dormitory, climbing the staircase to the third floor. Once inside my bedroom, I exchange my gray, everyday dress for my alb—the long white robe worn during Mass—and the cincture, which wraps my thick waist. Those who have taken their Final Vows tie the slender white cord into three knots. My time, however, has not yet come.

Sweat layers my skin by the time I reach the church, where the doors stand open. The Daughters of Thornbrook have congregated, a sea of white interrupted by ruby stoles, the smallest cuts of red.

If the sanctuary is the head of the cruciform edifice, then the nave is the torso, the pews nestled inside its expansive belly. Two transepts act as the arms of the cross, protruding on either side of the sanctuary where the altar rests.

Before entering the worship space, I wash my hands in the lavabo sitting alongside the doorway. Once purified, I insert myself at the back, sliding into a pew next to a fellow novice. She does not acknowledge me. Her attention remains fixated on the altar, white marble shrouded in scarlet cloth. Three everlasting candles—Father, Son, and Holy Ghost—burn atop it.

Gold clarifies the church. Light from the setting sun casts the floor in jeweled tones—seven stained glass windows for seven days it took the Father to create the world.

At the front of the room, Mother Mabel climbs the steps to the chancel, where the choir sits. She continues to the presbytery—the walkway separating the chancel and sanctuary—before turning to face us, hands lifted, palms up. Directly behind the altar, a window of green glass pours verdant light onto the draped marble and its fixings.

As one, we bow our heads.

“Eternal Father, our hearts are open. Guide us in these coming months as we navigate the approaching tithes.” Palms pressed together, I lift my hands to my forehead, as does the rest of the congregation. “Sharpen our senses. Guard us from deception. Gift us clarity of mind. For You are the Kingdom, and the Power, and the Glory. Forever and ever. Amen.”

CHAPTER 2

Lifting my arm, I slam the hammer onto the smoldering metal. The discordant ring expands, then expires, crushed into silence beneath the sweltering heat of the forge. Another strike. Sparks flare and die in the shadowed interior, the close, hot air tasting of iron upon the tongue.

Blows shudder up my arm. Back and shoulders tighten against the rising sting of exertion, but this, too, is familiar, and I lean into the pain, allowing the intensity to ground me in creation. Each dagger is a beginning. Fresh, molten iron, shaped and cooled. This particular weapon, once complete, will be added to the rest awaiting transfer into Under.

Down falls the hammer. The work is never done. Sweat plasters long, red strands of hair to my neck and forehead. My skin flames the color of a tomato—an unfortunate side effect of freckled, milk-pale skin.

While I work, I think of that man lost in Carterhaugh, far from the trail. I think of the fair folk and their penchant for violence.

Dawn, noon, dusk, night. An entire day has passed since I first stumbled across the stranger in the woods. I told myself I would forget him, yet my thoughts reach for his battered face, the questions that plague me.

When the blade loses color, I return to the great slab of stone where

the fire burns, the brick wall charred at its back, and shove the blade among the smoking coals so the rapidly cooling metal absorbs the heat. I grasp the bellows surely. The contraption expands, drawing in air, and hisses as it punches outward, the coals flaring in response. A few more pumps brings the fire to life.

Hammer, reheat, hammer, reheat. The pattern will continue until the knife is properly profiled. Gripping the tang with my heavy tongs, I beat the metal against the face of the anvil. Again. And again. A chip flakes off the blade's edge, burning the front of my cowhide apron. After another hour of hammering, I achieve the desired profile, having shaped the bevels to completion.

I quench the knife in a bucket of water. A spitting hiss seethes the air as the iron hardens, its structure stabilizing. I then examine the blade from all angles. Its silvery sheen brightens like a star, and satisfaction warms me. These daggers will keep us safe during the tithe. Despite it being months away, preparations have already begun.

I let the knife cool on the table. When I refocus on my surroundings, I pause. Beyond the small, darkened doorway, night has fallen.

Dampness springs to my palms, though heat has nothing to do with it. Evening Mass finished an hour ago, but I often return to the forge afterward to work in the more favorable temperatures, with Mother Mabel's permission. It's silly. My lantern provides more than enough light. I tell myself it is enough.

I begin tidying up the forge for tomorrow's work. After untying my apron, I hang it on a hook near the doorway, then toss my leather toolbelt onto the table with a clatter. Lastly, extinguishing the fire. I stir the coals, watch the cooler air lick their searing edges until they begin to darken. Within minutes, the fire is out.

Once outside, I set my lantern on the ground and plant my feet. In the

shadow of the forge, I draw my dagger and begin to practice a short round of exercises prior to bed. My body moves with fluid grace. I stab and duck, striking high and driving low when necessary. Over the years, my knife fighting has improved. Although my old swordsmithing mentor taught me the basics, Mother Mabel demands I whet my skills as I would a blade. Not many know she is an accomplished swordswoman.

Only when I'm drenched in sweat, blood humming eagerly, do I sheath my dagger and return to the main complex. The bathing chamber is empty at this hour, allowing me the rare opportunity to bathe quietly, in peace, without any snide comments about how I take up too much room in the baths.

I soak in the tub, sloughing the soot and grit from my skin, before returning to the dormitory, wet hair plaited, cool cotton whispering against my skin. Both novitiates and acolytes sleep on the upper floors, though the novitiates occupy the third level while the acolytes utilize the second. The bell tolls the ninth hour as I reach my bedroom—curfew.

Like every dormitory in Thornbrook, mine is sparse. It contains a narrow cot, a trunk at its foot, a desk with a chair for studying, a dresser, and a window. Very few personal possessions. The Text lies open on my desk, along with my journal.

The plaster walls soak in the golden glow of the lamp I light. Most novitiates share a room, but because I'm the bladesmith, coming and going at odd hours, I sleep in the eastern tower at the end of the hall. My window offers a view of the highlands to the north, and the strait, a dark line ruffled by white waves twenty miles eastward, which separates Carterhaugh from a realm known as the Gray.

Text and journal in hand, I climb into bed.

Today was fine. No more difficult than yesterday, though the buzz beneath my skin peaked following lunch, when I realized I'd forgotten to

complete the reading for our afternoon astronomy lesson. Mother Mabel's disappointment had only exacerbated the issue.

Opening my journal, I turn to my most recent entry, an entire page inked with last night's musings.

I do not know where this man has come from, but I wonder.

I thumb the corner of the page pensively, then close the slim, leatherbound book, which I'd bound myself, soaking the animal skins in a mineral bath to strengthen the parchment. I've nothing more to add. The man remains a mystery. I think of him lying there, so still.

Setting aside my journal, I complete my nightly prayers, ending with a mumbled, "Amen." That leaves the Text. Seven sections comprise the complete liturgical literature of our teachings: the Book of Fate, the Book of Night, the Book of Grief, the Book of Truth, the Book of Origin, the Book of Change, the Book of Power.

Turning to the Book of Fate, I pick up where I left off yesterday. But the script may as well be freshly inked for how it blurs, my mind elsewhere. Blood pressure rises in me. I shut my eyes. The man's horribly disfigured face, stamped into my mind.

My nature is not impulsive in the slightest. I am not the river's current, cutting pathways into earth. I am the rock within the stream. My life has been built in painstaking years, my hands weary from the toil. Yet I think of this man. He is likely gone, dragged off by the beasts of Under, where only the truly insidious dare dwell. And yet—

And yet.

My eyes snap open. The dark cuts shapes into the ceiling.

Cursing my soft heart, I toss off the blankets and throw on my cloak. As long as I return before dawn, Mother Mabel will be none the wiser.

I move with haste, tucking myself into various crannies along the

pillar-lined cloister. By some miracle, I manage to navigate the corridors unseen, slipping wraith-like onto the outer grounds.

Night coats the cobblestoned courtyard and its ring of trees. The herbarium sits through an open gate to my left. Tucked inside is a small shed, whose door swings open on freshly oiled hinges to reveal pails, gardening tools, scrap metal, and a cart—to carry heavy burdens, to haul a man onto the sacred grounds.

It will not be possible to push the cart across the abbey without attracting attention. To muffle the creak of the wheels, I cover them with cloth, then toss a blanket into the back. Thankfully, I reach the gatehouse without incident.

Since Thornbrook hasn't the funds to hire a night watch, I lift the gate with painstaking slowness. The crank shrieks so loudly I'm certain the townsfolk of Kilmany hear it. I glance over my shoulder as a wave of cold pebbles my skin.

Nothing. No movement. Fear of discovery hastens me. As soon as the opening is large enough, I haul the cart through.

It's a slow journey through the dark. Moonlight brightens the earth's swells in silver and deepens the violet clumped in the hidden pockets between the tree roots. The cart bounces and clatters onward, four wheels rolling sloppily over the uneven terrain.

I tread cautiously, for the fair folk revel in their nightly schemes. At one point, one of the wheels gets caught in a rut. I shove it forward with a grunt, pushing upward until my thighs ache and the wheel pops free. Not much longer now. If memory serves me correctly, this is where I ventured off the path to collect pearl blossom.

And there lies the man.

He is exactly where I left him, spread-eagle in the dirt. It is strange. He seems to blend in with the fine-grained soil, the ferns curling over his

torso in a disconcerting impression of belonging. I'm relieved by the rise and fall of his chest. A small, yet noticeable, improvement.

After tugging on my gloves, I arrange his arms against his sides, legs pressed together. He's as tapered as a blade of grass. My waist is thrice the size of his, my arms broad, heavy with muscle from smithing. Thus, it takes little effort to lift him into the cart. I cover him with the blanket for warmth.

The return trip takes an age. With a misaligned wheel, the cart veers crookedly over the terrain. The burn of exertion migrates from my calves, hooking talons into my upper thighs, yet I push, up and up and up. The ground levels off, then climbs as the east lightens. Soon, color will run cracks through the world.

By the time I reach the crumbling abbey walls, sweat pools beneath my arms. With dawn near, it would be foolish to haul the cart back onto the grounds. I abandon it outside the entrance, heave the man across my shoulders, and enter Thornbrook via the gatehouse.

A worn footpath rounds the back of the forge where the smoky air lingers. After a few paces, I stop to adjust the man's weight. My ears strain for sound as I pass through the herbarium, skirting the raised beds of vegetables and medicinal herbs, moving through the gate that empties into a small courtyard near the kitchen. Pebbles crunch beneath my boots in the heavily shadowed enclosure.

Quickly, I pass into the cloister. Too open, too revealing. Sound drifts like a muffled fog through the pillars of stone. Who would be up this late? Curfew was over an hour ago.

I slow as I turn a corner. A dark, quiet passage, brightened by islands of flickering light. Moments later, a silhouette, tall and stately, materializes at the end of the hall.

My blood turns to ice.

Mother Mabel. I would recognize her rigid posture anywhere.

My upper back begins to twinge from the man's dead weight, yet I dare not stir. The distance is too great to determine if she looks this way, but something has caught her eye. As the twinge lights a brush fire across my lower back, I bite the inside of my cheek in silent combat of the pain, but a whimper slips out, cracking the silence of the warm evening.

Her head swings in my direction. Shadow engulfs her form save the sheen of her eyes, the glint of her gold, serpentine necklace.

“Mother Mabel,” someone calls.

She startles, whirls toward dark-eyed Fiona, one of the novitiates. “My dear. What are you doing up at this hour?” Together, they stride in the opposite direction, vanishing through the doors leading to the church.

Silent as the dead, I climb the narrow dormitory staircase. How readily the ancient stone holds its chill. I'm sweating by the time I reach my bedroom. The door opens soundlessly, then shuts, a muffled click of the engaged lock.

My knees immediately liquify, and the man slides face-down onto my cot seconds before I sink to the floor.

That was far too close.

To touch a man's flesh is a grave sin. To house a man, unchaperoned, in one's room? The thought of repercussions tightens my airway. Sin and scandal. We've all heard the gossip: women who had given themselves to faith, suddenly banished out into the cold, their vows broken.

No home.

No warmth.

No purpose.

No god.

But—the man.

Pushing to my feet, I turn to inspect my visitor by the glow of the

still-burning lamp. He looks dreadfully uncomfortable. A gentle shove sends him onto his back.

The rip in his tunic opens across a smooth, muscled chest, a light layer of brown hair darkening his pectoral muscles. I push the fabric aside, revealing yet more wounds. Bruises, punctures, abrasions. A beating? If so, this is not the work of the fair folk. Those who dwell in Under enjoy their pain. It is a game to them. The objective is never to end, but to prolong, always. Why snap when you can bend and tear and wrench?

I straighten the man's legs, which are so long they hang off the edge of my cot. Then I rummage through the chest at the foot of my bed, searching my few worldly possessions. For I once had another life prior to this one, long ago.

A small, woven basket holds a plethora of poultices and balms—my mother's. Unscrewing the top off a glass bottle, I pour a small amount of ointment into my palm, the leather coated in a high shine. Its mordant scent smooths into a pleasant aroma.

I begin with the worst of the bruising—the underside of his jaw. Then the abrasions. Then the small punctures, partially healed, clotted in old blood.

The white paste pales his golden skin. As the swelling on the man's face begins to recede, I pluck leaves and twigs from his hair, brush the curls from his face. Thick, curling lashes rest upon lightly freckled cheekbones. The color of his eyes remains hidden from me.

And then, inevitably, the tolling of the bell: dawn.

Followed by a knock at the door.

CHAPTER 3

The doorknob rattles. “Brielle.” A barked command.

My pulse scatters, and I leap halfway across the room before remembering the door is securely fastened.

“Mother Mabel wants to speak with you.” Another rattle. The doorframe groans in protest. “Why is the door locked?”

Blood throbs in my ears, the dull pulsation of a heartbeat beneath water. It branches down my limbs in a paralyzing cold. Two, three, four heartbeats later, I’m still rooted.

All Daughters of Thornbrook receive keys to our bedrooms when admitted as novitiates, though most rarely utilize them. Only twice in ten years have I used mine. This is the second occurrence.

My mouth twitches. I look to the door, the bed, the window. Footsteps echo through the corridors as everyone heads to the church.

“I’m changing,” I croak.

A scoff through the door. “I suppose you *would* need a locked door for that. Kind of you to consider others.”

The insult is but a distant nuisance. What am I supposed to do with the man on my bed? And why have I been summoned prior to service?

Unless I was mistaken and Mother Mabel spotted me last night in the cloister. She must know I brought a man inside Thornbrook's walls.

My hands shake as I peel the sweaty cotton from my body and don a clean dress, fumbling with the buttons stamped down the front. Through my window, the sleeping world has paled to violet, and gold rims the curve of the earth.

“While I'm still young.”

The flinch hits me from within. She cannot hurt me if I keep it hidden. As for my unexpected guest, I toss a blanket over him—the best I can do at the moment. Whatever follows, I leave it in the Father's hands.

I unlock the door to reveal a small-boned woman dressed in the same gray, long-sleeved dress, a clean alb tossed over one arm. Her name is Harper, and she is a woman of three temperaments: cross, irate, and hellish.

The first two, she reserves for her closest friend, Isobel.

The last, she reserves only for me.

Her upper lip curls. “You look like a cow.”

“At least I don't have the brains of one.”

Harper blinks at the unexpected rebuttal. “Excuse me?” She draws herself higher, though the top of her head barely reaches my nose.

It takes a heroic effort not to give ground. My sweaty palm slides against the doorknob. I've been waiting to use that retort. I'm surprised I was able to voice it without vomiting.

Before Harper can peer into my room, I grab my robe from its hook, snap the door shut, and lock it.

Two eyes the color of lake water narrow at the sight. “Something to hide?” she murmurs, blocking my way forward. Her long, shining black hair is secured in a plait down her back.

It takes three attempts before the words emerge without quavering. “I have the right to my own privacy,” I mutter. “Please excuse me.”

She doesn't move.

I glance around the corridor. Pools of light break the darkness into pieces. The novitiates have gone, and we stand alone.

“Did Mother Mabel request my presence or not?” If so, then I must not delay. Tardiness would be grounds for additional punishment.

Harper's mouth curls in a half-smile. “You are a mindless dog, Brielle. It is not becoming of you.”

Shame flushes my pale skin. Then this is merely a visit to antagonize me.

I stand there, quietly seething, until Harper flounces down the hall. With her disappearance, my heart slows its pace. The bell clangs thrice: once for the Father, once for the Son, once for the Holy Ghost. And I am officially late for service.

THORNBROOK IS A vast complex anchored by a cloister encompassing a grassy quadrangle, each open-aired passage facing one of the four cardinal directions. History deigns the cloister is protection and separation. Beyond its arched magnificence lies the outside world. Meanwhile, the Father resides within.

The church, the largest of the buildings, sits north of the cloister—the heartbeat of a devout life. Tucked against the cloister's eastern edge is the dormitory, with the lavatory and bathhouse attached to the end of the oblong edifice. The refectory sits south of the cloister. After the church, it is the largest structure within the complex. It is here the Daughters of Thornbrook gather for meals.

Following Mass, we head for breakfast. The tower bell peals,

marking the seventh hour, the cloister aflood with girls as young as ten, all the way to middle-aged women.

The cool darkness of the refectory welcomes me as I sidle through the entrance behind my peers. A small atrium flows into a second set of double doors. Another lavabo sits outside the doorway, which I use to wash my hands. The wide stone basin catches the water poured from the ewer.

Simple wooden tables and long benches line the stone hall, enough to comfortably seat one hundred daily. Open-aired windows line the eastern wall, welcoming the heavy, loam-scented breeze. The kitchen sits through a door to my right.

The hall is so quiet nothing exists beyond the padding of slippers feet. Grabbing a bowl, I plop a spoonful of porridge from the pot. My stomach cramps unpleasantly. Most mornings I'm not hungry, but I force myself to eat, knowing the next meal won't be until noon, after an entire morning of hard labor.

Meals are a simple affair. There is always bread, always wine, always vegetables and fruits, rarely meat, and only if one is sick. Since I know better than to drink the water—who knows whether the fair folk have tampered with it—I pour a cup of wine from the barrel, then choose an empty table near the back and wait. Moments later, the doors open. I snap to attention, as do the rest of my peers.

She arrives draped in heavy folds of white. A gold stole warms her shoulders and hangs in equal lengths down her chest, the tasseled ends hitting mid-thigh, the trinity knot embroidered at both ends. Acolytes wear the diaconal red stole to represent service. The gold stole, however, represents authority of the faith.

Mother Mabel is an ancient woman, though she appears no older than middle-aged. No lines carve her face. Nothing droops below the chin. She stands as the tallest of pines, unburdened by snow. A thin, hawkish

mien surveys the room as she glides toward her seating area: a single chair and table placed atop a dais. Only the Abbess eats at such an elevated station, a symbol of her nearness to the Father.

Stepping atop the platform, she regards the room, her white-blond hair pulled into a bun. Breakfast cannot begin until everyone is accounted for. Snapping black eyes sit beneath pale, slashing eyebrows. Many claim her eyes used to be blue.

According to some of the older acolytes, Mother Mabel was stolen away into Under decades prior, yet somehow managed to escape. No one knows what occurred during her time there. She returned to Carterhaugh with an undying appearance—the mark of everlasting life.

“Please stand for the morning prayer.” Her command rings with authority.

Benches scrape as the women push to their feet. Heads bowed, hands clasped at our fronts, we speak as one.

“Eternal Father, bless this food to nourish our bodies. Grant us strength in spirit. Through you, our hearts are open.”

I lift my head. Mother Mabel’s gaze captures mine, its intensity burrowing straight through my spine.

With a softly uttered, “Amen,” I drop onto the bench, weak in the knees. Does she know of my disobedience? The man in my bed? It is too early to say. I lower my eyes and focus on eating, the spoon scraping the bottom of my clay bowl. Eventually, her attention moves elsewhere, and I’m able to breathe freely.

At the table diagonal to me, raven-haired Harper settles next to pug-nosed Isobel, their expressions seared into my innermost thoughts. Cruelty, every shade of it.

Of course, no reign would be complete without a band of slaving followers. The number fluctuates between two and five daily. Today, three

novitiates have joined Harper and Isobel, thrilled to finally be included in their circle. It pains me to know I had once desired to sit in their place.

Breakfast ends just as it begins: in silence. Everyone carries their dishware to the kitchen before heading off to complete morning chores.

The abbey itself encompasses fourteen acres within its fortified wall. In addition to the main complex, there is a herbarium, as well as stables, storehouses, the winery, and the forge. The remaining grounds contain plenty of benches and shade trees for prayer or meditation. Beyond the wall, trails lead to the vineyards and fields. Like all abbeys, Thornbrook is self-sustaining. There is always something to be done.

Currently, I'm assigned to harvest barley. As our most abundant crop, the golden stalks sprout in two of our three fields, with the third plot used for wheat. A neighboring tract of land serves as our vineyards.

We congregate at the garden shed, gathering extra buckets for the barley, the excess of which will be set aside for offerings. On the eve of the tithe, when another seven-year cycle comes to a close, we will place milk and barley on the sills of our open windows, the thresholds of our doorways. Through this, the Father's spirit is nourished, strengthened. A shield against the fair folk on the night when the veil between realms grows thin.

One woman grabs the twine. Another selects the sickles, snatching the tools before someone else can claim them and hurrying toward the golden fields in the distance. Two more swipe the pails. A separate group departs to pick grapes, wooden buckets in hand. What remains? The heavy cart.

I am built for such labor, I suppose.

The wheels clatter over the trail, and I'm relieved to have had the foresight to return the cart to its proper place late last night. A sweet-smelling wind grazes the bottle-brush stalks in ebbing waves. At the base of

the nearest hill, I abandon the cart to join my fellow novitiates in the harvest.

I cut barley until sweat drenches my clothes, hacking the stalks with seamless swipes, back bent, neck cringing in the sun. Again and again, my thoughts drift toward my unconscious visitor. Each time, I recenter my focus. At noon, we break for lunch and individual prayer, then return to harvesting, tying the barley into bundles for drying until the bell tolls the third hour.

Lessons occur for two hours daily, except on the Holy Day. Reading, writing, astronomy, arithmetic, geometry. I've enough time to wipe my crevices clean within the privacy of the bathhouse before hurrying toward the library. After lessons, a thorough wash, then dinner, followed by an hour of service. As I trail the women slogging up the dormitory stairs, the wall sconces flicker, though the inner passageways contain no windows to provide a breeze. I'm halfway down the hall when I spot Harper hovering in her doorway, regarding me with suspicion.

The pit in my stomach pinches uncomfortably. Behind those frigid eyes, I can almost see her thoughts churning, slotting into place like a metal trap. Harper is cunning. She understands the subtleties of human behavior.

My gaze drops, and I shuffle toward my bedroom. Harper's attention trails me until I'm locked safely inside.

Moonlight's milky smoothness slides over the vague, blanketed form lying on the cot. My pulse stirs at the sight. The man hasn't moved since this morning. That worries me. Is it possible he received trauma to the head I overlooked? What if the issue runs deeper, an illness of the blood, the marrow in his bones? I cannot risk bringing him to the attention of Thornbrook's in-house physician. The question remains. What am I to do with a man who will not wake?

After slipping on my gloves, I move to his bedside and remove the

blanket, prodding the base of his skull beneath the gold-tipped curls. No evident swelling. Good. I peer closer into the man's purpled face. At least his breathing has evened into a slow, peaceful status.

“Who are you?” I whisper. “Where do you come from?”

The man does not answer.

CHAPTER 4

Ten miles southwest of Thornbrook lies Kilmany, a collection of mud-brick homes tucked in a shallow valley where the River Mur and River Twee converge. As with all towns in Carterhaugh, it is surrounded by a stone wall spiked with iron teeth. Kilmany boasts some of the older beliefs in combating the fair folk, so a thick layer of salt rings the wall as an additional layer of protection.

We're stopped at the gates prior to entering the town. Our chestnut mare paws the dirt as the gatekeeper searches the wagon, the boxes of wares. Ten novitiates wait beside Mother Mabel, myself included.

The man lifts a hand. "Clear."

Fiona draws the mare forward by the reins. The wheels grind and the cart lurches forward. Aligned in single file, we trudge down the wide dirt lane. Every tree has been cleared, every blade of grass crushed underfoot, Kilmany a dark scar in the center of green-flushed Carterhaugh.

The air smells of smelted metal, and the sun peels away from the mountain's crown to flood the valley in mid-morning light. Market Day—the first of the month. Although Thornbrook is self-sufficient, we sell much

of what we produce—herbs, wine, fresh bread—to supplement the resources provided to the surrounding community.

Chaos overwhelms the main thoroughfare. Cart wheels dig trenches in the mud. Half-dressed children, all knees and elbows, dart beneath horses, dirt flinging from their bare feet. Tables, stalls, and storefronts clutter the road, merchants swinging their wares, artisans belting out prices as if they're moments away from going out of business. The forge where I apprenticed for three years belches smoke from the next lane over. In the distance, the white spire of a cathedral interrupts Kilmany's earthen tones.

"You know the drill, ladies." Mother Mabel gestures to an empty lot squeezed between two storefronts, where we unhitch the wagon. "I will return shortly with sweets. Any requests?"

Harper pushes to the front of the group. "Sugar cookies, if you please." She scans the group expectantly, as if anticipating a challenge. A few women drop their eyes to the ground.

Mother Mabel nods, somewhat distracted. As soon as her attention moves elsewhere, Harper's expression presses into disappointment. "I will see if they're available. Anyone else? Brielle?"

Though I'm partial to the raspberry tarts, I should focus on selling my knives. "No, thank you."

"Very well. Fiona, if you will?" She gestures to the fair-skinned youth, and off they go to the bakery.

Harper's eyes narrow on Fiona's back. The loathing there needles my spine, for I have seen that expression directed at me before.

The novitiates talk. They claim Fiona will be next in line to undertake the calling of a vowed life. I sincerely hope otherwise. Ten years I have studied and prayed, all to one day accept my appointment as an acolyte—a shepherd of the Father. Does Mother Mabel not see? It must be me. It *must*.

My back twinges as I haul the crate of knives from the wagon to my table. As of this morning, three days have passed since I stowed the man in my room. He lies unconscious in my bed, state unchanged, forcing me to sleep on the floor nightly. At this point, I have run out of options.

Prying open the lid, I remove a bolt of white fabric and begin to unfold it.

“Give that to me.”

I glance up. Isobel looms over my table, her hand outstretched.

The cotton crinkles in my fist, and I frown. “I need it for my knives.” A snowy backdrop for the iron blades.

“And we need it for the wine.” Harper appears at Isobel’s side. Both wear their trinity knot pendants, the overlapping corners of three—Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Mine rests beneath the collar of my dress. We must never take them off.

“You already have a tablecloth,” I say. Two, in fact.

Isobel grins rapaciously. Her teeth gleam like rows of pearls against her dark skin. “We want this one.” Striding forward, she snatches the fabric from my hand, pivoting so fast the cotton whips my legs and her numerous coiled braids nearly whack my cheek. Together, she and Harper drape it over the table they’ll oversee selling jugs of wine.

Me? I’m left with a scarred, makeshift slab of wood. My chest tightens in a feeling I know well. Despite doing my best to push out the anxious intrusion, it manages to infiltrate, slipping through cracks and corners I failed to reinforce. How easily they rile me. Today of all days, I seek clarity. Without a clear mind, I cannot safely move forward in handling my predicament, the unwanted guest in my room.

Deep breath. Like water sluicing down skin, my thoughts roll free, until my heart no longer carries those weights.

It’s fine. I don’t need a tablecloth. The knives are beautiful enough to

stand on their own.

Business is steady throughout the morning. The air warms as the sun climbs, and my skin grows sticky in the heat. Mother Mabel returns with a bag of cookies. I sell four daggers and two kitchen knives before noon. All in all, a good day.

Early afternoon, and the crowds begin to thin. A cloaked figure strolls our way, parting the lingering chaos like a river cutting through limestone.

My gaze tracks the limber motion. The air pinches my skin, and I straighten, a hand drifting to the iron dagger hanging from my waist, its weathered, hand-stitched sheath. The hair along my body stands on end.

Beneath the raised hood, two dark, round eyes swallow the majority of the woman's pointed features. They possess neither pupils, nor irises, nor the surrounding white. They sit dull as rocks, as though someone plucked out her eyes and shoved smooth black stones into the sagging hollows instead.

My breath comes short, muscles contracting as the distance ebbs, ten strides, seven, three. Fair folk. How did this woman manage to slip through the iron gates?

The woman stops at my table. Harper, Isobel, and the rest of the novitiates watch the scene unfold, hands tense, lips thin.

I fight for breath. "H-hello." Where is Mother Mabel?

Fiona darts off, hopefully to find the Abbess and bring her back, or at least alert the authorities. I'm afraid of what will happen if I move too suddenly.

The woman tilts angles toward me, ashen skin agleam in the midday sun. She is small, her body underdeveloped, bony beneath the long, sheepskin cloak. Reaching a hand into her pocket, she removes a string of

raw, graying meat, then proceeds to swallow it whole while perusing the display of weapons.

“I do not see a stamp.” Those stony eyes lift to mine, utterly blank. “Are you the bladesmith?” Her papery lips peel apart over oozing gums, voice low and raspy.

My stomach turns. “They were forged in Thornbrook,” I whisper weakly, feebly. I should be shouting. I should scream, unhinged, until attention is drawn, the guards descending. But I am small, and grow smaller in the passing moments, cringing from the unsightly, twisted creature that crawled out from Under. Seeing this woman, it is hard to believe the fair folk once shared Carterhaugh with us mortals, long ago.

“By your hand?” By now, the majority of the market has cleared, awareness of Kilmany’s undesired visitor having spread.

Indeed, I coaxed the fire to life, commanded the hammer, but the blade bears no signature identifying the maker. I’ve never had the courage to create a touchstone stamp of my own.

She purses her heavily lined mouth. Beneath the cowl of her hood, shadows swirl, even in brightest sunlight. “I am in the market for a blade. One can never underestimate the allure of the tithe. I’m sure you understand.”

My palms dampen, the leather-wrapped hilt fusing to my skin. She dares speak of the tithe? Here? I do not understand its allure. It is a necessary evil if Thornbrook is to maintain access to its lands.

“May I?” She gestures to one of the blades encased in its protective sheath, and I nod, watching her slide the weapon free of its casing, fitting the hilt to her palm.

“Ah!” A bark of pain, and the knife slips through her grotesquely elongated fingers. Metal clatters. I recoil from the sound.

The woman whimpers, clutching her hand to her chest, teeth gritted.

Horror bleeds like a killing cold through me. “I’m so sorry.” I glance around in a panic. Harper hunches behind Isobel, who clings to another novice as the group cowers behind the wagon. Mother Mabel is nowhere in sight. “Please, I can get you help. A healer—”

“It’s not your fault.” Her hand unfolds, revealing large white growths swelling atop her streaked gray skin. “A mortal-forged blade would contain iron.” She closes her wounded hand, smiling tightly, and slips it into her pocket. “I should have known better.”

“You should not be here.”

Mother Mabel steps in front of the woman, chin erect, dark eyes ablaze with the fury of a thousand suns. She presses forward, forcing the visitor into the center of the lane. The silk stole drapes her shoulders in gold threads, and a sudden wind stirs the folds of her alb around her legs.

“I will give you the opportunity to leave Kilmany freely,” the Abbess continues. “Otherwise, I will call the sheriff, and he will not be so merciful. Choose wisely.”

The woman looks to me. I flinch, yet hold my ground. Fear, or do I only imagine the emotion crossing her expression? Pulling her cloak tightly around her body, she hurries off, glancing over her shoulder once before slipping down an alley.

Mother Mabel turns to me, her mouth pinched with suppressed rage. “She did not harm you, did she?”

“No, Mother Mabel.” My voice wobbles. It must be shock, for my limbs buzz with a numbing cold.

Relief softens her face, eases those lines of worry. “Good.” She scans the general vicinity. “I do not know how that creature was able to enter Kilmany, but if one managed to slip through the gates, there might be more. It is best if we return to Thornbrook immediately.”

WE HAVE BARELY unloaded the wagon before I'm hurrying to the dormitory, taking the stairs two at a time. I've ten minutes before the dinner bell rings.

My boots slap the icy flagstones. The wall sconces dance, teased by the moving air snaking through the vacant hall. I've nearly reached my bedroom when a shape snags the edge of my vision, and I falter.

Harper stands in a shadowed alcove, watching me.

The surge of fear is so overpowering I momentarily cease to breathe. Flames ignite the cerulean rings around her blown pupils. They smolder with undeniable voracity.

How did she arrive here before me? When I left the courtyard, she and Isobel were deep in discussion, likely plotting how best to humiliate me, and at the soonest hour possible.

"Are you following me?" I ask, chin lifted despite my thundering heart.

Harper slinks into the light, no better than a fox in the brush. "What are you hiding, Brielle? What is it you wish to keep hidden from prying eyes?"

She suspects, but she does not know. It makes no difference. My door is locked. Only Mother Mabel and I have a key.

"I'm going to change for dinner," I state with impressive calm.

She cuts into my path, blocking my way forward. "Do you think I'm blind? Oh, the others are oblivious, to be certain. You are perfect Brielle who can do no wrong. But I see beyond that." One step closer and we stand nose to nose. She is so slight in comparison, absolutely overwhelmed by my curves. "I see the truth."

I'm shaking. The fury and the fear. How easily she digs beneath my skin. "I do not answer to you."

"No, you don't." Looking over my shoulder, she croons, "Good evening, Mother Mabel."

Unsurprisingly, she attempts to frighten me into revealing my hand. I do not fall for the ploy.

“Good evening, Harper.”

My heart skips a beat. Harper’s smile reveals bone-white teeth.

Slowly, I pivot to face Mother Mabel. Hands clasped at her front, she strides forward, boots scuffing the ground. That heavy gold necklace hangs like a yoke around her neck. “You claimed the matter was urgent, Harper,” she intones with dispassion. “Well? What is so urgent that you would have me delay supper?”

Harper’s mouth pulls, sharpening the severe peaks of her upper lip, but even the mild-mannered response will not soften the asp tongue.

“I’m afraid one of our own has made a grievous error.” She gestures to me. “It is my belief Brielle has brought an outsider into the abbey.”

I cannot speak. If I open my mouth, I fear vomit will emerge instead.

Mother Mabel’s nostrils flare delicately. The edges of her face grow pointed with displeasure. “That is a harsh accusation. Do you have evidence to support this?”

“I do,” she replies, head bowed, the image of pious humility. “I’d hoped it was untrue, but I heard something yesterday. A man’s voice.” She swallows. “*Groaning.*”

No matter how I fight the blush, it rages red across my cheeks. Impossible. Unless... did the man awaken at last?

“Brielle,” Mother Mabel says, her black gaze drilling into mine. “Is this true?”

I think of our Seven Decrees—the bedrock of our faith. The seventh, the most potent.

Thou shalt not lie.

No. It emerges as deception from the murk, spotted and malformed.

But I cannot utter the word. Even if I manage to convince Mother Mabel that I speak truthfully, the Father will know of my deceit.

I made my choice days prior. I chose this man's life over Thornbrook's safety. I hadn't thought of what perils I might invite. I'd thought only of the unanswered questions, the desire to know, and above all, helping a person in need.

"Well, my dear?" The Abbess stares at me, waiting.

My leaden legs shamble toward the door, which I unlock before stepping aside.

Mother Mabel crosses the threshold. Harper shoots me a nasty grin, and her lovely features twist unattractively. I stare stone-faced back at her, wondering why my existence offends her so.

After a moment, Mother Mabel calls, "Harper, can you help me with something?"

She saunters forward. "Yes, Mother Mabel." Shadow stretches wall to wall, thick enough to taste its chill.

"Can you please point out this unaccounted visitor?"

I fist the fabric of my dress in my clammy palms. The consequences will be severe. It is entirely possible I will be banished from Thornbrook. That is a decision I must live with, and yet, an overwhelming dread depletes my lungs, for I was trying to *save* this man, who means nothing to me.

It isn't fair. Have I doomed my life?

"Someone was here, Mother Mabel. I am certain."

"Then where is this person now?"

My heart lifts with tentative hope as I enter behind them, my gaze immediately snagging on the bed where the man had lain this morning. But the cot is empty. The rumpled blankets have been smoothed. The spots of blood staining the floor have been scrubbed clean. It takes every effort not to gape in bewilderment.

My attention cuts to the window. Torchlight from the corridor floods the room's interior. Closed shutters, latch secured. The door to my room was locked as well. How, then, did the man manage to escape without notice?

“I heard someone, Mother Mabel, I *swear* it.” Her breath hisses in frustration. That blue gaze scours the room, no nook or crevice overlooked. She swallows, shakes her head. “Brielle was acting odd. I knew something was amiss—”

Mother Mabel turns, straightening to her impressive height. “The next time you decide to waste my time with petty games, you will know the sting of the lash. Am I clear?”

Harper's dumbfounded silence is perhaps the most beautiful thing I have ever experienced.

“You will have latrine duty for a week. Think deeply on your actions and whether your values align with those of Thornbrook.” With that, she takes her leave, heels clicking down the corridor.

Quiet bleeds out. Harper's stillness pricks at me, yet I remain motionless, a hind caught in an open field.

Slowly, I begin to retreat into the hall.

Harper snags my arm, fingernails gouging so deeply into skin I'm surprised she does not draw blood. “I don't know what you're hiding,” she snarls, teeth bared, “but I'm going to find out.” Before I can shake her off, she storms from my room, slamming the door behind her.

Silence hits like a hailstorm.

My hands tremble as I light the desk lamp. Then I sink onto the lip of my mattress, the bed frame groaning beneath my weight. I do not understand. A man cannot walk through walls. A man cannot lock a window or door from the outside. Neither can a man vanish into thin air.

Though the bloodstains may be cleansed, my pillow bears the

imprint of his head, and a springtime aroma saturates the room. It wasn't a dream. But the man, whoever he was, is gone.

“Well, that was quite the scene.”

I whirl. The knife hanging from my waist frees its sheath. Mind and body detach, and there is only this: defense.

The dagger point rests level with the man's sternum. He slouches next to the now-open window, a shoulder propped against the wall, completely unperturbed.

A pair of clover eyes takes me in.

We stare at each other, neither moving. Red-edged panic recedes from my vision, and my pulse eventually returns to rest. It is the man from Carterhaugh. Strange, indeed, but not a stranger.

What a difference clean attire makes. The green tunic hits mid-thigh atop a pair of form-fitting trousers tucked into boots of dark, supple leather. His shoulders are broad, though his physique, as a whole, is on the leaner side. We are of similar height.

Somehow, he managed to procure a set of clean clothes on his own. He does not wear his cloak, I notice. My fingers twitch around the knife, yet hold steady.

“Do you agree?” the man asks, canting his head. An errant curl, tipped in gold, falls across his forehead.

I blink. “Excuse me?”

“Quite the scene, wouldn't you say?”

My mind drags ten paces behind. Like a proper fool, I gape. Perhaps, if his countenance were not so distracting, I could focus on the conversation rather than his appearance. I assumed the reduced swelling would reveal a more pleasing manner. This, however, is not the case.

There is no natural flow to his features. The nose resembles a lumpy growth. His skin—abraded, blotchy—stretches in uneven patches across a

weak chin and even weaker jaw. Only his eyes are striking, slightly translucent in color.

I'm not one to talk. It's unlikely this man finds me desirable, though a certain curiosity darkens his gaze as he scans me from head to toe.

The tip of his tongue slicks across his teeth—straight, white, dazzling. “Is it you I have to thank for my swift recovery?” he asks in a low, musical tone.

The weightless timbre of his voice might be content to drift until the end of time. It is too pretty for his mien. “It is,” I reply.

“Then I thank you.” He dips his chin. “It is a kindness I must repay.”

After some consideration, I remove the dagger from his chest. I sense no ill-will from him. “No repayment necessary, but in the future, I would think twice before startling a woman in her bedroom. I could have hurt you beyond repair.”

“I do not think that is likely,” he says, eyes bright with amusement, “but I appreciate the forewarning.”

My mouth twitches in irritation. If he thinks it unlikely, then I will not prove otherwise.

“I am in your debt.”

I retreat toward my cot to put additional space between us. Somehow, he must have entered through the window. But if the shutters were locked, how could he have gained access from the outside, and on the third story no less? “As I said, repayment is unnecessary. You were hurt. Of course I would help.”

“So you claim.” I cannot read the intention behind his response.

The intensity of his focus forces my attention back to the window. Darkness lies thickly over Carterhaugh. It is not my business, the why or how or what of his predicament.

“You are curious.” He lifts a hand, studies it front to back, before

sliding it into his pocket. Without moving from his recline, he takes up space, he steals the air. “I can sense your desire to ask. What is it you wish to know?”

My eyes drop. I take a breath, then another for good measure.

“I am curious as to what manner of creature gave you those wounds.” Peeking through my eyelashes, I catch an emotion too fleeting to read tightening his facial muscles. Doubt maybe, or pain.

One heartbeat passes into two. Eventually, he responds, “The manner of creature would be my brother, unfortunately.” A shrug. “What’s done is done. I insist on repaying the kindness.”

His continued insistence begins to grate. I said it was unnecessary. Why does he not hear me? “It was nothing.”

“A life is not nothing.” The claim falls like a slap. “Isn’t that what your teachings preach?” He gestures to the contents of my desk. Namely, the heavy tome that is the Text.

“You keep the faith?” Intrigue colors my inquiry.

He pushes off the wall, and I am taken aback twice in the span of a few minutes. A dance. It is the only way to describe his gait. A seamless pouring of his limbs, nothing but ebb and flow.

“You could say I was once quite devoted to faith. Now I am merely faithless.”

The bell tower tolls the sixth hour, signaling dinner. At the man’s approach, I retreat further, lifting my dagger in warning. Was I too naive in thinking him harmless? I stand alone with a man in my room. He studies my weapon, yet does not come within striking distance. Perhaps he recognizes I will not hesitate to use the blade, if I must.

“That’s a fine knife,” he says. “Where did you procure it from?”

This does not surprise me either, for I have heard it all before. “I am a bladesmith, sir. It was fashioned from my own hand.”

He merely blinks. “Well that’s not something you encounter every day.”

The comment isn’t meant to be insulting, even though I interpret it that way. “Is the dagger your weapon of choice?”

He laughs, and my heart skips a beat. “No. I favor the bow. I have found daggers to be an inconvenience. They force you into an enemy’s space, which I find disadvantageous.”

So he considers the knife an inferior weapon? “Perhaps practice is needed. Maybe then you would not feel unprepared.”

He inclines his head. “Perhaps.”

Sweat dampens my palms the longer he stares at me. It is quite penetrative, his gaze. Distant footsteps inform me the women head downstairs for dinner. Meals cannot begin until everyone has arrived. Someone will notice my absence. They will question my delay.

“I would ask for the name of the woman who cared for me,” he says. “Surely you would not deny me that.”

He is clever, I admit. Too clever by half.

I look to the door. I should go, yet my feet remain in place. “You are fair folk.” His insistence of wanting to repay a debt makes so much sense.

The emotion flitting across his features possesses no single dimension. It is a faceted display of complexity, too many layers to separate cleanly.

“No,” he says lowly, a harsh, acrimonious expulsion. “I am not one of the fair folk. But much of my time is spent in Under.”

I consider this man, the information given. The fair folk cannot tell a lie. It is good enough for me. “Brielle,” I concede. Just a name. So why does it feel as if I grant this man more than he asked for?

“Brielle.” My name unfolds in waves of warm curiosity. “A lovely

name for a lovely woman. I thank you, Brielle.” He touches a hand to his chest. “I am Zephyrus.”

Lovely? He hardly knows me. But I keep the thought to myself.

The man—Zephyrus—glides to my desk, scans the various liturgical manuscripts. He flips open the Text, idly shifting aside documents as though he has every right to. I grasp the fraying end of my cincture. *Don't touch that.* But the words remain stubbornly silent.

“What is your station at the abbey?” He glances over his shoulder at me, green eyes keen.

“Novitiate.” My voice rings with rare authority. I've dedicated every spare moment to the consecrated life: deepening my relationship with the Father, examining the faith, expanding my self-awareness, understanding the importance of community. It has been no small task.

Leaning back against the desk, Zephyrus folds his arms over his chest, one ankle tossed lazily over the other. Candlelight gilds the curling tips of his hair. “How old are you?”

This, too, I am reluctant to announce, though it shouldn't matter. “Twenty-one.”

His eyebrows wing upward in surprise. “How long ago did you enter the abbey?”

“When I was eleven.”

“You have been a novitiate for ten years? Shouldn't you have taken your vows?”

“I have.” I fist the rope tighter between my fingers. “My First Vows, at least.” The Final Vows will occur once I'm appointed an acolyte, my commitment to the faith set in stone.

Generally, a novitiate studies for three years, although there are always exceptions to the rule. Following the novitiate phase, a woman is appointed an acolyte, a station she will maintain for the rest of her life, as

long as her Final Vows remain intact. It is possible to climb higher in station, as Mother Mabel has done, solidifying her religious leadership over the region. But a woman may climb no higher than Abbess.

Zephyrus peers deeper into my eyes. He searches for something. What is it he seeks? “Why haven’t you taken your Final Vows then?”

“It is not up to me,” I say, more tersely than I intend. “Mother Mabel decides who is ready to graduate. My time as an acolyte will come.”

“You’re certain of your appointment?”

The opportunity to graduate does not arrive often. When it does, there is only one slot, sometimes for an entire year. Last autumn, I believed my time had arrived. Another, however, was chosen instead.

The longer we regard each other across the room, the stranger the man’s eyes seem. He cannot be human. The green fires too brightly.

“I have worked toward this for a long time,” I state. “Mother Mabel recognizes my efforts. She will choose whoever is best fit for the position.”

“And if that person is not you?”

Steel snaps my spine straight. What is the purpose of his animus? To prove a point? To draw up the rise in me, the red to my skin?

I’ve considered the possibility. Every time I do, my stomach cramps. I’ve seen it pass too many times. Still, I hope.

“That woman with the black hair? She is hungry for the opportunity as well.” A lazy, pointed remark. The corner of his mouth tucks into his cheek. “What will you do?”

“Your antagonism is unnecessary.”

“Is it?” he croons, sidling closer. “I merely speak the truth.”

I glare at him, and Zephyrus winces, a hand going to his temple. His shoulders tense, then slump. “I must return,” he mutters. “But first, there is something I would ask of you.”

“No.” The word cuts, and tension bleeds in its wake.

Zephyrus merely arches an eyebrow. “No?” He appears intrigued by this, amused even, though I do not understand why. *No* is a complete sentence. “But you have not heard my request.”

Something about his presence fuels increasing alarm in me. The hairs spike along my arms and legs, the back of my neck. Someone wanted him dead. Why?

“You have been here too long,” I choke out. “You do not need to repay me. I must ask you to leave at once.”

The floorboards shudder from another wave of departing novitiates. My eyes dart to the door. It is then I realize the lock is disengaged. Zephyrus slides into my path, blocking my view of the exit. “You saved my life. I ask that you hear my request and then decide.”

“Whatever it is, I’m not interested.”

“Oh, I think you’ll want to hear my offer. Knowledge is power, after all.” He returns to the window. I have half a mind to yank him out of sight. Anyone peering up at the tower could spot him. “Haven’t you wondered why your Abbess continually overlooks your accomplishments? Have you not questioned what actions or improvements would *guarantee* your ascension?” Lowly, silkily, he murmurs, “Come with me, learn what it is you wish to know, and my debt to you will be repaid.”

Whatever I wish to say—*no, leave, go away*—the declaration fails to emerge.

For I know this feeling. I recognize its face. Temptation. The unholy desire to reach and grasp, and catch something solid within one’s hand.

If I were to trust this man, would I be able to learn the exact requirements needed to become an acolyte under Mother Mabel’s guidance? A decade I have studied. How many seasons will pass before I’m selected to take my Final Vows, if at all?

A breeze, lush and temperate, coasts through the open window and

drags from my throat the reluctant inquiry. “How?” I whisper. “If I am to learn this information, what must I do?”

“We will pay a visit to Willow,” he says with burgeoning delight, “and you will have your answers.”

I lower my knife slightly. Willow. I’ve never heard of this person. “Why do you want to help me? Why can’t you accept I want no repayment and be done with it?”

A little notch crinkles his brow, and he does not appear so certain in this moment. “There is no such thing as goodness of heart. There’s always a catch.”

Not from me.

“Is there somewhere we can meet tomorrow evening?” Zephyrus asks.

“Tomorrow is the Holy Day.”

“Then the day after.”

I am likely going to regret this, but any advantage will outweigh the risks. Serving the Father is all I have ever wanted in life. “There’s a forge south of the main complex. It is empty in the evenings.”

“Excellent.” Zephyrus braces a palm on the wooden sill. “Light a lamp in your window two nights hence. When you see an answering glow, head to the forge. I’ll meet you there.”

Leaping through the window, he vanishes into the night.

CHAPTER 5

I return to the forge when the night is darkest, for the abbey sleeps, and I must return before the rising sun.

When I arrive at the shrouded, still-warm workshop however, I find it deserted. Had I misunderstood Zephyrus' instructions? The lamp hangs in my window, a mellow glow visible across the eastern strait, a small sun atop the tower to lead those at sea home.

I loiter a few minutes near the extinguished fire—naught but ash and scattered coal. Lingering smoke stings my nostrils. The hammer rests on its anvil, awaiting use. I tug on the cord cinching my waist, pacing, pacing. The previous night's conversation resurfaces. I did not mistake our agreement. Zephyrus said he would be here. Yet I am alone.

As I assess my surroundings, I spot a note nailed to the front door.

Brielle, meet me where the River Twee splits. I will await your arrival.

A wash of irritation pulsates through me. Of course he informs me to meet him at the most inopportune time, and at the most inconvenient location. I consider returning to my room, forgetting this fool's bargain. But

the promise he'd given me: Willow. Whoever this person is, they hold the answer to my prayers. Sometimes, life requires risk for reward.

With a small rucksack slung across my back and my knife secured at my waist, I cross the outer grounds to the deserted gatehouse and make the treacherous journey down the mountain's western face, over the crooked path winding through dense brush. If I were to break an ankle, become stranded in these woods, would I even survive the night?

Last year, tragedy struck Thornbrook. Curious Madeline, a novitiate in her second year, went missing while wandering Carterhaugh after dark. Seven days later, we found her in a nearby glen, circling a ring of mushrooms sprouting from the moist soil.

Back at the abbey, the girl rambled about a strange man smelling of roses, whose face she could not remember. The pregnancy unfolded quickly. Within weeks, Madeline appeared months along, on a separate timeline from everything else. The transgression resulted in dismissal from Thornbrook. We never heard from her again.

My pulse quickens as I navigate the rocky trail, stumbling along. *Do not stray from the path.* Mother Mabel hammered this into our very cores. The trails around Thornbrook are safe, blessed by the holy water. The fair folk cannot catch me unaware as long as I do not stray.

Trickling light, wan as milk, puddles onto the ground where it managed to squeeze through the interlaced canopy. Ahead, the river lies in strips of silver through the trees.

"I suppose they do not teach you to step lightly at this abbey of yours," a musical voice drawls from somewhere in the dim.

I'm panting, dripping sweat, and in no mood for barbed conversation. As well, I cannot determine if that was an underhanded insult about my weight.

"I'm here, aren't I?" A quick scan of my surroundings reveals merely

trees. The night blinds me.

“Indeed.” Zephyrus materializes between two towering oaks and saunters forward in a white tunic and brown trousers, the heavy green cloak warming his shoulders. Moonlight gilds the tips of his curled eyelashes and softens the awkward planes of his face. “Most do not brave Carterhaugh after dark.”

Apparently I am more foolish than most. Desperate, certainly.

“I am to return before dawn,” I state, falling into step behind him as he gestures me across a shallow section of the river.

“Consider it done.” He leaps from stone to flattened stone. “It should not take long.” Another effortless bound and he reaches the opposite bank.

Water rushes around my boots. “You will not leave me?”

His eyes catch the light, the small black centers narrowing in question. I bite the inside of my cheek. Perhaps I said too much.

“As long as you follow my instruction,” he assures, “you will have nothing to worry about.”

We delve deeper into the innards of Carterhaugh, picking a trail over the heavily rooted ground, surging through the vein-like openings between the long-standing trees, cutting new pathways through the thinner, more delicate capillaries. The tangle of leaves shutters the stars, yet Zephyrus glides over every dip and knoll. My tread is not as light, nor as quick. This man denies he is one of the fair folk, but how else could he navigate so well in the dark?

We arrive at a clearing the perfect roundness of a plum ripe for plucking. A spring interrupts the spread of softened grass, a deep pool of icy clarity. Light streams from the break above and colors the surface white.

Without turning around, Zephyrus whispers, “We’re here.”

“Where is *here*?” My voice drops, for the night sounds have hushed. And the wind? That, too, has died.

He approaches the edge of the water. “Under.”

My boot catches on a rut in the ground. “Wait, what?” When I manage to regain my footing, I stare at Zephyrus’ back, the strong line of his shoulders beneath the breezy cotton. “That’s a joke, right?” A high, tinny clamor rattles my mind. “You said you weren’t one of the fair folk,” I manage faintly. Am I truly that naive to have accepted his word?

Zephyrus glances over his shoulder at me, expression cold. “I’m not. The fair folk and I have an understanding. I am allowed to come and go from their realm as I please.”

My hands grow clammy. Only on the tithes, when the veil between realms is at its thinnest, may mortals venture into Under, and only accompanied by Mother Mabel. Without her guiding hand, one might lose oneself. I have heard of what happens to those who enter Under before their time. They do not return.

“You didn’t mention Willow would be in Under.” Then again, I never asked. I had assumed we would do what was safe. “I’m forbidden to enter.”

Zephyrus hums in acknowledgement. The toe of his boot scuffs the wet soil, chunks of mud plunking into the water, ripples distorting its glassy surface. “That is quite the predicament.”

A moment of silence passes.

“Well,” he says casually, “the way I see it, there’s a simple solution.” He pins me in place with that evergreen gaze. “Do it anyway.”

It is no joke. That concerns me. “You understand there are rules I must abide by. I am not free to go where I want.”

“So it would seem.” He laughs, and the sound is almost too pleasant to be scornful, despite the tension behind it. “You are free to choose your own path and make your own choices, yet you choose to live your life within the boundaries Thornbrook has set for you. But please, correct me if

I am wrong.” Hands sliding into his pockets, he rocks back on his heels. His shadow spreads black across the water.

I’ve half a mind to shove him into the spring for his gross judgment, the dismissal of my life choices, but kindness is of utmost importance, and I would not disappoint the Father with my actions.

Zephyrus sighs and falls forward, planting his boots in the mucky ground. “Let me explain. Beyond your abbey walls—” He sweeps an arm eastward, toward the distant realm of the Gray, a place I have never ventured and likely never will. “—there exists an entire world you have never touched. If you truly are committed to your faith, consider this. Once you take your Final Vows, you will be forever bound to the church. At the moment, you are only a novitiate. You have a bit more leeway to explore. Why not take the opportunity? It may be the last thing you ever do for yourself.”

I wish I were not so easily swayed. Obedience: the first of my vows. But might it be worth learning what actions would guarantee my appointment?

I tug the ends of my cincture with both hands, twisting the rope around and around. “Be that as it may, I am still mortal. The fair folk do not look kindly on us.”

“Never fear. As my guest, you are granted amnesty.” At my hesitation, he says, “Do you want to become an acolyte or not?”

I have worked too hard and for too long to risk anyone, especially Harper, obtaining the honor before me. It’s hard enough believing I belong in Thornbrook most days.

With great risk comes great reward. There must be a kernel of truth to it. Those who want, rise up. Those who do not find themselves trampled. Maybe I’m tired of being stepped on. Is there room enough for change in me?

I gather the weightiest breath I can manage, inhaling until my lungs twinge from strain. When it releases, my fear ebbs with it. “I don’t know if I’m capable of completing the journey, but I will try. What must I do?”

Zephyrus offers one long-fingered hand, which I accept. For someone whose hands appear to belong to an artist, they are surprisingly strong. Even through the leather, the heat of his skin seeps into mine.

“What is the purpose of wearing gloves?” he asks.

I step to his side, toeing the edge of the spring. The wall of trees edging the clearing hoards shadows. “It is against our moral law to touch a man.”

“Why?” Curls tumble across his brow. It gives his repellent features an otherwise boyish cast.

“Because it is,” I snap. “Why is the sky blue? Why does water flow downhill? It is fact. It is known. There is nothing required to understand beyond that.”

“Isn’t there?” How piercing that gaze is when resting wholly on me. “Tell me, Brielle. Have you ever wondered what a man’s touch feels like?”

This conversation has begun to slide into uncharted territory. I may be naive, but I am not ignorant. The Text explains what occurs when a woman lies with a man. Despite this, our faith does not view intercourse favorably. Purity—our second vow. To live a consecrated life, one cannot be impure of body. The Father would know. *I would know.*

“I have not,” I state. “Only a virgin may become an acolyte.” My tone warrants no argument.

His eyebrows hike upward, an expression of subtle amusement. “Who said anything about losing one’s virginity?”

I refuse to respond to such a ridiculous comment.

“Originally,” Zephyrus says, fighting a smile, “Under had four

entrances, each aligned to the cardinal directions. All delved into the mountain's heart."

I'm so relieved by the subject change I do not question how near he stands to me.

"Over time, however, Under came alive and shaped new entrances. Today, only two of the original doorways exist."

"This is one of them?" I ask. Knowledge—I encase myself in its armor. I will need it.

"Indeed, it is. Some doors require accompaniment from the fair folk. Others do not. You might wander a path and cross Under's threshold without realizing it, or an entrance might one day decide to seal itself off, never again to open. There is no rhyme or reason. Trees, springs, doors, caves, holes in the ground—all might lead to Under with the right conditions."

"And what are the right conditions?"

Zephyrus shrugs. "That is for Under to decide."

He turns to me then. A strange man standing in an even stranger place. "Can you swim?"

"Yes." My attention flits to the water. I cannot see the bottom.

A cunning little grin ghosts across his mouth. Beautiful teeth for a face that is anything but. "Here." Zephyrus holds out a shell. At my questioning look, he says, "Place it between your teeth and breathe through your mouth. It will prevent you from drowning." He tucks me close. "Don't let go of my hand."

What awaits me beneath the earth? Salvation, perhaps. Or the ruination of everything I hold dear.

"Trust me," he murmurs, slow and mesmeric.

I do not.

Clamping the shell between my teeth, I gird my stomach for the

drop. A sharp tug drags me forward, and we free fall into the spring.

FRIGID WATER ENCLOSES me. Then—panic.

A wave of heat branches down my limbs, and I begin to flail. My mind crumbles. I think, *I will die here*. I will die in this bitter, watery grave, alone, without a proper burial, forever denied the Father's divine gates of respite.

My shoulder rams into hard substrate, and the rush of bubbles blinds me. The darkness is eternal. I have fallen into folds upon folds of cloth. My lungs begin to seize, and I lunge in the direction I believe is up, only to slam my face into stone, its edge cutting open my cheek.

Something grabs my arm, halting my frenzy. Zephyrus. Short tresses float from his scalp like brown river grass. Our noses might brush were he to shift a hair closer, but the clarity of his crystalline eyes in the murk has an odd, calming effect on me.

Recalling his instructions, I inhale through my mouth, salt bristling my tongue from the hard, spiral shell clamped between my teeth. Water tickles my nostrils, and when my throat opens, air rushes in.

By the Father, he was right.

What is this sorcery?

Darkness yawns beneath, and the underground current tugs us farther from the surface. My only constant remains Zephyrus' hand curled tightly around mine. My fingers twitch, deepening the contact—the only warmth in this airless, lightless place.

As we drift, the gloom peels back, rendering the walls' smooth curves in a pearly shimmer. Down we sink, and down. My boots drag me deeper into the obscured earth. I fight the climbing panic in my chest, the

instinct to claw my way back toward the light. I am breathing. I am alive. The water will not take me.

Abruptly, pressure shoves against my feet. With Zephyrus' guidance, we rise toward the beckoning light, bubbles streaming from our open mouths.

My head breaks the surface. Releasing Zephyrus' hand, I tread water, peering at our surroundings. We've reached a prodigious cave, all dark rock upon which the echoing splash cracks. My teeth chatter. My skin puckers painfully. Perhaps it was always this cold before His warmth blanketed the earth. I cannot imagine living in a place with no light, no vibrancy, no green.

I swim to the edge of the pool and drag myself from its icy clasp. Water pours from my dress onto the smooth slab. The fabric sticks to every curve, every roll of skin, and slides into the divots so my body feels more exposed than if I were wearing nothing at all.

Zephyrus, meanwhile, hauls himself from the spring with nary a struggle, lean muscle displayed beneath the clinging cotton of his tunic and trousers. My throat tightens as I look elsewhere. I have seen a man's form, but never one so revealing.

I brush the thought away, no more than an errant cobweb, and focus on the chamber. Tunnels branch from the main cavity. Its ceiling sketches multiple arches glowing with faint pink light. "This is Under?" I thought it would be more... frightening.

"Not quite." Zephyrus squeezes droplets from the hem of his tunic. "The mountain is a neutral zone between Under and Carterhaugh. See that archway? Passing beneath it will lead you into Under."

The path ahead vanishes into the murk. I release a slow, shaky breath. It will be all right, I think.

"There are three things you must know if you wish to leave Under

alive.”

My throat dips, but I nod in understanding. After all, I have heard the sordid tales.

“The first thing to remember,” he says, lifting a finger, “is that you must not eat or drink anything offered to you.” His expression, pressed into solemnity, holds a curious allure. “The wine tastes sweeter, the fruits brighter, the meat impossibly rich with flavor.” A breeze snaps at my legs, and I flinch. “Once you begin to eat, you will lose your sense of self.”

Decades before, one of the novitiates failed to resurface following the tithe. Mother Mabel returned to Under, only to find the woman dead, having gorged herself for so long her stomach split clean in half.

“The second,” he says, “is that you must not stray from the path.”

“The path?”

“The path,” Zephyrus emphasizes, and gestures to the ground.

Indeed, we stand on an uprise of grass germinating from the bedrock, the blades crushed beneath my boots. It stretches the width of my arm span and passes beneath one of the carved archways. A chilled gust belches from the passage, reeking of decomposed plant matter. I choke on the taste.

“The path will keep you safe,” he says. “Do not stray.”

This is Under, an unfamiliar current, and Zephyrus is my anchor. I will follow his instructions without complaint. “And the third?”

“The last point is the most easily overlooked. If you must remember one thing, let it be this: never speak your name aloud. Ever. Should any of the fair folk learn your name, they will have power over you, more power than you can ever imagine. Keep it safe. Trust no one.”

“What of your name? Should I call you something else while we’re there?”

His mouth curves too sharply to be pleasant. A fitting smile, in equal

cold to this dreary place. “My name has already been claimed by another, so you may use it freely. It will make no difference.”

I fall into step beside him. The air feels alive against my skin. “What do you mean your name has been claimed?” We step beneath the archway, passing into dense gloom. Quiet like a void, like a tomb.

Nothing. I see nothing.

“Once your name is known,” says Zephyrus, “the sound is captured and stored in a glass bottle. It may be sold, or bartered, or given to another, or set free, though rarely are the fair folk amiable. Whoever possesses your name dictates your every movement, the where and when and how of your life.”

Is it the darkness that makes his reply slither and spit like a viper? I wrap my arms around my front as we shamle onward. Strangely, the dampness evaporates from my clothes. Beneath the chilly air, a warmer, tamer breeze skims my ankles. “There’s nothing you can do?”

“When you are called, it will be impossible to ignore. Only death may break the bond.”

Then I must keep my wits about me.

One moment, we shuffle in utter blackness, a low pulsation of sound dampening my eardrums, and the next, the walls fall away, the ceiling climbs, the space bleeds red. It is not natural, this light. It is wrong, discomfiting, the hard, garish brightness of an oncoming storm. Flecked in a sickly rust, its color slickens surfaces and puddles beneath one’s feet.

We stand on the bank of a wide, underground lake. It expands so far into the distance I cannot see the opposite shore. The rotting stench intensifies: a cloying sweetness, blackened flesh. At my feet: grass. Safe to tread, though I do not know if I am willing.

In the center of the lake floats an extensive wooden raft. Large glass orbs bob in the water, flushed pink, occasionally a richer scarlet. It’s

obvious we have intruded on a celebration of sorts, for drenched in the rust-tinged light, the fair folk have amassed, writhing to the blood-pounding rhythm of thundering drums. Small ripples disturb the opaque surface. Their shadows clamber up the walls.

I peer upward, startling in surprise. There hangs the moon, only I do not recognize it. The oblong shape reminds me of a yellowing growth attached to the ceiling, except it is not a ceiling, but the sky. A few stars pulse dully in the darkened fabric.

“Under’s enchantments reflect what occurs aboveground, but as you can see, there are some differences.” Zephyrus gestures to the feeble glowing orb above. “The realm’s sun and moon do not always cycle reliably. Sometimes, the moon gets stuck. A rudimentary design, but it does the job most days.”

“I see.” One last glance upward before my attention returns to the lake.

“Stay close,” he murmurs. A boardwalk flows into the platform, which rocks gently beneath our combined weight. The crowd parts, then sutures into a neat seam. I press nearer to Zephyrus, trying to avoid touching anyone or anything.

I have not seen many of the fair folk up close. They do not share any specific appearance, no single skin tone, no general shape, really, except for their eyes—small stones—like that woman from the market. Some possess tails. Others, beaks or antlers. In some instances, both. Their skin is a collection of browns, ochres, olives, whites, grays.

Bare shoulders.

Bare arms.

Bare stomachs.

Bare legs.

They slink and they fondle. Their hands stroke and slither across

torsos, down arms, over backs, up spines.

I look away, but there is always another person of interest amongst the loose-limbed dancing, the undulating hips. Bare feet. Long talons punching through the bones of their toes and fingers. Waistcoats and elaborate gowns, top hats and long, ragged tunics. When I spot a man's hand slipping between the thighs of another, I drop my gaze.

"I'm assuming you've never experienced something like this before," Zephyrus drawls beside me, having no qualms about studying the half-naked forms, male and female both. "The fair folk enjoy their merrymaking."

"It is unholy," I state stiffly.

"To you, perhaps."

As we push through the festivities, I catch the attention of one woman draped in gauzy silks, one arm bared, and one breast. A pair of antlers protrudes from her oblong skull. When she steps, a slit in the fabric runs all the way up her hip, revealing one long, creamy leg. She winks at me. I duck my head and keep walking.

We pass a trio of men whose skin resembles the texture of tree bark. It does not seem possible, but neither do any of the other creatures present. Are they human? Trees? The tallest man brings a glass of pale, sparkling liquid to his mouth. A forked tongue slithers out, curling slightly to capture the fluid, before retracting behind his teeth.

"Dryads," Zephyrus murmurs, tracking my dumbfounded gaze. "They prefer the taste of flesh."

He skirts what appears to be an oversized rock, but upon closer inspection is a man with a tiny hat perched on his head. The man plops onto a nearby bench with a heavy grunt and promptly falls asleep.

I hasten my steps. This place is like nothing I've imagined. There

appears to be no purpose to the gathering. They drink and laugh and dance as if it's a compulsion.

"Excuse me," I mutter, trying to squeeze between two owl-eyed girls, downy wings folded across their backs. I step lightly, avoiding a woman lying spread-eagle across the planks, a scaly tail wrapped around one leg.

Zephyrus hums. "You have lived a sheltered life. It is nothing to be ashamed of."

And yet, he cannot quite conceal the condescension.

"Maybe I have seen less of the world than you," I snip, "but I have the Father. I need nothing else." Through His teachings, I've witnessed the world's darkest corners, the lean and the hungry and the unfulfilled. "I'm not as innocent as you think I am."

A shrill, raptor cry soars over the gathering. "Is that so?" Intrigue colors his voice. "You are comforted by your god. I understand that. Indeed, there was a time when I was a symbol of good tidings."

The last bit of information snags my attention, but he continues before I have a chance to question it.

"Your world is not the same as mine. Your world is curated. Understand? You sleep and you read and you eat and you pray. Every hour of every day is spent within the boundaries of your faith. My world?" He bares his teeth, and for a moment, I swear they have developed points. "It is a treacherous place, unfit for the pure."

The warm, heavy weight of his palm braces my lower back, and I startle, my eyes flying to his face. "I can sense your resistance to the idea," he says lowly, "but we are attracted to things that lie outside of our lived experience. We crave something deeper."

I do not agree. Why would I be attracted to *this*? What is the purpose of exploring something so depraved? Under lacks morals. It is walls with no

foundation, no means to build. His claims are ridiculous. The abbey is my home and my heart. I want for nothing there.

The deeper we tread into the frenzy, the greater my awareness of the unwanted attention. For this reason alone, I remain close to Zephyrus.

“How far is this Willow person?” I whisper, crossing my arms over my chest, a shield against prying eyes.

“Not far.” The platform lists sideways, pulling me toward the edge. Water laps between the buckling planks. “We’re nearly there.”

“They stare,” I whisper.

He smiles, a small, contemplative thing. “They smell the innocence on you.”

A few paces later, someone slips a chalice into his hand, which he lifts to his mouth. I catch his arm. “Don’t drink the wine, remember?”

His eyes dance over the rim of his goblet. “*You* cannot drink the wine, my darling novitiate. You are mortal. I am not.” And he downs the red liquid, a bright sheen staining his laughing mouth.

Darling novitiate. I’m not sure how I feel about that.

At last, we step onto the opposite shore. I thought the crowd would have cleared out, but if anything, it has multiplied. Something pinches my rear, and I whirl, my breath shortening. This journey no longer seems worth the effort. Look at these fair folk with their dark, oil-slick eyes. The wildness clings to all their wretched points. They are not kind.

I must be mad. What would possess me to accompany a man I know nothing about to a place that will readily eat me alive if given the chance? A moment of weakness, apparently. I don’t need answers. I need my bed, and the church, and the worn leather Text. I need security.

I halt in place. “I want to go back.” The crowd is so dense I cannot see the cavern walls. Someone’s elbow drives into my back. Another creature jostles me from the side.

Zephyrus slows, cants his head in my direction. A single curl tumbles across his forehead, appearing more gold than brown in the gaudy light. “You can’t go back.”

I fiddle with the cord around my waist, tightening my grip to strangulation. “Why not?” I gesture over my shoulder. “There’s the entrance.” We arrived here via the spring, and there we will depart.

“It’s not that I won’t take you back. It’s that I *can’t*.”

“What do you mean?”

“The only way to return,” he says quite placidly, much to my frustration, “is to go forward. Should you attempt to backtrack, you will find yourself helplessly ensnared in Under.”

The claim rings with authority, and I dare not challenge it. Turning, I take in the scene. The black lake sheens like oil beneath the scarlet glare. More fair folk arrive by the minute, staking a claim on the platform’s ever decreasing space. Maybe Zephyrus is right. They *can* smell the innocence on me.

If I cannot go back, my only choice is to trust Zephyrus to lead me forward.

“Fine,” I manage, though my chest twists with a sharp pain. “We continue. But hurry, please.”

The crowd parts, and the grassy path unfolds, its wrinkles smoothed, as we veer from the shore toward a grove twinkling with faint blue lights. They float in long strings, catching the air on the upswing, briefly suspended, before floating back into place. The ruby light recedes in the presence of blue. It is dark, yes, but the pale, violet-edged glow doesn’t make my pulse quicken. Any light is better than none.

Zephyrus strides ahead, limber and sure-footed. My clothes are nearly dry by the time he lifts a hand, signaling us to slow. I peer around him, and my jaw drops.

It is without a doubt the most beautiful tree I have ever seen. It sprawls in a field of darkness, its smooth, twisting trunk the color of fresh snow, innumerable branches dressed in strands of blue lights.

“It’s lovely,” I say, though *lovely* seems an inadequate description of something so *other*.

“According to the fair folk, Willow is the heart of Under.” Ducking beneath the hanging lights, he moves toward the uprising of curved roots. “Ask, and you shall receive.”

Willow. A tree. Of course.

“So I just... speak?” When I push through the strands, the palest chime clarifies the air. The lights are so long they brush the ground, essentially enveloping the trunk’s base in azure light.

Zephyrus alights on a shallow root and springs forward, mouth quirked in mischief. As he sidles toward my back, his chest brushes my shoulder, and I experience a moment of hollowness, as though the air depletes from my lungs. By the time I turn, he’s a stone’s throw away, lounging against the trunk. “You may ask Willow anything you wish, but she will only answer the questions she believes to come from your true self.”

That, I can do. “Do you mind if I have a little privacy?”

His eyebrows lift. “You’re sure?” When I merely glare, he says, “I’ll be over there if you need me.” Pushing off the tree, he slips through the blue strands, vanishing into the darkness beyond.

With Zephyrus gone, the burden eases from my chest. I want him far away when I make my request. I’m ashamed of my voice’s tendency to wobble under pressure, how easily it breaks beneath the great weight of the unknown.

“My face is here, child.”

The throaty, feminine tone draws my gaze upward. It snags on what I

had believed to be knots in the bark, but which have cracked open to reveal lidded eyes, the curving seam of a mouth.

“There you are.” The bark creaks as the eyelids sink low, slitting the smoother, paler bark beneath. “It has been a long time,” intones the voice, “since a mortal woman has graced my presence. But tell me, child. What do you desire?”

This, at least, is easy.

“I would like to know,” I begin, stuttering lowly, “what I must do to become the next acolyte. How will Mother Mabel see me, as I am?” And then, hushed: “How can I be seen as worthy?”

The tree’s mouth pinches into a dark whorl. “I can see your whole history in your eyes. Ten long years you have toiled away, young novitiate. I sense the sadness in you, the confusion. You wonder why your efforts have failed to bring about the opportunity you seek. You wonder why it has not been enough.”

The pressure in my throat stings with a fierce ache. The dainty blue lights burn.

“What must I do?” I whisper. Shall I kneel? Shall I close my eyes and lift my hands to the Eternal Lands?

“My dear.” Willow sighs. “You ask whether anything will change your current status? Unfortunately, it will not.”

My hands tremble, so I clasp them at my front. “I see.”

“One’s actions cannot control another’s, but I urge you to continue on this path. Your Abbess will see the light eventually.”

“When? Am I to work diligently for another five, ten, fifteen years before I’m granted the opportunity to become one of the Father’s most loyal shepherds?”

A branch drifts down with an aged creak of wood to skim my back,

as a mother might console a disappointed child. “Do not fret,” soothes Willow. “Your day will come sooner than you think.”

I had expectations. I wanted to be comforted. I wanted to know my time at Thornbrook wasn't for naught. I wanted reassurance of the Father's warmth.

All I feel is the hollowness of one's heart being ripped out, cotton stuffed in its place.

“Very well,” I whisper. It's silly to have believed I could change something. I should never have come. I had hoped—too much, I think.

Soft grass muffles my footsteps as I turn to go. Pushing aside the strands of blue lights, I step into the clearing. Darkness rests as a veil over my vision, a relief after the piercing brightness. Zephyrus, however, is gone.

CHAPTER 6

I whip around, squinting through the cerulean glow as my pulse begins to climb.

Zephyrus isn't here.

Only minutes have passed since I felt the solidity of his body beside mine. Now? I cannot pick out his head of oaken curls, nor the fluid, slim-hipped gait among the murk-draped trees. What remains? A woman trapped within the walls of Under.

“Zephyrus?”

The blue strands sway, bright beads nestled in translucent casings. There is a distinct lack of wind.

I'm moving before I realize it, my pace surging forward to match my racing heart. I'm running, *sprinting*, feet pounding the grass in a furious rhythm. TBy the time I return to the lake, panting, I feel ill, ensnared by the red glare flooding the massive cavern.

My knife is all that grounds me. What are the odds that, were I to draw my dagger, I could fight my way out of this alive? The fair folk are incredibly swift, impossibly strong. I may be experienced with a blade, but I am mortal. I cannot fight my way forward, for I do not know the way.

Something wet brushes my neck. I whirl, knife extended, to spot a rotund creature with parchment skin.

“Hello, sweet,” coos the short wisp of a girl. A child she may be, but those eyes, dull black orbs, are ancient and cunning.

The tips of her fingers come within a hair’s distance of my cheek. I recoil, struggling to contain my breathing. Her skin is so white it is blinding.

“Red.” The girl smiles, catching one of my curls around her grossly knobby finger. “That’s not something you see every day.”

My hand twitches, but I fear the repercussions of stepping away. I’m imagining the lash of those grotesquely curved claws across my throat, a scarlet line that swells, then bursts with blood.

The tip of her nail skims my shoulder, the jagged edges catching on the cloth of my dress. She is tiny, her face made of points: the chin, the nose, the flare of wide cheekbones. She wears a loose white dress beneath a patched, fraying waistcoat with a high collar. Her hair, the same snowy shade as her eyebrows, has been lopped at the chin.

Thankfully, she steps away, tilting back her head to look at me. “Do I frighten you?”

It seems too innocent of a question. The fair folk cannot lie, but I’ve heard they’re able to sense untruths regardless.

“Yes,” I whisper hoarsely. Movement like waves at my back, the writhing, sweat-soaked bodies. It drags at me, the most vicious of currents. I fear Zephyrus has abandoned me to this place.

Her lips part around a mass of rotting gums. My stomach turns. I feel faint.

“Wonderful,” she sings. “Absolutely wonderful.” Slipping her small hand into mine, she tugs me through the crowd. Helplessly, I follow.

We skirt the edge of the rocky shore, pushing through a group of

creatures with necks enclosed in rings of thorns. The pierced skin weeps blood, old wounds encrusted in rust-colored flakes.

“How are you enjoying Under, sweet?” Despite the cacophony of animal sounds, we hold hands as though strolling along a placid lake.

“It is... unusual,” I say. Hopefully that’s not too offensive.

She pats my arm in comfort. “It is. And this is only the beginning. Soon, we will have our tithes. But you know this, coming from the abbey.”

“How do you know I’m from the abbey?” Although we are the only establishment occupying the mountain, women frequent Thornbrook for healing, temporary housing, education, and more.

“Your dress. It is quite drab—no offense.”

The reminder of the chafing fabric dims my already poor mood.

“What is this?” She lifts the ends of the white cord around my waist.

“It’s called a cincture,” I reply stiffly. There must be something I can do, a way to escape this place. “I mean no insult, but what manner of creature are you?”

“I am what they call a sprite.” She does not appear offended. Pleased, rather, practically preening from the attention. “My mother was a nymph. She taught me everything there is to know of the healing arts. Unfortunately, I never knew my father. I was hatched from an egg along the lakeshore.” She rubs the crown of her head against my shoulder like a cat. “What about your parents? What manner of creature are they?”

I do not know who my father is. As for my mother, I try not to think of her. Most days, I’m successful. “They are human.”

“How quaint.” She hums as a drink appears in hand, though I did not see anyone place it there. Her white fingers curl around the glass, which contains a dark, viscous liquid.

We’ve stalled near the fringe of the celebration, where the shore has climbed to a ledge jutting from the wall. From this vantage point, I’m given

an unobstructed view of the chamber in whole. Its hollow holds fast to echoes. The lake is too still despite the activity atop the platform. If I stare long enough, the reddish light inside the floating spheres swirls, restless, seeking escape.

The sprite turns to me. “You must be thirsty.” A harmless smile, meant to reassure.

I accept the glass with a nod of gratitude and make a show of taking a sip. My lips, however, remain pressed firmly shut. Lowering the drink, I again search for a man dressed in a green cloak, but Zephyrus seems well and truly gone.

“Good?” the sprite wonders. I nod vaguely and abandon the glass on the ledge, then begin to wander back toward the boardwalk. Every so often I glance downward to make sure I keep to the grass.

“You seem down, sweet.” She presses her nose to my shoulder and inhales. “What is your name?”

The answer emerges fully formed in my mouth. I only need to let it unfurl.

What was it Zephyrus told me?

Does it even matter?

“Lissi.” A hulking creature with ram horns curling from its skull pushes through the throng. Its chest is round as a barrel, agleam with sweat. Upon catching sight of me, its eyes narrow. “Who is this?”

“Don’t even think about it,” the sprite snaps. “I found her first.”

The newest visitor takes me in from head to toe. “A mortal. But you are not supposed to be here. The tithe is still two months away.” Its voice is so deeply resonant I feel its reverberation down to the soles of my feet.

“I’m looking for my friend, Zephyrus.” That’s not entirely true, but it seems the simplest term to describe him at the moment.

“Zephyrus?” The sprite wrinkles her nose. “You’d be better off

without him. He is not one to trust.”

Neither are they. “Why is he untrustworthy?”

She takes a delicate sip, then proceeds to chomp through the glass, which shatters in her mouth. I watch, in horror and fascination, as a black, worm-like tongue slithers out to lick the blood from her lips. “Oh, sweet. Haven’t you wondered why one of the Anemoi has found himself bound to Under?”

I’m not following. “The Anemoi?”

“Leave it, Lissi.” The ram-horned creature slaps its meaty hand upon her shoulder. I’m surprised her knees don’t buckle. “The girl is the Abbess’ property. Do not meddle.”

What a strange thing to say. I am no one’s property.

The sprite—Lissi—scowls. “Hush, Balfer. A little information never hurt anyone.” She angles toward me, mellow once more. “You have heard the tales, haven’t you?”

As a matter of fact, I have not. Is the Anemoi a phenomenon? A place? There is no mention of it in the Text.

“The Anemoi,” she says, “are a group of four brothers who were banished to this world millennia ago. You might also recognize them as the Four Winds. Zephyrus is known as the West Wind.”

The Four Winds. Why does that sound familiar? “Why were these men banished?”

“Not men, sweet. *Gods.*”

Zephyrus is a god? Of all the absurd claims I have heard, this tops it. Only one god exists: the Father. Carterhaugh was shaped by His hand, after all. “That can’t be true.”

“Why not? The fair folk cannot lie, as you well know.” Black gums peek behind her parted lips. “You know him as Zephyrus. We know him as the Messenger or the Bringer of Spring.”

“That’s enough, Lissi. Let the girl be.” He grasps the child’s slim arm. “This is between her Abbess and our king. I do not want to be caught in the middle of it.”

The sprite hesitates. Whoever this king is, might he punish them for speaking to me? Eventually, she nods. “Very well. Luck to you, sweet. Try not to wander too far.”

Turning heel, the sprite saunters off with her burly companion, leaving me with so many questions my head begins to pound.

Zephyrus is a god. From another realm.

I need to sit. I need to move. If he is not from Under, where does he hail from? Lissi mentioned he is bound. As punishment, or as a safety precaution?

I’m so lost in thought I pay little attention to my wanderings. I’ve returned to the woods. The dangling strands of blue capsules brush my shoulders, and a strange sound intrudes, giving me pause. Movement in my periphery draws my eye.

Beneath the draping branches there sits an ornate, four-poster bed swathed in a panoply of blankets. Atop the bed, two figures lie intertwined.

The woman is bare: dark skin, silver hair, voluptuous curves. She lies spread over the white duvet, chest heaving. Her nipples peak—large areolas, rosy tips. She turns her face toward me, eyes pinched shut.

A man kneels between her parted thighs, equally bare. His wheaten skin shifts across a muscled back, the stomach round, soft, beneath which hangs his erection, a flushed protrusion that juts aggressively from a coarse thatch of brown hair. The sight grips me. Two short antlers sprout from a head of tight sable curls.

From this angle, I watch a serpentine tongue slither from his mouth. As soon as the forked end skims the wet glisten of her flesh, her hips drive upward, a hoarse cry cracking the air.

A warm flush suffuses my skin, and I step closer, parting the willow branches for a better view. Again, the man angles his head, tongue fluttering. The woman's legs widen, and I can't tell if she's trying to shift away or... something else. She catches her lower lip between uniformly sharpened teeth. The arch of her throat reminds me of a swan.

I do not know why I continue to stare. It is unseemly. Then the woman begins to move, grinding against the man's mouth. She whimpers, tosses her head from side to side, eyes still closed. An involuntary pulse throbs between my legs.

"Don't move." A hot expulsion of air steams the side of my neck, the order drenched in a honeyed tone. Then the long, lean shape of a body brushes the top of my spine.

I practically vibrate with the urge to pull away. I cannot stay here. To watch—

"Closing your eyes will make no difference," Zephyrus whispers. "You have already seen."

It is true. How I hate that it is true.

In the dark behind my eyelids, there lingers the imprint of two people coupling. The man's groan sends a dart of heat through my core. The bed squeaks. There is the slap of skin colliding—wet, immediate. A scattering of bumps pebbles my arms.

"Tell me your thoughts, darling novice."

I squeeze my eyes shut tighter. Zephyrus is right, though I'm loathe to admit it. "Why do they do this here?" My voice wobbles. "Anyone could stumble across them."

"I believe that is the point." Gently amused.

The woman moans wantonly, and I flinch. A weight sinks onto my hip—a hand?—then is removed. "Why does she allow him to do this?"

"He does not harm her," murmurs Zephyrus. "He brings her

pleasure.”

“He touches her inappropriately.”

“Does he?”

Their breathing spikes amongst the squeaking bed frame, the man emitting low grunts, the woman’s gasps climbing to higher frequencies.

“Have you ever touched yourself?” Low and throaty, his voice reminds me of every temptation. The question is so invasive my throat swells shut with humiliation. “Look again,” he says.

I must be charmed. It is the only explanation as to why I follow his instruction. There is the couple atop the bed, their languorous movements and flushed, open mouths. The man mounts the woman from behind. An uncomfortable warmth spreads through my lower belly. “Why did you abandon me? You left me alone, among all those people.”

Zephyrus leans closer, the smell of rain washing over me. “I wanted to see what kind of woman you are. Do you close your eyes, or do you face the uncomfortable truths of the world?”

“What does this prove,” I mutter, “except to make me feel small and afraid?” Whirling around, I brush past him. Being so large, it’s rare that I am physically weaker than a man. “If that was your goal, then congratulations, you have accomplished it.”

Zephyrus catches the sleeve of my dress. “Don’t you want to see how it ends?”

The couple, he means. I am ashamed he caught me staring. More so, I am ashamed by my unexplainable fascination with the display. Why should I care how it ends? It has nothing to do with me.

“No.” I yank my arm free. “I want to return to Thornbrook.”

Zephyrus sobers then, stepping back to give me space. “About that.” He brushes aside a curl falling into his eyes. “There is something I must do first.”

I'm quickly realizing the true depth of my stupidity. Trusting a man I know nothing about has led me into the beast's belly. I feel helpless, for Zephyrus is my only way out of Under. I must follow him whether I want to or not.

We depart the woods in silence. A soaring, pillar-lined hall encloses the verdant pathway, and the chaos of the lake grows muffled. Time trickles out. I cannot tell the difference between one hour and five.

Eventually, mist clouds the air, its cooling touch dampening my dress. The walls widen into a smaller chamber where a long, impressive waterfall pounds white foam into a pool below. Multiple tributaries branch from the basin, which I assume lead to the lake. Small pink lights flicker from where they've been tucked into the walls.

Five partially submerged rocks provide a crossing over the water. Zephyrus leaps across with ease. I pick my way across slowly, following him into an even narrower tunnel behind the waterfall, its distinct lack of rosy light. My mouth goes dry. I wish I were brave enough to voice aloud my needs, but eventually, Zephyrus halts our progress.

“From this point forward, I will go alone.”

My stomach bottoms out. Even after all these years, the reaction catches me by surprise. “You are leaving?”

He glances sidelong at me. “Not for long. The person I'm meeting would take an interest in you. For your own safety, it is best to remain out of sight.”

A nice sentiment, but rather pointless, considering a good portion of the fair folk noticed my presence at the festivities. Drink has loosened their tongues, and they will likely chatter nonstop about the mortal woman from Carterhaugh.

Then again, why take unnecessary risks? It is not trust Zephyrus and

I share. It is necessity. A single, distressed thread that will not hold under additional upheaval.

“Stay here.” He moves off without bothering to wait for my reply. The arrogance of him.

Crouching down, I press against the wall, grateful for its solidity. Darkness stamps the space before my eyes. I see nothing, not even the hand in front of my face. A floral aroma teases my senses, reminding me of Thornbrook’s lush, manicured grounds.

“Zephyrus.” An unfamiliar voice drags through the dark in a low, faint rasp. My ears strain to catch the rest. “I did not expect you so soon.”

“Ever the obedient servant,” he drawls. “You call, I answer. Is that not how this relationship works?”

There is a pause. “Zephyrus,” says the man. “I called for you three months ago.”

This must be the keeper of Zephyrus’ name. He who holds power over the Bringer of Spring.

“Not that it’s any of your concern,” he responds insouciantly, “but I was visiting my brother.”

Whoever he speaks to laughs. It is a sound made of fragments, spewed forth. “I’m surprised your brother let you stay at all. But how is Boreas?”

“He is well. He and his wife are very happy together.” The hesitation is so slight I nearly miss it. “I have not seen him this happy in a long time.”

“Do I detect jealousy?” I hear the smile in words so few, and the oily quality of this man’s character slips unwelcome beneath my skin. I do not understand. What kind of person rejoices in others’ pain? “That could have been you.”

“So you have claimed.”

“You do not agree? But I have told you before.”

“Do you not grow tired of this?” Zephyrus snaps out. “I am here. Let that be enough.”

A scuff races through the darkness: the sound of something massive being dragged across stone.

“It will never be enough.” Ice coats the clipped response. “I had hoped you would have realized that.”

It is heavy, this quiet, all the world a void above and below. A heavy *whump* slaps the ground before the man adds in a conversational tone, “Who is the mortal woman you have brought to Under? I daresay I would like to meet her.”

My heart stutters in my chest, and I press deeper into the crevice. How? I’ve made absolutely no sound.

“I do not believe the lady would be comfortable in your presence.” Does Zephyrus’ clever mind begin to tie threads into knots? “This is her first visit to Under, and she is already overwhelmed.”

“Do you imply I will frighten her?”

“I do not imply. I state a fact.”

Another hoarse cackle. “You have always entertained me, Zephyrus. Bring the girl. I wish to exchange words with her.”

My fingers bite into the little divots around me. The rocks jab into my spine so severely the vertebrae will likely bruise by morning. I cannot flee, lest I want to remain trapped here forevermore. The grassy path extends only forward, toward whoever speaks with that abrasive tone.

This must be how a bull feels as it is being led to slaughter.

A shrill cry of pain cuts through the passage, and my heart shrivels as a wave of cold sweeps through me. The sound was definitely not human.

“You continue to test me, Bringer of Spring. Bring the girl, and make haste. I do not like to be kept waiting.”

Crouched within the recess, I stare unblinking at the lightless tunnel,

willing something to take shape. No footsteps reach my ears. But I should not be surprised when, moments later, Zephyrus emerges from the inky pool, a small pink orb aglow in his palm.

Something in his face has changed, the warped angles cut into new severity. Then it comes to me. His mouth no longer holds the shape of laughter.

“I don’t want to go,” I whisper.

“You are wise to feel this way.” He scrubs a hand over his jaw, up into his hair. The glass sphere trembles in his grip. “Come. We do not want to keep him waiting.”

My stomach lurches. One, two, three heartbeats later, I still haven’t moved. “Will he kill me?”

Zephyrus strides forward, grass hissing beneath his boots. He is frighteningly grave. “No. He is curious as to why I’ve brought you here. He’s likely contemplating how best to use this to his advantage, use you as a tool to control me.”

Control. Advantage. Tool. What manner of creature awaits at the end of this long, winding, cavernous throat?

I swallow to bring moisture to my mouth. “What’s his name?”

“Pierus. He was once a sovereign of distant lands. Now he has asserted his rule here, under the name of the Orchid King.”

My legs wobble as I push to my feet and adjust the dried, crusted fabric around my legs. Wrinkles have imprinted themselves into the dress. My hair crinkles like brittle stalks of wheat. No matter how hard I try, the roughness of my breathing fails to smooth.

“Heavenly Father,” I whisper. “Guide me through the darkest waters. Lead me to your house of worship.”

Zephyrus glances sidelong at me. All emotion has been wiped clean of his features. “Your god cannot help you here.”

The light he holds goes dark.

The tautness in my chest fuses into a cold, hard diamond, an ache crammed with points. “Can you turn the light back on?” I feel lightheaded. “Please?”

“Pierus has temporarily muted its ability to glow. He knows I have it and would prefer to make me as uncomfortable as possible. We will have to walk in the dark.”

I go mute. My tongue, slack with rising terror, will not take shape.

A warm hand cups my elbow, and he murmurs, low enough that I’m certain the sound does not carry, “Do not fret, Brielle. The darkness is not forever.” Gently, Zephyrus draws me forward. “Put your hand on the wall,” he says. “Let it be your guide.”

Damp rock whispers against my glove. If I close my eyes, I can almost convince myself the darkness is one I have chosen.

“I heard a scream earlier,” I murmur, oddly reassured by Zephyrus’ presence. “Did he hurt you?”

“Pierus enjoys his punishments.” As the passageway narrows, evident by the close, bright echoes of my boots passing over stone, the air turns to frost in my mouth. “Remember not to speak your name. Of all those in Under to be bound to, Pierus is the worst.”

He does not have to worry about that. I am as tight-lipped as they come. “How did he capture your name?”

A touch guides me to the left. Zephyrus steps so lightly I cannot hear his tread making contact with the ground. “Pierus and I are acquainted from another time, unfortunately. Although he possesses my name, that is not what binds me to him.”

Since venturing into Under, my questions have multiplied, and here is another tossed onto the pile, this mystery surrounding the Bringer of Spring. If he is not bound to the Orchid King by name, then what?

“When you see him, try not to stare, and do your best to make polite conversation. Pierus appreciates the effort.” His touch spasms around my arm, and we slow, his breathing erratic. “You can open your eyes.”

We stand inside a shining, moonlit cavern, the walls dripping silver. Pink blooms capped in tiny, curling petals carpet the earth, interspersed within the field of grass. Roses. It explains the honeyed aroma encompassing the space. But what awaits against the opposite wall strikes me with numbing cold.

The man appears to have been consumed by the nightshade plant—enormous, carnivorous flowers shaped like open mouths, which snap closed on any object that stimulates the fine trigger hairs protruding from their stamens. The lower half of his torso mutates into a stalk shielded by leaves and vines. Roots, pale and lumpy as spoiled milk, pile beneath him. The upper half of his body is humanoid, though a few blossoms have erupted through the naked skin of his muscled shoulders.

A scream rises in my chest as the man tracks my entrance into the cave. The flowers sprouting from his back are heavily spined, pricked red, red, red.

“Hello, young novitiate.” When the man smiles, dark emotion slithers behind his eyes. He cannot be fair folk, for his eyes do not resemble stone. They are like mine, like those of the Bringer of Spring, though the man’s are blue. “You smell of the incense they burn in the church.”

Remembering Zephyrus’ advice, I nod politely. “We burn it on the Holy Day.”

An extensive, ropy vine slithers along the ground, gently parting the overgrown field. I recoil, slamming into Zephyrus’ chest as Pierus coaxes, “Let me have a closer look at you.”

The vine locks around my wrist. It tugs, forcing me to step forward or be dragged. And there the vine remains, a heavy bracelet, faintly spined.

Pierus gives me a thorough once-over. I am aware of how my dress clings. My cheeks grow warm from the attention. “May I ask what they call you?”

I thought I was prepared for this question, but truthfully, my mind blanked the moment the light vanished in the tunnel. I blurt the first thing that comes to mind. It is neither polite nor clever.

“You may call me novitiate.”

A small, secret smile graces the man’s mouth. Were his body not so hideously unnatural, I might consider him handsome. We share a similar skin tone. Features of perfect symmetry and a pretty mouth. “Zephyrus has taught you well.” Pierus cuts his attention to the Bringer of Spring, who stands isolated in a corner. “Though I wonder why he has brought you here. Mortals are forbidden to visit Under except on the tithes.”

I look from Zephyrus to the Orchid King. “He claimed I would be granted amnesty. I don’t want to cause trouble.”

“Nonsense.” Strands of silver hair slide across his smooth, hairless chest, the chiseled abdomen. “This will not take long. If you have a weak stomach, I suggest you retreat until the ritual is complete.”

A low buzz begins to vibrate my eardrums. *Run*, a voice hisses, but my feet are rooted. “Ritual?”

The Orchid King lifts his eyebrows. The tops veer sharply together, like severe mountain peaks. “He did not tell you? But I should not be surprised.”

“She doesn’t need to see this,” Zephyrus growls, the first words he has uttered since entering the cavern. “Allow her to leave until its completion.”

“Zephyrus.” His chuckle skates across my shivering flesh. “You are the one who invited her.”

I glance at the exit. No grassy path. Is it worth the risk navigating

Under alone in order to escape this place? I think I'd rather face the fair folk than the Orchid King. Oh, his smile deceives, but he does it so very well.

The man's gaze returns to me. "Do not be frightened. Zephyrus and I have an understanding."

"I ask you again," Zephyrus says. "Let her leave."

A second vine lifts to curl beneath the Orchid King's chin. Lips pursed, he considers me, and I quake from the intrusion of his pervasive gaze. I may be fully clothed, but his eyes slide beneath cloth. I may stand across the room, but I imagine those curved talons pricking the ripeness of my flesh, their possessive hold.

"No." He shakes his head. "Lessons must be learned, and I want this woman to know what happens when trust is misplaced." A clawed hand gestures toward Zephyrus. "You have kept me waiting long enough. Let the ritual proceed."

The Bringer of Spring goes still. Truly, I did not realize how expressive he was until the brightness was extinguished from his expression, a neutral barrier slotting into place.

He moves in pieces—shoulders, arms, wrists, fingers. Grasping the hem of his tunic, he peels it over his head, tosses it aside. My attention flicks to his naked torso before skittering elsewhere.

"This will not take long," the Orchid King assures.

One of the flowers uncoils, latching its spined mouth against Zephyrus' neck.

I trip backward with a horrified yelp and land hard on my rear. A second flower extends from a slender vine, affixing to his cheek, a third to his forearm. Zephyrus twitches, face rigid with pain, and falls to his knees.

The gasp shrivels in my throat. Scuttling backward, I ram into the wall, paralyzed by the horror unfolding before my eyes.

Five flowers fuse to Zephyrus' naked torso.

Then seven.

Now ten.

Another twitch renders his limbs useless, and yet, he emits not a sound. When a blossom sinks into the pectoral muscle above his heart, his back arches, the taut abdomen flexing in shallow pulsations. His mouth yawns in a muted scream.

The petals' pink hue darkens to carmine. They grow engorged, inflamed, the drink too bountiful to contain. Red seeps from their suckling mouths.

By the Father. Like muscles in a throat, the nightshade contracts around Zephyrus' blood, dragging the substance back to its source. My gaze lifts to the Orchid King, who watches me with avid fascination. I flinch, pressing harder against the rock.

I'm not sure how long the gruesome ritual lasts. Long enough for my empty stomach to twist inside out. When the blooms finally detach with wet pops, Zephyrus slumps forward, panting through his teeth. Blood trickles from the corner of his mouth.

I want to go to him, but I cannot move. My legs will not hold my weight.

Under is a poison. This I knew. I should never have agreed to this fool's errand.

Hands pressed to the solid ground, Zephyrus pushes himself upright, listing sideways. He manages to catch his balance before he topples.

The spines punctured his skin in half-moon markings. Across his ribs, there appears to be a tattoo colored white, pink, and violet, but the sight is quickly masked as Zephyrus replaces his tunic. Blood dots the light cotton. He will not look at me. For whatever reason, I wish he would.

“Refuse my call again,” Pierus intones, vines tumid from the feeding,

“and I will drain every last drop from your body. This is your final warning.” A wave of his clawed hand. “Dismissed.”

Zephyrus’ dull, distant gaze stares straight through Pierus. Those eyes may as well belong to another. He is changed, no sign of the charismatic man from earlier. Turning heel, he strides from the room.

The Orchid King shifts his focus onto me. I’ve yet to move. At his back, the entire field of roses has hemorrhaged, pink replaced with a dense red. “You would do well to heed my warning, young novice. Do not trust Zephyrus. He will use you for his own gain.” One of the flowers curling from his back opens, then clamps shut. “Should you need aid, you may seek me out. Under is a treacherous place, after all.”

CHAPTER 7

“Zephyrus!”

He pushes onward, walking so swiftly I’m forced to run. By the time we emerge into the lightened cavern, the waterfall pounding its rage against the still pool, sweat and mist drench my skin.

Zephyrus leaps across the slick rocks, landing lightly on the opposite bank. I scramble after him, but I should know better than to think I can outrun the West Wind.

The landscape holds no familiarity. It is a kaleidoscope of color and terrain, spinning, uprooting, never still. I span forests and small, cluttered towns in mere steps. At the next bound, I toe the edge of high white cliffs, Zephyrus a smudge in the distance. Three steps later, I’ve returned to the underground lake with its pulsating drums and shattering noise. Grass sprouts before me, Zephyrus only two strides ahead.

“Wait.” I reach for him without thought as the world lurches before righting itself, the scene settling into place.

He stops, stiff in the frame, and angles his face away from me.

“The Orchid King,” I gasp. “Why did he...?”

My gaze drops to Zephyrus’ chest, but his tunic shields the aftermath

of that gruesome feeding. The image marks my vision, set to scar, forever old, tough skin. A dark cavern. A blanket of pink blossoms, the scent of honey in the air.

“Drink my blood?”

I nod slowly. We may as well stand alone in the vaulted cavern. The fair folk, every shape and every shade, disintegrate in light of what occurred, veiled behind the intense brightness sopping the walls in red.

The West Wind sighs. “There are forces at work you will not understand. Old blood. Old debts. For your safety, it is best to remain in the dark.” He speaks all this without looking at me. His voice, however, trembles.

“But why does he treat you so poorly?” No, *poorly* is not the right word. That display of power? Absolutely disgusting. What was that man’s name again? “Pierus. He just—”

“Please.” He lifts a hand. The long, tapered ends curl slightly, as if grasping for something to hold. “Do not speak his name.” Quickly, he searches the crowd loitering at the shoreline. It has somewhat dispersed, though I spot a number of the smaller sprites, identified by their rotund stature and twig-like limbs. “If you must, refer to him as the Orchid King. It is disrespectful to do otherwise, and many fair folk are employed in his service.” A pause, likely for dramatic effect, which I’m readily learning this man has in abundance.

I take a few breaths, trying to process this new information, arrange it beside all I have learned this evening. The effort fatigues me. It is too complex, too overwhelming. “What I don’t understand is why you had to complete that—” My stomach turns at the recollection. “—ritual.”

Only now does Zephyrus turn. His eyes are darkened moss with little light to brighten them.

“Due to past circumstances, this is the life I must live.”

“You’re his captive,” I claim. “Why? For how long?” Is the ritual part of Pierus claiming Zephyrus’ name? How do the two coincide?

He rests a hand against the wall with a grimace, the flesh around his jowls sagging. Beneath his touch, the stone shimmers into a bright opening that reveals a familiar bend of water singing over rocks. After many hours spent wandering in near-darkness, the sun blinds me. “This is where I leave you.” A gentle push sends me stumbling into the quiet wood of Carterhaugh. When I turn around, there is no sign of the entrance, nor the Bringer of Spring, only the smooth, leaden face of a boulder.

Crisp mountain air snaps at my ankles. I blink, a bit dazed. That was no dream. So why do I feel as though I have suddenly woken from one?

Daylight streams through the broken canopy. Noon, from the sun’s positioning, which means I have missed not only service, but breakfast and morning chores. Zephyrus failed to maintain his end of the bargain. My absence has no doubt been noticed.

Lifting my dress, I hurry back up the mountain, trying to think of an adequate excuse for my absence. I could claim I was gathering pearl blossom, which only blooms under moonlight, and which the infirmary is dangerously low on. When steeped in hot water, the leaves release a substance that can be used to heal various ailments of the skin, even deep wounds.

Soon enough, the church spire breaches Carterhaugh’s crown. Once the porter admits me through the gatehouse, I fly toward the herbarium. Its entry gate often sticks, so I have to bang on the latch until the rusted metal pries free, the hinges squealing as they open.

Sixteen beds, four rows across, four columns deep. They overflow with zucchini and broccoli, lettuce and carrots, eggplant and radishes. Small raised beds house the medicinal plants, including ginger, chamomile, milk

thistle, garlic, and valerian. A tidy herb garden, used strictly for cooking, crowds one of the walled corners.

Shovels and sheers clutter the scuffed worktable glimpsed through the open doors of the gardening shed. I leave the scent of freshly tilled soil behind, crossing into the open-aired cloister toward the refectory.

As I turn a corner, I run into Isobel and Fiona, both of whom I was supposed to harvest barley with this morning.

Isobel shrieks and recoils against Fiona, whose face drains of color so quickly she teeters. “Brielle?”

I offer my most apologetic smile. Mayhap it is not too late to fix the damage I’ve wrought. “Sorry for missing chores earlier. I lost track of time and…” And nothing. The lie is so pathetic it doesn’t seem to be worth voicing.

They stare at me, slack-jawed, eyes wide.

Isobel recovers first. “What are you going on about?” she cries, and the strength of her ire sends me back a step, my shoulder knocking one of the pillars. She is small in stature, but vicious. “Who are you trying to play here?” Before I can respond, she spits, “Mother Mabel has been worried *sick* about you. Is this some kind of joke?”

My mouth works soundlessly. Joke? I look to Fiona in confusion. The younger novitiate approaches me, slow and watchful. Never before has she regarded me this way, as though I have risen from the dead. “Brielle,” she says hoarsely. “What happened to you?”

Too much, I nearly say, but I must remain tight-lipped. “The infirmary is low on pearl blossom, so I went to gather some at the riverbank. I’m sorry I lost track of time.” It has happened before, so it isn’t completely out of the realm of possibility. Thornbrook’s medicinal garden provides the necessary plants required to create balms, tinctures, and special

salves for the women utilizing our healing services, but pearl blossom, which requires a source of running water, only propagates near the river.

Fiona's expression grows troubled. She knows, as I do, that traveling from Thornbrook to the River Twee, where pearl blossom thrives, takes less than an hour on foot. "Did you get lost?"

Yes. "No."

"Then what happened?" Isobel demands. "We looked everywhere for you. Mother Mabel sent for the sheriff."

"The sheriff?" My voice crests sharply. Through the open doors at the end of the corridor, a group of novitiates startles at the disturbance. Shade obscures their features, but someone gasps, "Brielle?"

I do not understand. The sheriff is a last resort in finding a missing person after all existing resources have been employed. My comprehension of the situation encompasses a single part, rather than the whole. "Why would she send for him? I was only gone for an hour."

"An hour?" This from Fiona. "Brielle," she whispers. "It's been seven *days*."

The words do not immediately process. "That's not funny."

"It's not a joke. You really have been gone for a week."

"Stop." My voice cracks. "Do not toy with me." I swallow, nearly choke on my own saliva. This claim makes no sense. "I went down to the river, but I am here now." Have they fashioned this hoax as a punishment for my tardiness? If so, I do not appreciate the distress it causes me.

I begin to brush past them, but Fiona snags my arm. She is stronger than I gave her credit for. "Brielle." Lips compressed, eyes grim. "It is no act. We've been searching for you for many days. We believed you to be dead."

My blood pounds so forcefully the skin of my throat leaps with each heaving beat. In the far doorway, the novitiates have multiplied, their

whispers seeping out into the open air—frightened, accusatory, conflicted. Any attempt to neutralize my features crumbles as my mind falls quiet.

It cannot be. Because if what they claim is true, then somehow, over the course of a single night in Under, an entire week has passed in my absence.

“Mother Mabel truly sent for the sheriff?” I croak.

Fiona nods. Isobel shuffles backward as if I carry a pox.

“I will speak with her.” I nod to myself, for it is a good plan. We will speak, and I will explain my mysterious absence in the most practical manner. “What time is it?” Sunlight splashes the quadrangle nestled in the cloister’s center. The archways between the pillars reveal cutouts of the sunny grass.

“The midday bell rang a short time ago.” Isobel and Fiona, not quite friends, yet they stand as a single unit against me. The wariness has not ebbed from their gazes. “She is at the church.”

The weight of their suspicion trails me as I head for the church, hurrying as quickly as my weary soles will allow. My dress has dried into a crusty mess, and my red curls have become so snarled it will take the entire evening to separate them. Mother Mabel will know something is amiss.

The sanctuary doors stand open. It feels silly to wash my hands when the rest of my clothes are so filthy, but I stop to use the lavabo prior to entering, watching the clouded water settle into the basin. The air cools as I step onto hallowed ground: gray stone walls, expansive belly, jeweled glass. A rug runs between the rows of pews. It mutes my footsteps as I pad toward the altar.

Mother Mabel kneels at the railing surrounding the sanctuary, her back to me. She wears the ornate, sleeveless chasuble, a symbol of her unselfish service, which she dons during Mass and other ceremonial events. The trinity knot graces the center of her back, gold threads stitched upon a

shining background to protect her from any ill will. The billowing white sleeves of her alb frame the sleeveless vestment, her hands clasped.

Red drapes the altar. The trio of candles burns atop. Father, Son, Holy Ghost. Never to be extinguished.

It's a long walk to the sanctuary. The nave stretches continuously, interrupted by ancient pillars, which support the vaulted ceiling's immense arch. Once I reach the steps to the chancel, I climb the rise and pass the enclosure where the choir sits.

Joining her at the railing, I kneel atop the long cushion and bow my head. The heart is a complicated organ. It has the capacity to sustain heavy loads, but such are the burdens of life.

Forgive me, Father.

What are the ways in which I've strayed?

I have taken a man into my room.

I have watched a private, sexual act and did not shut my eyes to it.

I have entered a place that is forbidden to me.

Shame rises to clot my airway. It hardens, becomes stone. *I am sorry*, I tell Him, for He will know where I have been and with whom.

A soft breeze grazes my cheek. Beneath the cooling touch, I calm.

For this is what the church offers me: silence. Tolerance. A place where I need not scrutinize my pitfalls and shortcomings, where I am merely Brielle, novitiate and bladesmith, devotee and follower, where I am, unbelievably, enough.

After countless minutes, Mother Mabel stirs at my side. A long exhale streams from her beaked nose. "I have questions for you," she murmurs.

My eyes open, and I turn to meet her gaze. My stomach twists. Disapproving, or disappointed? I'm not sure which sentiment is worse. "Yes, Mother Mabel."

Candlelight intensifies the pale strands of her hair. “Come.” Pushing to her feet, she gestures me to follow.

A short aisle branching from the main altar flows into the sacristy. The tiny room is barred by a heavy oaken door, which thuds shut upon our entrance, the wood thick enough to muffle any sounds from within.

I have visited the sacristy countless times over the past decade. Here, the Abbess vests and prepares for service. It also houses all vessels used for Mass, such as the altar linings, the hangings, and the Text.

Tapestries depicting particularly violent scenes from our literature line the opposite wall. The story of Byron, from the Book of Fate, who was beheaded after admitting to incestual relations with his daughter. As well, the story of Bram, from the Book of Night, who was Carterhaugh’s last true king before northern barbarians slaughtered his clan.

In the corner squats the piscina, the small basin where the chalice, ciborium, cruet, and paten are washed following Communion. The drain flows directly underground to prevent the water—touched by the sacred vessels—from being flushed into the sewers.

“Sit,” she says.

I obey. It is for the best, since my knees have begun to tremble. Mother Mabel’s features are never more severe than when cast in the shadow-dark flicker of candlelight.

She strides past me with a scuff of silk slippers. The bones of her torso protrude to points beneath the hem of her robe, the chasuble’s elaborately stitched border resting a few inches above that.

“You were missed this week, Brielle. Your room was empty, your bed unmade. When you did not show up for service, your fellow novitiates believed you to have fallen ill.” She stalls, pivots, and slowly paces the opposite direction, sweet, clinging incense wafting from her passing. “But when Fiona checked your room, she found it empty.”

Nothing I might say could explain my absence. I cannot stop a stone rolling downhill.

Sometimes it is easier to say nothing.

“When you did not show up for breakfast, I grew worried. It is unlike you to miss meals, which is why, when evening fell, I decided something terrible must have befallen you, and I called on the sheriff.”

The hair on my body stiffens. Then it is true. Someone would have trekked all the way to Kilmany to call on him.

“He lost your trail at the River Twee. We feared you had drowned.”

My eyes widen at this. Should a person drown, their soul is denied the opportunity to pass into the Eternal Lands.

“No, Mother Mabel,” I whisper. Sweat collecting on my palms sticks to the inside of my gloves as I rub them atop my thighs. “I am well, as you can see.”

“I’m glad,” she replies, and the terseness of her response reveals her distaste with my frazzled appearance. “I was sad, having believed you were gone from this world. It is a miracle you have returned healthy and whole.” There is a pause three heartbeats long, no less and no more. “I would like an explanation.”

She demands something I am unable to divulge. Under is a tainted place, teeming with evil. To have entered prior to the tithe, I have broken the abbey’s oldest rule, set in place to secure our safety in the wilds of Carterhaugh.

“I’m sorry,” I manage, and bow deeper. I am a liar. Disobedient. “I left because I wanted to help gather supplies for the physician, but it is no excuse. I should have informed someone—”

“And what, exactly, did Maria ask you to gather?”

“Pearl blossom,” I stutter.

She hums, a flat, shapeless sound that offers no indication of her

thoughts. “That’s interesting, because when we questioned Maria about your absence, she claimed not to have spoken to you in days.”

And I have officially said too much.

“Brielle,” she whispers. I cannot bear it, my name sculpted by the Abbess’ disappointment. “Look at me.”

My throat clicks with the force of my swallow. But I must obey.

I lift my head. Her facial muscles have frozen in an expression of polite interest. Shadow cuts the space beneath her angular jaw, the skin unblemished by neither lines nor coloring from sun exposure.

She stands before the tapestries hung during the Holy Week. The first portrays a young man—the Father—collapsed on the ground, blood dripping down his naked torso. The second reveals men with spears, their points gouging his skin. When the Father sacrificed His life, our world was cleansed of impurities. We were given a clean slate, a means to begin again.

“What are the Seven Decrees?” Her voice holds no life. It decays in the span of a breath, the beat of one’s heart.

It has been so long. I have not had to state the Decrees since I was a child. It is the lowest humiliation for the Abbess to believe I need reminding when I carry them in my heart all days of the week. “Please, Mother Mabel—”

“The Decrees, Brielle.”

I take a shaky breath as the flush climbs my throat and singes red across my face. “Thou shalt not kill. Thou shalt not steal. Thou shalt not covet. Thou shalt not disrespect thy mother and father. Thou shalt not forsake thy God.” My voice grows hoarse the longer I speak without pause, each rule a dead weight I must cast aside. I swallow and finish with, “Thou shalt remember the Holy Day.”

“You missed one.”

I had hoped she wouldn’t notice.

Once I complete the set, it will become real. The last vestiges of this dream-like state will peel away. I am not ready.

“What is the Seventh Decree?” she snaps. “Speak.”

“Thou shalt not lie,” I whisper.

Mother Mabel links her fingers together, studying me. Cold radiates through my dress, and my knees begin to ache from pressing into the hard stone. “You vanished for a week. Where did you go? What was so important that you thought it necessary to leave without informing anyone of your whereabouts? And I want the truth.”

Sweat slithers down the column of my spine. Once this information comes to light, I might be dismissed from Thornbrook. I do not think I could survive the world untethered. “I told you, I was seeking pearl blossom.”

“I see. Then why did your trail lead northwest as opposed to southwest, where the plant grows?”

The lies spin webs, but I cannot keep track of their sticky threads. I would have been better off saying nothing. Whatever the consequence, I will accept it, however sharp the barbs. Do I deserve to bleed then?

“Mother Mabel—”

“Enough. I have heard enough.” Presenting her back, she shrugs off the impressive chasuble, hangs it on the wall hook with the rest of her vestments. Beneath, she wears her alb, the gold stole, the cincture with its trio of knots.

She unties each knot deliberately. Her long nails pick at the rope and slide it free. Setting aside the cord, she then removes the stole, hanging it with the chasuble. Lastly, her alb.

Beneath, Mother Mabel wears a flimsy white tunic. I stare at the pasty skin of her exposed calves.

She crosses the room to remove something from a box placed on a

low shelf. After a moment, she returns to my side. “Knowing these are the Decrees that guide us, is there anything you would like to add? Anything at all?” She regards me with much knowing. I think I have fallen far in her eyes.

Nothing I say would change my fate, so I do what I have been taught to do since I was eleven years old, hunched on the abbey stoop beneath the pouring rain, watching a dark figure descend the mountain out of sight.

I keep my mouth shut.

Mother Mabel strides for the door. Its lock thunks into place. “Please remove your dress.”

My eyes drop, fingers twitching into loose fists. A wave of cold drags at me. “I do not understand.”

A faint snap pricks the hair on my neck. Somehow, the sound is familiar.

“I will not repeat myself.”

All the punishing edges of that statement send me to my feet. Presenting her my back, I remove my dress so I’m left in my chemise and breastband. The dried, crusted fabric drops to the ground, and I shiver in the cool air, completely exposed, naked to the core before the Abbess of Thornbrook.

“Kneel.”

My knees crack against the flagstones. A metallic taste floods my mouth and coats my tongue.

Mother Mabel rounds my back. The church’s incense has always comforted me, but now it clogs my nostrils and turns my stomach, its sweetness curdling to rot. “I am sorry to do this to you, Brielle. I hope you understand.”

The air keens seconds before pain ruptures across my spine.

I scream, lurching forward as the searing line burns with increasing

agony. My fingernails bite into the rough stone. My head hangs, and I pant through the shock of what occurred, the wounded girl within me whimpering.

“A lash for every day you were missing,” the Abbess whispers from behind. “A lash for every lie that spoils your tongue.”

The lash comes down. Then—fire across my back.

Seven lashes for seven days.

Seven lashes for seven lies.

Seven lashes for the stark cruelty of a realm beneath the earth, and rivers, rivers, rivers of blood.

CHAPTER 8

“Brielle.”

The waspish tone slaps me into wakefulness. Harper stands before me, hands on hips, mouth pinched as though having recently sucked on a lemon. She likely enjoyed it, too.

I straighten from where I dozed off, wincing from the twinge across my back. The refectory clamors with scraping utensils, clattering bowls. The Daughters of Thornbrook have gathered, surrounding the battered wooden tables. It smells of boiled greens and the hot, bubbling sweetness of fresh porridge.

Harper continues to glare at me expectantly. “What?” I hiss. Conversation is prohibited during meals.

“I have a question for you.”

Then by all means, let me wait with bated breath.

I dare a glance around the hall. Today, I’m on dish collecting duty. When the women finish eating, they bring their tableware to the kitchen. I scrape any leftover food into a bin, which we’ll donate to the poor, and separate the bowls, cups, and cutlery for washing. Due to the status of my station, no one pays me any mind. “Yes?”

“What is it Mother Mabel sees in you?” A cant of her head. “After that embarrassment with your disappearance, can you blame her lack of trust in you?”

My molars grind together so viciously I wouldn't be surprised to crack a tooth. Harper spews so much vitriol it's a wonder plants don't wither in her presence. And here I stand, receiving every blow like a pelting rain.

Disappointment and shame hit me all over again. It isn't fair. I have worked tirelessly for this opportunity, and within a day, my hopes were dashed. Mother Mabel will not select me as an acolyte this year. Perhaps never. I am not worthy. I cannot be trusted.

“Well?” Her toe taps with irritating calm. “Will you answer me, or will you stand there like a dolt?”

Never have I spoken during meals. We are to take this time to reflect on ourselves, deepen our faith, strengthen our principles. But Harper will not cave. She will pry every desired emotion free. She will hammer blows until I sunder.

“There is nothing I have to say to you, Harper.” My voice rings with surprising strength. “The fact that you insist on belittling me reveals just how weak your character is.”

Her eyes flare. She seems to grow four inches in the next breath.

We join Thornbrook to evolve, but in all the years I've known Harper, I have seen no growth from her, only stagnation. “Whether Mother Mabel chooses you to ascend will not stop me from continuing my studies. Acolyte or not, I will deepen my relationship with the Father.”

Rare it is for my anger to slither and strike. If Harper voluntarily sticks her hand into the mouth of a snapping cur, she can only blame herself.

Thankfully, the bell peals, signaling the end of breakfast. Everyone

files out the doors to begin their morning chores. Since I'm assigned breakfast duty, I remain in the hall, the smell of boiled vegetables lingering.

A single novitiate to clean the mess of one hundred women, normally a task shared by four. But I will not complain, just as I did not complain yesterday.

Stacks of bowls coated in food fill three large buckets. One by one, I drag them to the kitchen, where I fill a massive tub with water from the well and begin to scrub each dish and utensil clean.

I move slowly, for that is all I can move these days. Three sundowns, three sunrises, yet my back still aches fiercely. Any slight shift drags my dress across the bruised flesh, seven large, painful welts received. I expected the pain to subside, but it has worsened over the passing days.

Four, seven, ten bowls. Sudsy water coats my hands, and my mind unspools. As soon as it begins to stray toward Zephyrus, I reel it back, slamming the door shut on those intrusions.

It takes two hours to wash the dishes, clean the tables, sweep the floor. Sunlight heats the wooden floorboards to honey gold, the open-aired windows cutting the long, simple benches into blocks of light. That done, I head upstairs to exchange my slippers for boots, shuffling slowly to combat the lightheadedness.

Once inside my room, I move to the mirror. My hands shake as I unbutton the front of my dress, then my chemise, peeling both from my clammy skin and exposing my back to the reflection.

Deep violet curdles the surface, the bruises' outer rings having cooled to a mealy gray. The centers rage a livid red, nearly the same shade as my hair. I flinch in remembrance of the lash. Blood veins outward across the surface—irritated, pulped skin.

With an unsteady breath, I rebutton my dress and undergarment. Mother Mabel has barred me from the infirmary. In the Book of Grief,

Arran traveled across the highlands for twelve days enduring the pain of a festering sword wound and lived. According to our Abbess on High, I, too, will withstand this suffering.

I've revealed nothing of what transpired in the sacristy, though I wonder if the others know, gossiping behind closed doors. They question why Brielle, Mother Mabel's favored novitiate, has been assigned the most wretched chores, a subject of cold scrutiny in the Abbess' critical gaze.

I spend my evenings in the forge, away from prying eyes, but my smithing comes at a cost. I can only shape the metal for so long before my back spasms and the tools slip from my grasp. Once a week, the Abbess trains me after evening Mass, but she did not show up for our knife fighting lesson yesterday. Another punishment? Most likely. As for chores, I am the slowest to complete them, but I do not complain. A liar I may be, but never a complainer. Through this hard toil, I seek repentance.

Something creaks behind me, and I glance over my shoulder. The shutters swing open, revealing the ferocious black waters of the strait in the distance, a line of soot ground between the cliffs and the Gray's rocky shore.

My slow, drudging pulse begins to climb. A flash of green enters my periphery, and it is a wonder I'm able to rein in my ire as I spin to face Zephyrus. "Get out."

The West Wind, who reclines against the wall, arches a brow. He practically glows with health, curls ashine, hideous face kissed by a rosy hue. "Is that any way to greet a guest?"

"You are not welcome here," I snap. How my throat scalds, torn open by the viciousness I fight to repress.

His lips curve. A dangerous thing, that mouth, able to snarl and croon in equal measure. "So there *is* fire within you." Three deliberate

strides bring him within arm's reach. "I was wondering when it would manifest."

That he treats my anger like a performance to witness bristles in me. Even my red curls spring from their confinement.

Moving to the door, I engage the lock. Then I whirl on him. "I will not repeat myself. I wish never to see nor speak to you again. Leave." Before my ire snaps its tether.

Closer he sidles, padding with all the quiet of a barn cat. White tunic, rough trousers, weathered boots. "I admit, your anger confuses me. I thought you would be pleased. After all, I gave you the opportunity to learn the answer to your most deeply desired question."

My hand cuts the air. "You assumed wrong." I never should have agreed to accompany him, but I allowed myself to dream.

He stops at my desk, skimming a hand over the Text, open to the Book of Truth from last night's reading. The West Wind, standing in my room, stealing the air. A god. I cannot believe it.

"What has changed?" A calm inquiry, yet tension simmers underneath.

Nothing, and everything. I have glimpsed things—terrible, lovely, yearning things—in a world that is not for me.

"It is simple," I state. "I will not be returning to Under, nor will I associate with you in the future."

"You have not answered the question."

"Because it is none of your business."

"Is it not?" His hands slide into his pockets, yet I feel no safer in his presence. If only I could read him better. "Tell me why."

I consider it—saying *no*. "Should Mother Mabel learn of my visit to Under, I could be cast from the abbey. Should she learn of our association, I absolutely would be. Thornbrook is my home. I will not risk it."

Strangely enough, this last statement seems to weaken whatever barrier exists between us. It mollifies the intensity rolling off his shoulders, the stiffness of his posture. It quiets him momentarily.

“This is your home,” he agrees. “You are right. I was careless in having failed to keep track of the passing time belowground.”

“Did you know time moves differently in Under?”

He ambles to the window, gently plucks the sprig of dried lavender from the sill. Sunlight marks a pale bloom across his cheekbone. It smooths the unsightly, patchy quality to his tanned skin. “I was aware, but I did not take it into consideration. I am used to working alone, without thought for others.”

Yet I told him how important it was to return to Thornbrook before dawn. What is the truth—these words, or his actions?

“You have overstayed your welcome.” Though he was never welcome in the first place. “I insist you leave at once.”

“There are things I wish to say to you, Brielle. I had hoped you would reconsider.”

Enough of these games. If Zephyrus will not leave, then I will.

I’m nearly to the door when he catches my shoulder and unknowingly places pressure on my bruising. A cry of pain cracks out of me as I recoil, slamming into the wall.

Zephyrus drops his hand, startled.

An exhale hisses through my clenched teeth. The throb migrates up my spine, digging deep into muscle, bone. I shuffle sideways to put more distance between us, the door handle within reach. His gaze drops to where my hand curves around my shoulder, sheltering it from his touch.

“You are injured?” Too quiet.

I do not respond.

He steps forward.

I take a step back.

Zephyrus' eyes darken, and a discomfiting thrum of energy courses through me. He smiles so readily and weaves such pretty lies, but something lurks beneath that facade, and it is not as tame as I had assumed.

“What happened?” he demands.

“The business is mine,” I state. He will take nothing more from me. I will not give him the satisfaction.

A rough hand drags through his curls with leashed patience. He tucks his tongue into his cheek, the look of a man considering a situation from all angles, examining responses and discarding them, all but one. “Be that as it may,” he continues with willful obstinacy, “I have a responsibility to you.”

I am too far removed to find humor in this situation. He will never be satisfied. He will tear into flesh until he hits bone. “You have no such thing. Let me be clear.” My tone demands his attention, and I do not proceed until he gives it. “I aided you in your time of need, and you repaid that debt. We have no further business with each other.”

He eyes me doubtfully. “You’re saying you gained the knowledge you sought? If I recall, you did not appear particularly enthused after meeting Willow. Why, you didn’t mention it at all.”

I hate how I begin to cave despite my intentions. He must know so much more than me. Thus, he must know best.

“You want to know what happened?” I grit, voice hoarse with unbridled shame. “By the time I returned to the abbey, an entire week had passed. They—” My throat strains as the tears well. “Everyone thought I was dead!”

His expression has frozen into something borderline inhuman. He is not mortal, I remind myself. He is something far beyond my comprehension.

“You were punished,” he grinds out, “because you did not confess

where you had been. Is that it?”

“I told you I was forbidden to enter Under.” A single tear tracks down my cheek, which I wipe away. “I could not risk being sent away. Thornbrook is my home.”

A gust snaps at the shutters, startling me. “What punishment did you receive?” The whisper rings in the corners of my room.

“It doesn’t matter.” The punishment is irrelevant. Physical pain is temporary. The knowledge of having disappointed Mother Mabel lingers, however, and I wonder for how long.

It was deserved. I strayed. I trusted the wrong person, someone blind to my discomfort, his manipulations showcasing a complete lack of concern. I am beginning to think the Orchid King was correct in his assessment of Zephyrus.

My shoulders slump. I’m tired. I cannot fight in this shamed, weakened state. Perhaps that is why the West Wind finally takes his leave via the open window, using the dense ferns and roots clambering up the tower for footholds. “If I could explain—”

“You have taught me a valuable lesson, Zephyrus.” I grip the window’s slatted wood coverings, fingers digging into the warped timber. “Never trust a man.”

I slam the shutters in his face.

LATER THAT EVENING, I sit in bed, journal propped open on my lap. Since Zephyrus’ departure, I’ve struggled to mollify the creature pacing inside my chest, tension drawn to a point with nervous energy. Rather than retreating to the forge following service, I picked up my quill, my jar of charcoal ink, and scratched at the parchment until the tightness had eased, my mind

quieting. Today was difficult. One of those days when time seems to flow backward, offering no reprieve from the weight on one's chest.

I reflect on Zephyrus' unexpected arrival, the shock and fury and dismay I'd felt. I parse out the moments of shame. I list all that I wished I'd said to him, but did not. I speak to the paper as I would confide in a dear friend, though I have none.

I write until my hand cramps, until my eyes sting with fatigue and the words blur, until ink smears the parchment, until my spine cracks from hunching over the journal. But alas, I do not understand why this system of events occurred, why I have received this misfortune. Poised at the bottom of the page, my quill hovers, awaiting direction.

I write, *Who am I to question the Father's plan?* and leave it at that.

A SOUND STARTLES me awake.

It is brief—too brief to know what, exactly, woke me. My room does not harbor its usual lightless pitch. The far wall reflects the brightness of moonlight on white plaster. The shutters, when I prepared for bed, were closed. They currently hang open, a frame for the forested hills, the darkness of Carterhaugh in slumber.

I lie frozen atop my stomach, blankets tangled around my legs. I must rise, defend myself. Snagging the knife beneath my pillow, I ready the strike, arming myself against the agony that will accompany the brutal thrust, the vicious tear of unhealed skin. I suck in air, preparing to scream. Whoever has entered my bedroom will know of their mistake.

“I would not recommend that if I were you.”

The scream finds a premature death. I grip my dagger between trembling fingers, staring at the wall above my headboard. It is an age

before the strength to reply returns. “I told you not to show your face again.”

“Is my face displeasing to you?”

Conscious of my bruising, I sit up gingerly, wincing at the spasm in my lower back. “This has nothing to do with your appearance,” I say, scanning the veiled room, “and everything to do with your character.”

“Can they not be one and the same?” Zephyrus sounds close, but that can’t be possible. I would have seen him move. As it is, I see nothing in the patched light and shade, no bodily figure or silhouette.

If I strain my ears, I think I catch the hush of padding feet, but the screaming wind beyond the shutters drowns out the slightest noise.

“I’m aware,” he says solemnly, “that I am unwelcome. But I have come to pay yet another debt.”

I’m so taken aback I wonder if this is a dream. “A debt?” My fingers twitch around the hilt, and I pull the dagger from beneath my pillow, resting it atop my thigh. In the chilly air, my sweat-pricked skin puckers, drawing my nipples to points beneath my thin nightgown. I cross an arm over my chest. Unfortunately, my cloak hangs from a peg across the room.

The West Wind clears his throat. A floorboard creaks to my right. “You were punished. The fault was mine. I can ease your pain if you will allow it.”

He wants something. Why else would he return? “What do you truly want, Zephyrus?” My attention veers to the window. Still no sign of him. I closed the shutters before bed, right?

Am I unraveling?

“All I want,” he says, “is to right the wrong I have done.”

He speaks with perfect eloquence, the warmth of genuine remorse.

I do not believe him.

Cool air floats across my face. In the darkness, I need not be afraid,

not on hallowed ground. Strangely, I appreciate the eve's concealing nature. It shields my confusion over the Bringer of Spring's return.

“Will you allow me to help you?”

“The last time you *helped* me, I was punished. Why should I trust this will be any different?”

“I am here.” The shape of a hand imprints itself on my nape, but when I reach back, nothing is there. “Let that be enough.”

It's a trap. There can be no other explanation. “Tell me what you plan.”

“I wish to heal whatever wounds mar your back.”

My ability to respond fails me. I am frozen, nothing but a sculpture crafted from bone.

“You are unsettled,” he says. “You need not be.”

There—something moved in my periphery. I spot a shadowed figure detaching itself from the wall near my dresser. Moonlight transforms his eyes into wells of light. I swallow hard. My knife remains in my lap. If my mother were here, she would have driven the blade into his throat, but I try not to think about that.

“Lie down, Brielle.”

A new depth enters his tone that was not previously present, a strange, assertive quality, enthrallingly grounded. It is a compulsion to obey. My limbs twitch in confusion, to stand and put distance between us, yet to rest, ease the pain. *Lie down*, the West Wind orders. He is no keeper of mine.

A cork springs free of a glass vial. Moments later, a stringent aroma stings my nostrils.

“What is that?” I whisper into the dark.

“A salve made from pearl blossom.” His voice flows across my skin in pacifying strokes. “Highly effective.” He glides across the room, halting

an arm span away. If I'm not mistaken, a fresh bruise mottles his left cheek. "A small amount may heal any manner of surface wounds."

No wonder it smelled familiar. My fingers curl into the sheet on either side of me. "My nightgown—"

"You will need to remove it, otherwise I cannot access your back."

I stiffen. "Who said anything about accessing my back?" What he suggests...

"Can you reach your wounds?"

His gaze snags mine, bright with intensity. It is easy to overlook the displeasing countenance, the lumpy nose and weak jaw, in the presence of those brilliant, crystalline eyes.

And yet, the daring in him. I tuck my chin into my chest. What he asks violates everything I've been taught. Purity: our second vow. "The welts will heal."

"They will scar without the proper treatment."

"Then I will live with it."

The West Wind tosses the balm from hand to hand as he gazes out the window. Piled atop the forested canopy, starlight gathers so plentifully it appears to have been poured from the fattest urns. "You are awfully quick to accept this punishment. Do you know what I see? Lack of sleep. Exhaustion." He points to my face, tracing the lines of weariness in the air with contempt. "But I am not surprised, considering how sterile this room is."

There is nothing wrong with my room. It holds a cot, a desk, a chair, a trunk at the foot of the bed, and a dresser. Why would I need tangible objects when the Father fills my life?

"I'm not sure I understand," I say.

Moving to the bed, he rests a palm flat against the mattress and sinks his weight onto it. The wooden slats squeak beneath the bowing pressure.

“Your mattress is filled with old straw. It offers no support. You sleep little because you are uncomfortable.”

“I sleep little,” I counter, “because you have entered my room unwelcome and unannounced.”

“No personal touches,” he continues, gesturing to the plain plaster walls and lack of color. “You possess not even a book.”

“I have a book.” The Text rests on my desk.

“Not a book read for pleasure or comfort.”

He does not understand. “The Text comforts me.” It is steadfast in my life.

“But nothing else in this room does.”

I do not need comfort. I need only the Father.

“You are denied pleasure.”

I clear my throat and shift to lying on my side. “Pleasure is temptation,” I whisper.

“Mm.” A low, curious sound, neither agreement nor disagreement. “Is this what you believe, or what you are taught to believe?”

“I do not see a distinction between the two.”

For a moment, I’m positive his gaze falls to my chest, where my arm conceals the shape of my breasts, but it is too dark to be certain. “How can you judge temptation when you have not experienced it yourself?” The quirk of his mouth widens, unfolding in delight. Still, he remains entrenched in shadow. “You are not curious?”

This again. “No, I am not.”

He purses his lips, then relents. “Very well.” This near, I smell the rain on him. “If your injury is not treated, you might always live with this pain.”

My fingers dig into the mattress. It is agony, my injury, though I do

not want to admit it. “Even if I accept the salve, I won’t be able to reach my back. It’s too painful.”

“I can apply it for you.”

My hand spasms around the dagger. “Absolutely not.”

“You truly want to punish yourself in this way?”

The question gives me pause. Yes... and no. Mother Mabel might consider my sentence just, and I agree, to an extent, but we are armored differently, she and I. The West Wind offers me relief. I question whether that’s a good thing. “I can’t,” I whisper through a tightening airway.

Zephyrus steps forward, and I tense. “You can,” he says gently, “if only you say yes.”

I cannot read his expression. Indeed, he is quite adept at secrecy. “But—”

“Let me help you.”

My tongue is rendered useless, naught but an awkward chunk of flesh behind my teeth. “No man may touch a Daughter of Thornbrook.”

“You are in pain,” he says. “Pain I have directly caused.” Another step forward, boots quiet. When I walk the room, the wooden floorboards buckle and groan, but with Zephyrus, it is as though he weighs nothing at all. “Let me heal you. Let me ease your burden.”

The agony is unbearable. I have been unable to properly sleep these past few nights. My eyes burn, yet no tears fall. Exhaustion has threaded my skin, encasing every muscle and tendon and bone.

If I were to guide another in this situation, what would I say? *Accept the healing for what it is—a grace.* But I have never taken my own advice.

“What must I do?” I say.

Pulling a pair of gloves from his back pocket, Zephyrus slides them on. I did not anticipate the consideration. Once again, he’s left me unbalanced. “Unbutton your gown to the waist and lie on your stomach.”

My cheeks sting so hotly I fear I will melt. “Turn around while I undress.”

He follows my instruction without complaint.

I am but a body in motion, bone sheathed in flesh. As my mind detaches itself from my limbs, I loosen the buttons running down my nightgown and lie across my bed, the fabric parting over my back, ruined skin exposed to the chilly air.

“You can look,” I whisper.

A soundless step brings Zephyrus to my bedside. My skin tingles from the proximity.

“How bad is it?” I ask.

In my periphery, I watch the hand dangling near his thigh form a fist. “There’s an infection near the base of your spine.” He exhales through his nostrils. “My brother received a similar lashing... a long time ago.”

“A switch to the back?”

“A whip.”

The word stings—*whip*. With a deep breath, I force down the curdling in my stomach. Discipline is expected in the church, but it has never sat right with me. Other roads lead to similar destinations. “How many brothers do you have?” A test, to see if his information aligns with what Lissi told me.

“Three.” A curt response. This emotion colors differently than the rest, darker than the light and green he surrounds himself with. “My eldest brother took responsibility for a punishment I should have received as well.”

Five fingers skim my spine. I flinch, my muscles clenched. Zephyrus wears his gloves, I remind myself. His flesh will not touch mine.

“Why should you have received the punishment?” I stare at my desk, the blocky Text, the slender edge of my journal.

“What does it matter?” he says. “What’s done cannot be undone.”

The sheets sigh beneath my shifting legs. I curl my hand into a fist, tuck it against my cheek. “You sound sad,” I whisper.

A faint, whistling breath slides free. Perhaps he, too, struggles to share his emotional state. The sadness must be something he carries just as my insecurity is something I carry. I understand its weight: a lodestone around one’s neck.

“In times of trouble,” I offer, “I turn to the Father. I allow Him to guide me to clear waters. When we have faith—”

“Do not speak to me about faith.” He practically spits the words, and I feel the tremble of his hand pressed to my shoulder.

What follows? The widest, deepest gulf, into which all sound plummets. It is so silent I hear the tolling of Kilmany’s town bell ten miles away. “Do you believe in faith?” I ask softly.

“No,” Zephyrus says. “I do not.”

I’m suddenly cold. Frighteningly cold.

I snap upright in bed. “Stop.” The motion tugs on the inflamed skin, and I hiss out a breath.

Shadow eats half of Zephyrus’ face, yet moonlight falls on its reflection, his eye bright like a spot of new growth in the cold. “I cannot heal your back if you do not allow me to touch you,” he says calmly. Gone is the mischievous, cunning creature I saved from the woods. This version of the West Wind is haunted. By what, I cannot say. I know nothing about him. And I am the world’s largest fool.

Pushing to my feet, I snatch the cloak hanging from its hook on the wall and wrap it around my curves. Zephyrus stares unashamedly at my voluptuous shape. My skin tightens beneath his scrutiny.

I should have sent him away the moment he entered my room. What

was I thinking? Does he hold power over me, my will? But no, I made the decision, however poor, on my own.

Wordlessly, the West Wind places the salve on my desk before taking his leave. “Smooth it onto your wounds,” he murmurs. “It should nullify the pain by morning.”

The shutters clap shut following his departure. I pluck the glass vial from the piles of documents, lift the substance to my nose. Its harsh odor clears my head. Silly, foolish girl. Zephyrus’ lack of consideration caused me to receive the beating in the first place. Let this balm be a reminder. With these scars, I will never forget.

CHAPTER 9

It takes time, but eventually, life returns to its previous rhythm. Once my back heals, I'm allowed to return to the forge under Mother Mabel's supervision. As well, I'm reintegrated into the chore rotation: the fields, the vineyards, the herbarium, the kitchen. Unfortunately, a gulf separates me from the other novitiates. I am not dead as they had believed. With no explanation for my disappearance, they resort to gossip, the falsities of imagination distended into ugly untruths.

What do they give me? Silence.

I scrawl these words with tear-stained cheeks in my journal late one evening. My hand cramps from the hours of furious inscription. Emotion pours out—nine pages of it. Only when I am purged of the hurt does my pulse slow, easing into a calmer state, though never calm enough to truly feel at peace.

Most of my waking hours are spent in silence, but there is the silence that takes and there is the silence that lends. These women, with their suspicions, they take and they take and they take. They do not ask me about my day. They do not greet me in the halls. They assume I lie, and they would be correct.

Setting the journal aside, I move to the window and peer below. Tucked in the shadow of the towering complex, a woman brandishes a blade of solid steel. Its silvery arc catches the torchlight as she moves slowly through various exercises with painstaking intention.

Many nights I watch Mother Mabel train in secret. How many know of her skill? Who has she informed except me? I am in awe of her effortless grace. I always have been. Yet trailing that emotion comes the inevitable shame. We haven't revisited our evening training sessions. I wonder if the break is permanent.

Returning to my bedside, I kneel, place my linked hands atop the mattress, and bow my head in the low candlelight.

"Eternal Father. Hear me, for I am struggling." Oh, if only he knew. "Despite attempting to connect with my peers, they have shunned me."

Yesterday afternoon, I asked one of the acolytes if she would mind reviewing the day's geometry lesson with me, since she excels in the subject. The woman, Bryn, stared at me and said, "Sure, if you come clean about what really happened when you disappeared."

When I did not respond, she walked off. Since then, I haven't spoken a word—to anyone.

"I do not always know the answers to life's questions," I go on. "I do not know why it was *I* who found the West Wind, thus leading me into Under."

I squeeze my eyes tighter, blow out a breath. I do not say this aloud, but I wish I never stumbled across Zephyrus. Since my return, I feel more alone than ever. The peers I believed to be friendly have offered little comfort or support. I suppose I was wrong about them, too.

Recentering myself, I reach into the farthest depths of my heart and pull the last traces of this confession free. "Despite these obstacles, I know

you have a plan for me. I eagerly await its reveal. In Your name I pray. Amen.”

EARLY ONE MORNING, weeks following my lashing, Mother Mabel directs us to the refectory following Mass. Dim, watery light leaks through the cloister, and beyond the manicured yard, low clouds gather, dragging the scent of rain inland.

Silence entombs these halls of stone. One by one, we wash our hands and file through the doors, solemn, for the change in routine is unusual. Unbowed beneath the heavily ornate chasuble, Mother Mabel brings up the rear. A pair of novitiates heaves shut the oaken doors. The crash lingers in the rafters, then ebbs, the quietest death.

“Please take your seats.” She strides up the center aisle, toward the raised table where she takes her meals.

Someone gasps.

One heartbeat is all it takes. The atmosphere draws inward, compressing the breathable air into spare leavings, an impression of what once was, charged with fear. I do not imagine the change in scent, something ensnared in soil, long buried, now unearthed. One of the women whimpers. My pulse spikes as the crowd halts in place, pressing in. What disturbs them so?

“Calm, ladies,” Mother Mabel soothes. “You are not in danger. Please take your seats and I will explain.”

I crane my head over the crowd, seeking the reason for the disturbance. Someone’s elbow drives into my back.

“Quickly.” Our Abbess’ command snaps out, and a heartbeat before the crowd lurches forward, I spot him.

He squats like an overgrown weed atop the dais. Dirt marks a trail on the ground. His bare chest, indecently exposed, draws my focus, the round, disked nipples flushed a healthy pink. The lower torso, fashioned from a heavy stalk and broad leaves, spreads into the small, red, open mouths of the nightshade plant, their vines curled around his wide shoulders and the back of his neck like docile serpents.

These women see. We *all* see. The Orchid King is not human.

Fear is the bedrock.

My gaze swings wildly across the room. With the impending storm shrouding Carterhaugh in a dreary pall, the candlelight breeds shadows. Zephyrus is nowhere in sight, not that I expected his presence. Does he know of the Orchid King's attendance? I have not seen him in weeks.

Everyone vies for the tables farthest from the dais. Harper and Isobel rush toward the back corner. Only one bench remains.

Isobel reaches it steps ahead, sliding into place. Harper claws at her friend's coiled braids, yanking her head back. "I don't think so."

The shorter woman sneers, her nostrils flaring dangerously. "I arrived here first." Her nails gouge into Harper's wrist, drawing blood. "Let go."

Harper's blue eyes glitter, but when she notices the Orchid King's attention, her confidence falters, and she releases Isobel's hair. "I'll remember this."

"I'm sure you will."

"Ladies." Mother Mabel glares at them across the hall. "If you please."

Three tables at the front remain. I shuffle forward with the rest, yet veer toward the kitchen, using the crowd as a cover while I slip into a shadowed cranny. Everyone is too stricken to notice my absence. For once, I appreciate being overlooked.

Mother Mabel lifts a hand, and the noise cuts out.

“Please join me in welcoming the Orchid King.” She gestures to Pierus, whose shifting weight bows the platform beneath a heap of swollen, milk-white roots. Due to his bulk, there isn’t enough room for both of them on the dais. Thus, Mother Mabel stands to his right a healthy distance away. “As he is my guest, you will treat him with the same formality and respect you would show any of His followers.”

I sincerely hope he’s not staying as a guest. If he were a secular official, he would sleep and take meals in the Abbess’ house. The guesthouse is strictly used for visiting acolytes from neighboring abbeys.

“Thank you for your hospitality, Mother Mabel.” Pierus dips his chin in gratitude. “I will not take up much of your time.”

Mother Mabel offers him a bland smile. She stands as the stone pillars do, with rising majesty, blond hair darkened to gold as the outside dims further and candlelight winks into distant islands. With everyone focused on the Orchid King, no one notices her hands, how they clamp at her front, the catch of tightening skin over rigid knuckles. If she is uncomfortable, why extend Pierus this invitation?

Arms extended, the Orchid King takes in his audience: novitiates, acolytes, humble servants of the faith. “Daughters of Thornbrook, you have my respect. The tithe draws near. I want to extend my deepest gratitude for what you will provide my people. Please know your contribution will not be overlooked.”

As he scans the room, I press my back against the cool stone, grateful for my quick thinking. The brightness of my hair would surely attract his attention. Pierus would see my face. He would know.

“Please understand your participation is vital to the success of Under’s viability. As such, all requirements must be carried out with the

utmost precision. Mother Mabel.” He turns to our Abbess, all smiles. “Have you secured the girls who will participate in the tithe?”

“That has yet to be determined,” she replies stiffly. “And they are women, Pierus.” Her gaze flicks to a wayward root, which eases through the legs of a bench, jostling the wood and startling the group of acolytes sitting atop it. The women, two of whom work with me in the fields, flinch, though manners dictate they remain seated.

Mother Mabel frowns at her wards. I, too, question if the jostle was purposeful.

“My apologies.” Pierus rests a hand on his chest. Cracked, sooty talons interrupt the silver strands of his long, unbound hair. “When you live forever, every woman appears as a child. I only meant to inquire as to the number.”

Wood groans beneath his shifting weight. Then, an unmistakable crack rents the air. Mother Mabel stares at the splintered dais, lips compressed. Whispers flare and die as we await her response.

The tithe requires the blood of twenty-one Daughters of Thornbrook—three sets of seven. There has never been a lack of volunteers. Most are curious of Under, and the cost is little: one drop of blood, pricked from our fingers with the point of an iron blade. Due to unexplainable enchantments, the participants’ memories are wiped prior to returning aboveground.

“Rest assured there will be exactly twenty-one women.” She steps into a pool of shifting candlelight. I believe the movement is intentional, for the chasuble, with its gold threads, comes alight. Even the Orchid King stares. “We will meet you at Miles Cross, as is tradition.”

Although uncomfortably violent, we all understand the tithe’s importance. The contract between Thornbrook and Under is clear. The land upon which the abbey was built belongs to Under. Thornbrook may continue to lease the land if we participate in the tithe. Too many towns

depend on Thornbrook to risk its closure, Kilmany and Aberdeen especially. Even Veraness, my hometown.

“I am glad to hear it,” he says, “and I am grateful for our continued allyship. Any questions or concerns, you are welcome to voice them. I will linger for a time, but I must return before noon.”

With that, we are dismissed. A few of the more courageous acolytes approach Pierus with questions. I slink toward the doors with the rest, though I swear I sense his gaze on the back of my neck as I leave.

I spend the morning carting bins of laundry down to the wash. The dresses and albs will soak in lye overnight, following any necessary mending. I’m assigned laundry quite frequently compared to the other novitiates. The laborious task requires a strong back and arms. Likely that is why.

I’m on my way to the refectory for lunch, fingers sore from stitching thread, when someone calls my name.

With a sinking stomach, I turn toward Mother Mabel. She stares at me for an indeterminate length of time. “Please join me in my office.”

She knows. It is my only thought as I shuffle after her retreating back.

Reaching her office requires entering a building tucked snugly against the cloister’s western edge, south of the church and north of the infirmary. The Abbess’ house contains a small dining hall, a chapel, an office, and additional bedchambers for any prestigious visiting authorities.

Pockets of light brighten the foyer beyond the front door. Tapestries hang from the plaster walls. A small side table contains multiple copies of the Text, stacked in various shades of brown leather. Turning right, I accompany Mother Mabel down a short hall lined with doors. She fits her key into the first lock. Once inside, I shut the door for privacy.

She settles at her desk, a massive slab framed by the arched window

overlooking the western grounds. Her chair is all angles. Her spine reaches, straight as a pole. The Abbess on High still wears her chasuble. Perhaps she needs reassurance—the Father’s own hand curled protectively around her—after the Orchid King’s visit.

Fingers interlaced atop her desk, she gestures to the empty chair before me. “You are welcome to sit.”

It does not sound like a request.

I sit.

“How are you healing?” she asks with unexpected compassion.

I blink stupidly, then relax into the chair. I’m not here to discuss my foray into Under. Hopefully my absence in the refectory was not noticed. “Well enough.” Undoubtedly, my skin would bruise and tug and scar. Such is the consequence of my actions.

“Good.” A shallow nod.

The Text rests on the corner of her desk. Mother Mabel drags it toward herself. For a time, she stares at the freshly oiled cover, and I wring my hands, wondering if I should speak.

“I want to apologize for this morning.” She looks to me. “Pierus’ presence was unexpected.”

I’m not sure what to say. The last thing I expected was an apology. I also find it interesting she uses Pierus’ given name in private.

“I have known Pierus for a long time. He is an acquired taste.” She fiddles with her gold necklace. Two serpents shape the metal, a clasp formed by their open mouths. “I know he’s uncomfortable to be around, but I commend the poise you all showed this morning. I was proud of you, Brielle. I was proud of every one of my charges.”

The pride is misplaced. She does not know how I fled and cowered, or why.

“Next time,” she says, “I will make sure his arrival is known.”

I nod with all the forced cheer I can muster. If he appeared without notice, there is little she could have done. I fear what were to happen if Mother Mabel barred him entry. “Is he a guest at Thornbrook?”

“He is not, thankfully.” A tired smile. “I have been thinking lately.” She smooths her hand across the tome’s vast spine. “You have accepted your punishment without complaint and have displayed true devotion to Thornbrook these past few weeks. As such, you are welcome to visit the infirmary and have your wounds checked.”

Zephyrus’ pearl blossom salve has hastened my healing, and I would not have the physician question my lack of scarring. “I appreciate the sentiment, but my back has healed well enough.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” She flips to a bookmarked page. “We all have our scars, our lessons learned. They are paramount to our individual growth.” The frail parchment—stretched and dried animal skins—whispers between her fingertips. “However, I would like to extend my apologies. I did not enjoy dispensing your punishment.”

I remember the scream of the lash seconds before my skin split. Sweat dampens my underarms.

“No apology needed,” I whisper. “I know you did not enjoy it.” Neither of us did. “But I understand why it was necessary.”

That keen, watchful gaze scans me from head to toe: slippers, dress, limp russet curls. As always, I fear she finds me lacking. “Is there anything you wish to discuss with me, Brielle? Anything at all?”

Mother Mabel is not warm, exactly, but she has provided me a home and a purpose when I feared my life had ended. Eleven years old, abandoned on a rain-drenched doorstep, three words to usher me into a new life: *Be good, Brielle.*

“No, Mother Mabel,” I reply, head bowed. “There is not.”

“I see.” The disappointment in her voice draws my eye. “You can

always come to me in your time of need, you know. There is nothing we cannot navigate together.”

Guilt is the hound dogging my heels. Higher the secrets pile: Under, Zephyrus, betrayal. “I understand.”

“May I ask you a question, Brielle?”

The prickling continues its torturous spread. She has the right to ask. But she also has the right to demand answers of me. “You may.”

“What is it you want from this life?”

Her question gives me pause. No one has ever asked this of me, but I thought it was obvious. “I wish to bring myself closer to the Father,” I say. “I wish to be His servant in all ways.”

“You do not wish for something different?” She leans forward. “A family, or your own home to tend? There is no shame in it.”

“I do not.” My response does not waver. The Father is gentle and forgiving. Only He may guard my wounded heart.

Mother Mabel closes the Text with a snap. Strands of white-gold hair gleam, pulled taut against her skull. “I wonder if the abbey is enough for you.”

The pit that has steadily amassed in my stomach opens wide and engulfing. What does Mother Mabel suggest? Am I no longer welcome here? The thought of being ripped from this place closes my throat. What am I to do with my days? What purpose will I serve? *Who* will I serve, if not the Father? Another moment ticks by before I’m able to collect myself. “You’re saying I must leave?” My voice fractures.

She sighs. Fabric shifts, and she rounds the desk in a few short strides, stationing herself at my side. Gently, Mother Mabel cups my cheek with one hand. “Of course I do not want that. You are a worthy novitiate. I have never met anyone so focused on their studies. But with your behavior of late, I have begun to question your place here.”

The coolness of her touch only serves to remind me how feverish I have become. Turning my head away, I fight to regulate my increasingly chaotic emotions. “I never want to disappoint you, Mother Mabel. I’ve worked hard to prove I belong here.”

“You are dedicated,” she assures. “Of that, I have no doubt.”

I should find satisfaction in Mother Mabel’s offering. Rarely does she bestow praise. Yet this conversation stirs up many long-lived insecurities.

“If I am worthy,” I dare say, “why have you continued to pass me over?” My hands ball into fists atop my lap, and I search for answers in the Abbess’ black gaze. “A decade I have been at Thornbrook. Why choose novitiates less driven, less experienced, than I?”

She drops her hand, pulls away. I cannot read her expression. “I admit I have been unfair to you, Brielle. When one becomes an acolyte, one gives everything to the Father. Your studies become more intense, your cause calls you away to the outer reaches of the realm.” Finest lines feather her mouth, its subtle upward curve. “But I need you here, in the forge. You are the only one who can do what you do.”

“So you will keep me a novitiate forever?”

“No.” She shakes her head. “I have given it thought. You are right. No novitiate is more driven, nor more experienced, than you. Bladesmith or not, you will stagnate if not given the opportunity to grow. Truthfully, I was going to select you this year, until I learned of recent occurrences.”

We stare at one another, but she has always been obdurate, uncowed. I drop my gaze to the floor.

Mother Mabel says, “I know you have visited Under.”

Calmly, I lift my eyes. Sadness and grief bring years to our faces, but this has never been more evident than it is now. Between one blink and the next, folds sink into the soft, wizened flesh of her visage, the skin sagging

beneath the chin, but in the next blink, the vision vanishes. She remains unaged.

“Mother Mabel.” The words crumble to a dry wheeze. “I—” What can I even say? Everything will sound like an excuse.

Pushing away from the chair, I fall to my knees. “I’m sorry. I admit, I have visited Under, just once.” The trembling in my limbs intensifies, for I fear. Oh, how I fear. “When you asked me if there was anything I wished to tell you, I was afraid.” My eyes sting, my voice warbles, but I must be brave. This heaviness in my heart will not lift until I have shed these stones.

“Thornbrook is my home. There is nothing I want more than to give my life to the Father. But I thought if you learned I had broken the rules, you would send me away.” The first tear falls, then the second. “The truth is, I helped a wounded man in Carterhaugh, and he manipulated me into trusting him. He took me into Under. I do not know how to explain it, Mother Mabel. It was—”

“Terrifying?” she inquires softly.

Closing my eyes, I let the warmth of her compassion wash over me.

“Yes.” That inky lake, those scarlet glass orbs, the field of roses sheltered within the cave. “There is much I do not understand about the realm.”

Mother Mabel rounds my other side. Her brown slippers peek beneath the hem of her alb. “My dear, we have all been tempted by Under one way or another. However, as Daughters of Thornbrook, we must remember our purpose. We must stay the course.”

“I know, and I’m sorry,” I whisper. “It was a brief upset. I promise it will not happen again. I will work hard to regain your trust.”

“It is not my trust you need to regain. It is His.”

The comment lands with painful precision, as intended. I stay quiet.

“Brielle.” She touches my shoulder in comfort, a fleeting warmth. “I

wish you would have come to me. I would have been able to guide you through this mess with clarity. We all make mistakes, but it hurts me to know you have been suffering.”

She’s right. I *have* been suffering. But wasn’t that the point of my punishment? What else did she expect me to do?

“Do you know why you forge the iron daggers for the tithe?”

I have wondered, but since no one speaks of Under, or of the tithe, I have kept those thoughts to myself. “I assumed it was for the ceremony, and for protection, since iron is fatal to the fair folk.”

“You are correct, but they also serve a greater purpose.” Fingertips steepled against her mouth, she paces the length of the room in a cloud of sweet incense, the myrrh having fully infused the office. “They act as an anchor and help ward off any enchantments that might touch us. Without them, we would lose our sense of self.”

It makes perfect sense. “What of the grassy path?” Mother Mabel must know, since she has braved Under before.

“Not even the grassy path can be trusted. Nothing and no one can. You must always question what is real. Promise me you will not needlessly risk your life in returning without permission.” She halts, angles toward me. “I would hate for your disobedience to be cause for dismissal.”

Every horror, every sadness, every tatter of grief I have carried these weeks freezes to ice inside my chest. If I do not have the abbey, if I do not have my god, then I have nothing. I *am* nothing. “I promise.”

Gently, she pats my arm. “You are a sweet girl, Brielle. You try your best. I cannot fault you for that.”

I am not a girl though. Twenty-one years I have walked this green earth. Body, mind, and soul, I am wholly a woman.

Mother Mabel returns to her desk, where the great carved slab lends

her additional prominence. The distance allows me to rise. Maybe I have fallen from grace in Mother Mabel's eyes, but I still retain my dignity.

I'm surprised when she offers me a genuine smile. It eases the harshness from her features. "It takes a woman of great character to admit her wrongdoings. I would like to offer you the opportunity to ascend your station, if interested."

No matter how many times I dissect that statement, it does not seem real. It has always felt like an elusive impossibility. "You mean—" Become the next acolyte. "Truly?"

"Should you begin the process of this transition, your heart belongs to the Father. Once you speak your Final Vows, He becomes your life."

"I understand." By all that is holy, I never thought this day would come. My chest swells in elation, and the world seeps color. I could run for miles without water or rest.

"Good." Her smile softens. "You understand, then, that before a novitiate can ascend, she must prove her dedication by completing a task, which tests her devotion. Normally, the task is granted to a single candidate, but in your case, there is another who seeks the same opportunity."

Just as quickly, I deflate. I had hoped, prayed, but there is yet another obstacle to climb. "Who?"

CHAPTER 10

Raising my fist to the old, creaking door, I gird my stomach for what will befall the moment my knuckles touch wood.

I can do this.

A hard *rat-tat-tat*, a sharp crack of sound. Then I wait.

It doesn't take long before the door swings open, Harper's unpleasant features fixed into a scowl. Her blue eyes thin, a scouring glare that rips me open from boot soles to scalp. "What do you want?"

As if she cares about such a thing. "Did Mother Mabel speak with you about the appointment?"

Her eyebrows, delicately arched and beautifully groomed, creep inward. "Why do you care to know? Is it not enough that I'm forced to interact with you daily? Must you spy on me as well?"

"There are many ways I would rather spend my time, Harper." Like shoveling dung.

Her foot taps out her irritation. Again, not unexpected. She has always moved in fits and bursts, propelled by the tightly coiled energy stuffed beneath her skin. "What is it then? I don't appreciate having my time wasted."

Funny. I was thinking the same thing.

“If Mother Mabel spoke to you, then she likely mentioned you are not the only one vying for the position of acolyte.”

At this, she straightens, and I watch her slide the bits of information into place with satisfaction: my unforeseen visit, this topic of conversation, the odd lack of fear as my gaze meets hers.

Her lips pinch into whiteness. “You’re joking.” A small, spiteful laugh descends into a sound of utter bewilderment. “Who knew you had the capacity for humor. What’s the real reason for your disturbance?”

It took all day to gather the courage to knock. Now I fight the urge to vomit, or pass out, or both. Dizziness often accompanies the tightness in my chest, which is never more severe than when I’m forced to face my oldest adversary. “I’ve been offered the opportunity to earn the position.”

Those blue eyes pop, comically round. “Excuse me?” Her shrill cry is as hair-raising as an outright shriek. “You? After the stunt you pulled? You can’t be serious.”

It stings, for I had believed the same, but Mother Mabel granted me a second chance. I will not squander it. “I do not lie.”

For once in her life, Harper is speechless. No insults, no scathing remarks. Blessed silence.

Her attention whips up and down the deserted corridor. Lunch ended an hour prior, but Mother Mabel freed me from obligations so I would have time to pack accordingly. I assume she granted Harper the same respite.

“Come inside.” She yanks me across the threshold, slamming the door behind me. “It’s embarrassing enough learning this without someone overhearing it.”

I jerk my arm from her grasp. “What, exactly, is embarrassing? That I’m worthy enough to be offered the spot, or that you have to compete with me for the title?”

A little snarl punches through her clenched teeth. My heartbeat peaks, a screaming high. I'm not sure why I feel the need to antagonize Harper. I think, *Defend, protect, hide*. She wants to become the next acolyte as much as I do. Therefore, I must tread carefully.

Keeping her within my sight, I angle away, scanning the cramped space, which she shares with Isobel. Zephyrus called my bedroom sparse. I suppose that makes Harper's sparse, too. The Text rests on her bookshelf, coated in months' worth of dust.

"What did Mother Mabel tell you?" she demands. "Leave nothing out."

Harper's outrage is total. It breaks upon me like ferocious waves and will suck me under if I do not hold my ground.

"I assume the same things she told you," I reply, crossing the room to put space between us. "She mentioned a quest."

"The quest. Right." I receive a polite, close-mouthed smile. "She told you nothing else?"

"She did not."

When I do not elaborate, she spits, "No one believes the story surrounding your disappearance. You would never be that irresponsible. Yet here you are, acting like we've all done you a disservice in ostracizing you. Do you think me a fool?"

If I say yes, Harper will readily rip my head from my body. So I say nothing. Sometimes no response is best.

As suspected, she accepts my silence as withdrawal and begins to pace. "I can't believe she's giving you a chance. You are the last person to deserve the appointment."

I've learned a thing or two about my adversary over the past decade. She seeks attention. She places importance on image. She cares about Mother Mabel's opinion a surprising amount, despite her failure to excel,

her poor study habits. As long as there is an ear to absorb her complaints, Harper wants for nothing.

“You understand it will be a long journey, yes?” she goes on, too self-absorbed to realize my eyes have glazed over. “I will not wait for you. With your bulk, you will likely fall behind. Do not blame me when that happens.”

My cheeks warm. Years I have weathered her atrocious insults, and still I struggle to fortify my defenses.

It is true we are different. Personality, appearance, and yes, weight. I’m larger than most. Tall, wide, muscular. An ample chest and soft hips. Most days, it doesn’t bother me. Beneath my white robe, I am no different than any other Daughter of Thornbrook. I do not care about my weight. I wish others didn’t either.

Stomping over to her cot, Harper plops onto the edge of the mattress. Leather slippers peek beneath the hem of her gray dress. “Did she mention the task to you?” Blue eyes regard me coolly.

“She did.” At first, I did not believe our Abbess. Am I thrilled about this quest? Not exactly. If, however, Mother Mabel demands I load stones into my pockets and plunge into the deepest river, I would do so without question. “We must seek out the blade called Meirlach.”

Harper frowns. “She told me the same.” For a time, she stares out the window, across the rain-damp forest, unusually ponderous. “The name is familiar,” she admits. “I can’t remember where I’ve heard it from.”

My attention wanders to her bookshelf. If she bothered to open the Text, she would not have this issue.

Harper tracks my gaze, and frowns. Leaning back on her elbows, she eyes me as one would a particularly loathsome creature. “Spare me your snobbery of the faith. Are you going to tell me or not?”

The story occurs in the Book of Change. It is brief, a handful of

sentences mentioning a king, the gods-forged blade wielded only by those who stood upon the stone of destiny and heard their name whispered by the fabled sword. Only those deemed worthy could wield it.

When I'm finished with the tale, Harper drawls, "It doesn't sound special to me. It sounds like an ordinary blade."

Unbelievable. "Did you not hear the part where it whispers to its bearer?"

She snorts at the ridiculousness of the notion.

I do not share the sentiment. The Text must be considered truth, always. "May I see your Text, please?"

She waves her fingers in dismissal, as though my asking is an inconvenience, but I wouldn't want anyone handling my personal copy without permission.

Plucking it from her bookshelf, I settle the heavy book in my palms. Dust coats my fingertips. I wipe them on my dress with a grimace.

Flipping to the Book of Change, I scan the story of Meirlach, seeking additional details while Harper watches from the bed. Her right leg, tossed over her left, bobs a rhythm as it hangs.

"According to the Book of Change," I say, "Meirlach can cut through any shield, pierce any armor, even hack through walls. When held at blade point, you will be unable to tell a lie." Bumps pebble my flesh as I read further. "It is even said to command the winds."

Thunder rumbles in the distance.

Harper's eyebrows climb all the way to her hairline. "I'm sure," she drawls.

I snap the book closed. "Why do you doubt the words on the page?" I ask, sharper than I intended. "To doubt the Text is to doubt the Father and His teachings." Does Mother Mabel know of Harper's skepticism? She

must not, otherwise she would never have given this woman the opportunity to transcend her current station.

Harper glowers at me, tight-lipped. “You’re saying you believe a sword can *cut through stone*? You believe it can *command the winds*?”

“Yes.”

“Without proof?”

“Harper.” A huff of exasperation escapes me. “That’s the entire point of faith. It only exists in the absence of proof.”

Her face pinches in contemplation. Then she nods, perhaps conceding to the idea that there exists such a blade despite lack of evidence. “All right. Let’s pretend this blade exists. How are we to find it?”

Setting aside the Text, I pull a square of folded parchment from my pocket. “With this.”

She bolts upright. “Is that a map? Why would Mother Mabel give you the map and not me?”

The reasons are too many to count. If I were to guess, it’s because I’m the more responsible, levelheaded one.

Mother Mabel marked an entrance into Under on the map. Relatively unknown, it requires an offering to pass through. Apparently, the nymph guarding the doorway is easily bribed.

“We’re looking for someone called the Stallion,” I say, ignoring her question and slipping the map back into my pocket. “If we find the Stallion, we find Meirlach.”

“What is the Stallion?”

“I don’t know.” Mother Mabel told me nothing about who or what the Stallion is. She gave me three things: a name, a warning, and a command.

You must kill the beast. It is the only way to obtain Meirlach.

The order sits queasily in my stomach. Does she expect me to

disobey my Decrees? I assume the Stallion is a type of horse-creature. Some novitiates have spotted equine-shaped silhouettes at twilight, before Carterhaugh reaches full dark. Their long manes and tails trail them like hanks of seaweed. “He lives in a place called the Grotto.”

“Sounds wonderful,” she mutters.

I refuse to feed her sour mood. “Navigating Under will present unique challenges. We must remain alert.”

Harper goes still. Her hands, planted on the edge of her cot, curl over the straw mattress. “You mean to tell me I am to travel into Under? With *you*? Into some horrible beast’s lair for a sword that may not even exist?”

It appears Mother Mabel told Harper very little about the details of this task. Not for the first time, I wonder why.

“No.” An adamant shake of her head. “No, this is absolutely ridiculous. Sending two mortal women into Under without a guide?” Strands of black hair hang in her face, which she bats aside with a growl.

I understand. Harper and I, despite our differences, do share a similarity. We fear the unknown. Perhaps all of us at Thornbrook do.

I’m not particularly thrilled about the quest either, but I recall Mother Mabel’s expression when she informed me of this task, her eyes reduced to furrows of skin, a rare sign of distress in someone who does not age. This task is necessary, just as our participation in the tithe is necessary. There is little enjoyment in it, but it must be done.

“I’m not going,” Harper clips. “She can’t make me.”

Then my road to success is all but guaranteed.

“Very well.” I speak with the utmost serenity. “I will inform Mother Mabel that you will be remaining behind.”

I’m nearly to the door when she calls, “Wait.”

Slowly, I turn. Harper appears torn, furious at the idea of being

painted a coward, yet refusing to hand over the opportunity without a fight. It is to be expected.

“Seems like a lot of effort for something that isn’t guaranteed.” Pushing off the bed, she reaches the window in four steps. Fog shrouds the vineyards in the distance, the air sweet with rain. “There is a high chance we will not return.”

I am well aware.

“Why does Mother Mabel want this sword anyway?”

“I don’t know.” The Abbess has access to plenty of iron blades, enough to keep the entirety of Under at a distance, if needed. It bears the question of why *this* blade is so special. It holds incredible power. What use does she have of it?

Harper stares at me until I grow uncomfortable. “What?”

“Aren’t you afraid to go into Under?”

“No.” Yes. “Are you?”

She sniffs delicately. “Not in the slightest. But it matters not.” She brushes past me. “I am not traveling with the likes of you.”

This, too, is expected. She thinks me a pawn, positioned where I will bring the greatest advantage. But this is my life. My future at Thornbrook depends on the outcome of this quest. I will not go quietly.

“How do you expect to enter Under without a map?” I anticipated the tantrum. Stupidity? I’ve little patience for it. “Is your plan to wander Carterhaugh until you stumble across an entrance by happenstance?”

“Obviously not.” She holds out a hand. “You will give me the map.”

Too easily, the noose tightens, my head swelling with air in the face of confrontation. I swallow to draw moisture to my mouth. “No.”

Harper stares at me. “No?”

I force out the rest. “I’m not giving you the map. Traveling on this journey alone is your choice, but eventually you’ll realize how little you

know of surviving beyond these walls. How will you protect yourself from the fair folk? How will you know where to shelter, what water sources to avoid, what plants are poisonous?” Her skin pales, snow against the ebony fall of her hair, and I am glad of it. Let her understand my knowledge of such things, the weight of her ignorance. “I’m keeping the map. If you were wise, you would want to travel together.”

“And how does that benefit me?” she counters, eyes ablaze. “If we each want to find the sword first, who’s to say you wouldn’t leave me to fend for myself?”

Because I understand what it is like to walk alone. Because I know how much darker the nights are without a fire. Because, despite my intense disdain for Harper, I cannot in good judgment abandon her to the dark. I have seen its face.

Maybe that makes me weak.

“It’s your choice,” I reiterate. “You are free to travel alone, if you wish.” Moving to the door, I rest my hand on the knob. “I will be in the fields tomorrow before dawn. I will wait until the sun breaches the horizon. Then I will leave, with or without you.”

Harper holds herself stiffly, every harsh angle whetted by panic. Fear that I am right. Fear of what will happen if she attempts the journey alone and realizes she was wrong. “I’ll be there.”

“Then you’ll need this.” I offer her the extra knife I’d tucked against the small of my back. It should fit her hand well.

Her eyes widen. “What use would I have of that?”

“To protect yourself.”

There was no bladesmith when I first arrived at the abbey, but in my sixteenth year, I stumbled across the old, dusty, forgotten forge. I peered through the cobwebs of abandonment, this cramped, overlooked hut, and asked Mother Mabel of its purpose.

Thornbrook's last bladesmith had passed on decades prior. Since then, no one had taken up the mantle—until me. It was Mother Mabel who suggested I wield the hammer. *Light the forge*, she'd said.

What do I remember?

The weight of that hammer, the awful ache of fatigued muscles the following morning.

What do I remember?

Smoke. How horribly I'd hacked and wheezed until I had the good sense to open the doors.

What do I remember?

The first blow against blistering metal, its singular clarity.

What do I remember?

Strength like I'd never experienced before. Strength like elation, like relief.

Lifting the dagger higher, I study it from all angles. How sharp must a blade be to cut?

Sharp enough.

CHAPTER 11

Harper and I depart at first light, laden with whatever supplies fit into our rucksacks, and our wits. I've secured my hair into the tightest braid I can manage, a strip of red falling to my lower back, the heavy strands unlikely to move except in gale-force winds. Harper has arranged hers into an elaborate updo, something more appropriate for a ceremonial event than a weeks-long trek, but I hold my tongue. We've donned our plain, everyday dresses. At least Harper had the foresight to wear her sturdy boots.

Upon reaching the edge of the barley fields, I glance back, just once. The abbey, pale stone tucked into climbing ferns, appears in blurred pockets through the trees. I have never left Thornbrook for so long. I wonder if I will be missed.

My gaze flicks to Harper. She stares at me, blue eyes mistrustful beneath her smooth brow. The high grasses stir at my waist.

"The tithe," I state.

She nods in understanding. We have until its eve to return to Thornbrook. In less than two months, when another seven-year cycle reaches its end, one of us will hold Meirlach in hand. And the other, unfortunately, will not.

“Do you want to leave anything behind?” I gesture to the straps cutting into her shoulders. “There’s still time to lighten your load.”

Harper rears back, and my stomach cramps in warning. As usual, I have affronted, insulted, offended. “If I were you,” she says, dropping her voice, “I would worry about your own ability to keep up.” She looks me up and down, smiles sharply, and shoves past me. “While we’re still young.”

Very well then.

We do not converse the entire morning. Not that I have an issue with this. The unexpected blessing allows me space to muse, plan. We follow the River Twee south. According to the map, the nymph-guarded entrance is located twelve miles from Thornbrook. We should reach it by dusk, bearing no delay.

Every so often, I check our route to ensure we haven’t strayed. It follows an abandoned foot trail, though none I have ever utilized. Steams collects inside the understory as the sun climbs, and the ground slopes into small hills where the trees and bracken have clambered atop one another in search of sunlight. A glance over my shoulder reveals Harper struggling to navigate the numerous twisting roots.

“I warned you about the pack,” I say. My back aches, but I’m used to the strain.

Harper snarls something unintelligible and fumbles to remove her canteen. Sweat slithers down her face and neck, plastering hair to skin, her updo having lost its shape. Sagging against the nearest tree, she gulps the liquid eagerly.

“Slow,” I bark, hoping Harper took the necessary precautions. As long as we bless the water prior to drinking, any taint will be cleansed, regardless of whether the fair folk utilized the source. “We still have miles to go.”

She tears her mouth away, gasping out, “I liked you better when you

kept your opinion to yourself,” then drains the rest.

My face burns. Why do I bother offering advice when she refuses to listen? I try not to let the unkindness bother me, but I am not made of stone.

“We aren’t far,” I say, unfolding the map with shaking hands. At least I sound unaffected. “Only a few more miles. Do you want to break for lunch?” I’ve apples, hard cheese, and bread.

“I’m not hungry.” A fierce proclamation, better suited for an extensive audience, a great hall. The trees are a poor substitute.

I do not believe her, but I’m certainly not going to argue. “Fine.” I fold the map back into its square.

The motion draws her eye. “You say we have miles to go, but I question how much quicker we would reach our destination if someone more capable was in charge.”

Thus she unfurls, neck unbent, chin lifted, a rim of gold etching her slim frame. “I’ll take over from here.”

When the day is done, the world dark, my journal open on my lap, these are the moments I remember: the hot-blooded simmer beneath the skin; the tightening airway and racing heart; the drop in my stomach, a fall from a great height despite the firm ground beneath my soles.

But mostly, I remember this: the shift of parchment whispering against my fingertips as it passes from my hand to another’s. The conflict I wish to avoid. The words I did not say.

Harper smiles as I relinquish the map and tucks it into her pocket. “Lovely.”

By the time we reach the entrance to Under, dusk nears. Ferns carpet the bent path, each long, crenated tongue licking at our ankles. Harper pants heavily as she trudges through the green thicket. Whether or not she regrets the effort of leading, she is too proud to admit it.

A few paces ahead, mushrooms encircle a massive boulder, which

stands atop a grassy knoll. According to the map, this entrance will lead us to Under.

“We’re here?” Harper asks. Dirt coats the hem of her dress, and mine.

“Yes.” One step closer to Meirlach.

Upon further inspection, I spot a small, circular cutout in the rock. A door? Striding forward, I knock.

“Do you have an appointment?” A faint, airy voice floats from behind the boulder. No, not behind. *Within*.

Harper and I exchange a look. She waves her hand as if to say, *Do something*. “Um... yes?”

“Name, please.” Droll.

“Brielle of Thornbrook.”

There is a pause. I bite my lip, worrying its flesh between my teeth. “I do not see your name on the list.”

Harper spits a curse. Indeed, no dramatic hand toss would be complete without a mutinous glare, because of course it’s *my* fault my name isn’t on the list. Mother Mabel gave me no additional instructions aside from knocking and offering a loaf of bread. Hopefully, the nymph will accept the Father’s own flesh.

“Are you sure?” My question teeters on shaky legs. When have the lies become default? “It should be there.”

The round cutout cracks open and pushes outward like a door. I squint into the opening, then stumble back as a creature emerges on four spindly legs, scuttling forward like a spider. Harper yelps and dashes into the safety of the ferns.

The nymph rises to stand on its hind legs, back bent. I believe the creature is male, for he appears akin to a little old man. His bald, rounded skull possesses three measly yellow hairs, which sprout from the furrowed

gray skin. A white shift falls to his knees, but considering how slight the creature is—the top of his head barely reaches my chest—that’s not saying much.

The nymph’s bulging eyes thin. “You do not have an appointment.”

“No,” I admit, “but we were informed you would accept an offering to enter Under?” I offer him my most sincere smile.

He blinks slowly. Sleepy, or suspicious? “We?”

Scanning the forest at my back, I spot Harper peeking out from behind a tree. I wave her closer. She hesitates, yet picks her way over to the ring of mushrooms, upper lip twitching at the nymph’s shriveled appearance, the white, gossamer fabric shivering in strips around his bowed legs.

“We are novitiates from Thornbrook,” I explain to the creature, trying my best to articulate confidently. “We seek entrance into Under, if you please.”

“You and everyone else,” he mutters. A shudder runs through his small frame, bones secured by thin, papery skin. “So what’ll it be? What is your offering?” He looks to Harper, coarse brows low, mouth mulish.

She makes a horrible retching sound. I elbow her in the side. While the fair folk aren’t the most visually appealing creatures, we need this one’s cooperation.

“Bread,” I say.

“What flavor?”

“Rye?”

He huffs and crosses his arms. “Very well.”

“Harper,” I whisper. We discussed our roles a few hours prior. Since she insisted on leading this mission, I agreed to step back, mostly to avoid unnecessary conflict.

She slips her hand into her pack, where the bread awaits.

The nymph barks, “Well?”

“We have it, don’t worry.” I stare at Harper as she begins to shake and a fog passes vaguely across her gaze: panic.

I grab her arm, yet she startles, lashing out with a scream.

“Look at me.” I give her arm a shake. “If you won’t give him the bread, let me take over.”

Harper grinds her teeth, turning away from the nymph, who watches curiously. “It’s the last of our bread.”

“We still have fruit and cheese,” I point out, the only balm to soothe her frazzled nerves.

“And how long will that last us?”

Harper’s fear has no singular taste. Its potency fizzles on my tongue, a momentary liveliness, before flattening out. We’ve a week’s worth of supplies. Eventually, we’ll need to forage for more. Once we reach Under, we cannot consume any food or drink but our own.

“Harper,” I whisper. “It’s the only way.”

That smile bears teeth. “Spoken like Mother Mabel’s blind follower.” A sharp turn of the heel, and she regards the gnarled creature. “Will you take another offering instead?”

That stony gaze rakes Harper, then me, before settling on the dagger hanging at my waist. “What of the knife?”

“Done,” announces Harper.

“Not done,” I snap.

She scoffs. “I’m to give up my meal when you get to keep your stupid knife? I don’t think so. Why can’t you give something up?”

The nymph glances between us. I bite the inside of my cheek until it bleeds.

“Because—” I suck in a shaky breath, praying for patience. “We need weapons. We need protection.”

“Then what about those special salves you’re hoarding? Don’t deny it. I’ve seen the basket.”

As if I would give up my mother’s poultices. “You agreed to this,” I say. “Give it the bread like we decided on.”

“That was then. Why does it need a stupid piece of bread? The thing looks seconds away from keeling over.” She flips her long hair over her shoulder, daring the nymph to argue. He stares at her with distaste.

“Angry mortal woman,” he croons, “I do not appreciate your insults. Whatever it is you seek, you will not find it here.” The small round door slams shut, dust and pebbles rattled loose from the aftershock.

Harper’s gaze swings to mine, dark with reproach. “Well that was a waste of time.” She pats her hair into place.

The smallest, hardest lump of coal sears my chest where my heart should be. I can’t catch my breath. “If you had offered your bread to the nymph, we would have passed through. Now we’ll have to find another way in.” This mission is impossible enough without another obstacle tossed into our path.

“Why am *I* to blame? You had the opportunity to give up your salves.” Hands planted on her hips, she lashes back, “You are equally at fault.”

Is she truly comparing risen flour to my prized possessions? “Those salves were my mother’s,” I retort. “I would never give them up.”

“And yet she didn’t extend the same courtesy to you.”

The blow blindsides me. I can feel the shape of my face as it collapses, dropping into my stomach, then lower, splattering at my feet. My deepest wound, torn open afresh.

Tears slip down my cheeks, hot against my cool skin. Harper turns away, oddly quiet.

I’ve wondered whether my peers knew of the circumstances

surrounding my arrival at the abbey. Mother Mabel would never betray my privacy. Harper must have heard it from someone who spotted my arrival on that storm-drenched night.

“We should get moving,” I mumble. Somehow, we will have to find another way in to Under.

MANY HOURS LATER, we stop to make camp. Or rather, *I* stop to make camp. Harper drops her rucksack and slumps onto a stump, drenched in sweat. Two strips of dampened fabric mark where the straps cut into her shoulders, reddening the skin above her collar. What is she carrying anyway? The pack is nearly twice her size.

Tucking my supplies between the tree roots, I pull my waterskin free and take a deep swallow. Harper drained hers hours ago, and we haven't passed a stream since. The ruby sheen of her skin snags the eye. Her lips, too, are heavily cracked.

Biting the inside of my cheek, I glance upward, seeking the spread of violet overhead, a band of cooling calm. This same sky reaches down to Thornbrook's fertile earth. Why, then, does it appear different?

“Here.” Crouching down so I'm eye level with Harper, I hold out my waterskin.

She is watchful, but her gaze inevitably lands on the container, a bur unwittingly snagged in a stocking. “I'm fine.”

“You're near collapse. Take the water.” The last thing I need is an unconscious traveling companion.

“I told you I don't need it.”

“You do,” I reply with forced calm.

She peels away the hair plastered to her neck. It is a subtle thing, that

quavering hand. “Why are you being kind to me?” A low, waspish tone whetted by fatigue. It takes everything in my power not to chuck the canteen at her head. It would certainly make a satisfying thump.

“You ask a question I do not have an answer to,” I respond, equally prickly. I’m reminded of every vile word, every scornful laugh, every hurled insult I’ve ever endured. Ten years’ worth of malice. “Is it my hand you snub, or an offering in general?” Our gazes clash and hold. “Do you want the water or not?”

Harper recoils as though I demand she amputate a limb, so alive is her fury. But she accepts the boon, downing every drop until it’s gone.

Night will fall in less than an hour. We must seek shelter prior to its arrival, for the cold will sweep in, harsh from the mountain peak.

“I’m going to search for water,” I say, accepting the waterskin when Harper hands it back to me. “We should build a shelter once I return.” Unfortunately, fire is out of the question. It attracts the fair folk.

Newly revived by the water, fresh guile slithers behind Harper’s eyes. She straightens on her perch. “I do not believe I agreed to this. Unless I have suffered loss of memory in the last hour?”

Patience, Brielle. But oh, this woman surely tests it. “Unless you want to spend the night shivering, we need to build a shelter. A lean-to is simple and won’t take long.” If we work together, it shouldn’t take longer than a few hours. Building one myself would take half the night.

“If you want to build a lean-to,” she responds with false sweetness, “I won’t stop you. But do not think traveling together means working together. You focus on your needs, and I’ll focus on mine. Deal?”

There is so much I might say were I not so cowardly.

We need to take protective measures, I might state. Or perhaps, *I will not carry you through this journey.* Or even, *You need to pull your own weight.* Yet I say nothing.

I stride off, denying Harper the pleasure of witnessing my flaming face. A scream hammers blows upon my ribs, but I refuse to let it escape. Harper's presence won't stop me from acquiring Meirlach, becoming the next acolyte in Thornbrook's service. This, I must remember.

First: water. Once I bless a nearby stream, I refill my canteen and begin gathering larger branches for the roof and walls of the shelter.

Dark descends with startling speed. Carterhaugh cloaks the dying sun and stamps the ground with murk. At one point, I'm certain I spot something moving in the brush, but when I peer closer, I find the area empty, nothing to disturb the undergrowth. They are unfamiliar, these trees. They do not strive. They loom.

It's likely nothing. Fear of the unknown etches shadows where they do not exist, yet the wind carries a scent, and I know in my bones I am not imagining it.

"Will you continue to lurk out of sight like a coward," I call, "or will you step into the light, stranger?"

An errant gust lifts the hem of my skirt. I slap it into place, surveying the darkened area with straining ears, heightened senses. The sky, too, is masked.

I drop the branches and grasp the hilt of my dagger, thumb pressed to its base where my etched signature signifies the blade as my work. The leather wrapping fuses to my sweaty palm.

A twig snaps, sharp like a fracturing bone.

"A woman wandering alone after dark? Foolish of you."

He materializes before me, shaded by the encroaching night. The West Wind.

Flanked by two rotting trees, he strides forth with unfettered confidence, an arrogant waltz. Darkness mutes the emerald tunic to an ash gray. It is strange, but I swear something appears different about his face.

Oh, it is still unsightly, the nose most of all, though his eyes remain beautiful indeed. I cannot put my finger on it.

“It’s a long way for someone to wander,” I state with a calm I do not feel. “Won’t the Orchid King come looking for you?” The West Wind has followed me. For how long? I must not shrink as a mouse would in the presence of a hawk, beak bloodied and talons extended.

Zephyrus flinches. It’s a low blow, and I’m not proud of it, but he has come for a reason, and I fear its repercussions.

“I’m curious by nature, as you know.” He appears less sure-footed than he was a moment ago. “And no, Pierus will not seek me out. Not yet, anyway.” He saunters forward. “Where do you travel to?”

I stride a few paces away, needing distance. It’s not that he makes me uncomfortable. Rather, I am unused to a man’s presence. “My business is my own,” I say, and leave it at that.

Beneath the bow of his mouth lies a duplicitous cunning. “You run from me, Brielle, yet is there not a debt you owe me?”

My grip on the knife loosens in surprise. “There is no debt.”

“Isn’t there? I gave you the opportunity to seek answers to questions in your life. A chance to change your future.”

What is he talking about? “I never asked for favors. You took me to Willow. *You*. So *you* could repay the debt you owed me after I saved your life!” His miserable, frustrating life.

He steps forward, and the green of his eyes blackens in this lightless place. “Ah, but you agreed to the bargain. And to a god, one’s word is binding.”

How fearless might I be if I were a man caught unaware in this situation rather than a woman? I tighten my grip around the knife with renewed vigor. “And if I refuse repayment of this supposed debt?” What

will Zephyrus do, steal me away into Under? I will cut off his hand before he can touch me.

He angles his head. “Do not fret, my darling novice. Just allow me to fulfill my obligation to you. It is in your best interest to agree. I will not take no for an answer.”

I choke on a surge of fear. “You—” The word dissolves to dust in my mouth. Why is he so adamant about repaying this debt? Why can’t he accept that my help was done out of goodness, without any expectation of recompense?

I shake my head, growing tired of his veiled threats. “No. This is ridiculous.” My hand cuts the air. “Do not engage with me again.”

“Then you accept the consequences of your actions.”

Leaves hiss across the forest floor. It is no bluff. The words carry no carefully crafted loopholes to snag the unsuspecting, no hidden nooks. But I know this: I regret saving him that night.

The Orchid King was right. I cannot trust Zephyrus.

“We are done,” I whisper hoarsely, turning from the clearing.

“Brielle—”

The weight of his hand on my arm zings through me. I spin, dagger unsheathed, the blade slicing in a practiced arc toward the face. Zephyrus recoils, a hand flying to his cheek. Blood seeps between his fingers as he stares at me incredulously.

I have marked a line of blood on the West Wind’s cheek, yet I feel no shame for it.

“I have told you,” I growl, my voice a wisp of cold, like so many of those distant stars. “I have told you again and again not to touch me. This is your final warning. Next time, I will carve another line into your face.” My heart hurls itself against my sternum, a beat of thunder and fear. I do not

have to be kind. Not for someone who has shown little consideration toward me.

“Perhaps, had you seen me as a person and not a tool for your misuse, you would have recognized that sooner.” Without a backward glance, I stride off, the branches forgotten.

Only, I do not go far. Rage boils my skin, but I’m not foolish enough to abandon camp. Running into Zephyrus only serves to remind me how alone I am. The West Wind is no ally, and Harper is no friend. I have carried my weight, and hers, this entire day. So it is no surprise that I find Harper asleep back at camp, limbs sprawled, a blanket tangled around her slender legs. Her unbound hair splays, coal roots threading the patch of dirt near her head. Lines of exhaustion engrave her face.

There is no dinner. There is no shelter. And I am too tired to care.

After unpacking my bedroll in the chilly, rot-damp night, I settle in, pulling the blanket around my body. An owl coos as I rest my head in the crook of my arm and close my eyes.

But I do not sleep.

CHAPTER 12

Gray skies, gray realm. Hunched beneath the haphazard lean-to I share with Harper, I draw my wet blanket around my shoulders, though there's no warmth to be had. Harper shivers beside me. Her teeth chatter, blunt, muted clicks behind compressed lips.

The drizzle pelts like small, stinging pebbles against my face. It's been raining for the past three days in an unceasing torrent. Thick, oily muck submerges the ground, and splintering cracks alight the night—water-laden branches bending beneath damp foliage and snapping free.

Everything I own is drenched. My sopping dress smothers my skin. Stockings strangulate my moist, wrinkled feet. My pack, too, is soaked: clothes, food, journal.

The river has swelled beyond its banks, cutting into the soil and ripping portions free of the roots. It is too dangerous to cross. We must wait until the rising water recedes. Until then, we're stuck. Wasted days, but then again, Harper and I haven't figured out a way forward. The map only provides a means to reach a single doorway into Under. I suppose we could backtrack, use the spring entrance Zephyrus showed me, but I fear drowning in the underwater tunnels without the enchanted shells.

I sigh and push to my feet. “I’m going to see if there’s another way around the river.”

Harper mumbles something unintelligible, face tucked into her knees, arms wrapped around her shins.

My blanket falls to the ground with a wet slap. Mud squelches beneath my waterlogged boots as I trudge toward the River Twee, yanking my legs free of the soft earth, planting them carefully, following its rapids northwest for a time. The landscape remains unchanged since yesterday: a rush of dark water threaded white swallowing the weak banks and rising higher by the day. Even the shallowest stretch can carry a dangerous current. Attempting to cross would be foolish.

If the rain doesn’t abate by tomorrow, I’m going to suggest Harper and I return the way we came. We have run out of bread. The nymph might accept another offering if we are properly remorseful. As it stands, it’s our only option if we are to return to Thornbrook on time.

Back at camp, the rain begins to taper off—a small miracle. When I reach the lean-to, however, I find my bedroll gone, my blanket along with it. Harper has snatched both and piled them atop her own bedroll, additional protection from the sopping earth, leaving me to sleep in the mud.

I stare at Harper. She stares back. One eyebrow lifts as though to say, *What are you going to do about it?* Then she rolls over, presenting me her back.

A hot shimmer infuses my skin. The heat swells: pressure in my throat, a sting across my cheeks, a burn in my eyes.

How dare she steal what’s mine. She did not ask. She designated my property as her own.

A hole lies within my chest, and within that hole dwells a beast. It must be soothed at all hours of the day, always denied sustenance,

otherwise it would grow beyond its hovel, beyond myself. I would no longer control it. The beast would control me.

The beast is restless though, weary with irritation. It paces along the burrow's opening, head swinging from side to side, never satisfied. Three days I have spent in Harper's company. Minutes become hours become days. Standing in the downpour, I consider returning to Thornbrook. I will run as fast as my legs can carry me, abandoning my companion to the wilds of Carterhaugh. Maybe something horrible will befall her. With no one to challenge me, I would become the next acolyte by default, Meirlach or not.

"I'm cold," Harper whines.

"Mother Mabel said no fire," I gripe. Doubtful we could produce a spark in this wet environment anyway.

She peeks over the blanket with deep satisfaction. *My blanket.* "You're shivering."

Droplets wend down my face as I duck into the lean-to. My fingers twitch toward the damp wool. I have every intention of yanking it off her, but I don't.

All at once, I deflate and tuck myself into the corner. *Could have, should have.* No fire. No blanket. No bedroll. It will be a miserable night indeed.

Abruptly, Harper pushes to her feet and tromps behind our shelter. After a moment, I catch the scent of smoke.

I'm up, striding toward the bent, wizened tree shielding Harper from the downpour. Crouched beneath its branches, she nurses a small, damp fire to life. Miraculously, she is succeeding.

"What are you doing?" I lunge toward the flames, intending to stamp them out, but she slams into me, knocking me off-balance. A root catches my heel, and I go down.

Harper stands over me, having planted herself in front of the flames,

smoke leaking at her back. “Touch the fire, and I’ll rip you to shreds.”

Mud spatters my dress and sucks at my palms. I’m too dumbfounded to respond. Slowly, I climb to my feet, gazing at the flare of spitting embers, the enlarged pool of illumination. I’m panting, winded from the sudden fall. “The fair folk are attracted to firelight.”

“That is no concern of mine.”

I cannot believe this. “Well it should be!” Again, I edge forward, but Harper shoves me back.

“I can’t sleep without it,” she snarls.

“And I can’t sleep with it.” My shoulder rams hers, and she shrieks, tumbling head over feet in an impressive display of athletics. A low whine winds through the gaps between the branches above, an eerie keen that pebbles my skin and pricks at my awareness, a gust reeking of rot.

I go still.

Harper does not notice the change. She has hardened into an entity honed by vengeance. A snap of fabric, and she’s on her feet. Her ranting climbs in volume, arms swinging and pretty features pinched in a fit of unchecked rage. I grip her arm, hoping to calm her. She screams and flies at me, red-faced, aiming for my stomach. Her fist clips me on the shoulder. The toe of her boot knocks my shin with a dull ache.

The harder I resist, the more viciously she fights, thrashing about like a fish on a line. If I’m not careful, she’ll bloody my nose purely by accident.

Securing Harper’s arms in both hands, I force her still. “Hush.” The plea hits, breathless with dread, in her ear. “Listen.”

A rattling moan skates over the ferns. The leaves shiver in response.

Harper stiffens. “What was that?” Her fingers curl like the bars of a cage atop her thighs. At her back: gray, stretched at the seams.

I kick dirt over the fire. Its flames sputter, smoke spewing from the

ashes.

The extinguished light casts a heavy pall over the area. The trees resemble streaks of soot against the darkest sky. There is no brightness, no moon.

I straighten warily, my clammy skin throbbing with pulsating blood. My fingers creak as they curl around my knife and pull it free of its sheath. I scan the dim. Two women, alone in the dark. What infests these woods? What have we called closer with our fire and light?

“What do we do?” Harper whispers.

I whip up a hand, demanding silence. My body throbs—head and heart colliding.

The vibrations arrive in waves of four. A momentary pause before they resume, shuddering up my legs and stirring the fabric of my skirt. Somewhere in the distance, a tree shatters, and Harper recoils, whimpering. The four-legged gait picks up speed. Whatever the manner of beast, it is massive.

“We run.” It’s our only option.

Harper backs away, eyes flitting from pocket to darkened hollow, searching the thick darkness oozing across the forest floor. A hair-raising howl crests and dies.

“We’ll go north,” I murmur, rushing to gather our supplies. I toss Harper her rucksack and slide mine onto my shoulders. “Do you remember the fork in the trail we took earlier? Go left. We can hide in the caves.”

She wheezes, hands clamped at her front. “South?”

“North—”

A bellow sends Harper fleeing into the woods. I’m right on her heels, plunging through the enclosing dark where the brush snags our ankles and calves. We veer around a tree and converge a few steps ahead. Beyond lies the divide.

“Left!” I bark, cutting down a path shielded by ferns. But when I glance over my shoulder, Harper is gone.

CHAPTER 13

Branches crack like bones and vines snake across the mossy floor. Springing over a collapsed tree, I veer into Carterhaugh's black depths. Thorns claw at my dress and poke holes in my skin. Blood beads upon its surface, a fleeting sting, gone within the next heartbeat. My mind is twelve steps ahead, grasping at directions, possible options as I crash blindly through the brush. The beast gives chase.

South, toward Harper? Or north, into the highlands? Westward, the canyon expands in folds of baked red clay with little places to hide. That leaves the Gray, sitting across the strait to the east.

I push onward. My pack slams into my lower back. My legs ache as the terrain splits into small eruptions of stone. The agony sharpens, a white-hot sensation that cramps my muscles, shaved right down to the veins.

The trees are ancient. The ground is full of holes. I clamber over another fallen tree, yet the earth buckles as a wave of shattering noise crashes with deadly speed at my back. My feet slip on wet moss, and I twist mid-fall so my shoulder absorbs the brunt of impact, vibrations shuddering alongside my bones.

I scramble to my feet, push my leaden legs into motion. Sounds of

snuffling reach me. The beast nears, having caught my scent. If I can hide until the creature passes, I can backtrack to the fork and find Harper. A high place. A low place. Any will do.

A creek runs a line of silver through the darkness. The icy water burns, but I follow the current downstream, over rocks, down into a valley and up again into the highlands, cast lifeless by the dying light. I've been running for so long my saliva has turned to paste, collecting in white globs at the corners of my mouth. I can't maintain this pace. Eventually, something has to give.

Half a mile downstream, I leap onto dry land and circle back. I lose track of how many times I do this, threads crisscrossing in the dark. Panting, soaked in sweat, I sag against a tree when an ear-shattering scream rents the night.

Harper.

MY WET BOOTS slip and slide through muck as I race south. The ground oozes from the recent downpour, the air heavy, thick with damp. Every so often, a rock tumbles down the steep incline, bounces high, and crashes into the uprooted flora, the ferns at times climbing so high they have completely swallowed the trees.

An alabaster light leaks through the dense canopy, spotting the mossy ground. The moon is high, slivered, its crescent fading into the darkened cavity overhead. As I near the valley's basin, the trees begin to deplete. Eventually, the terrain shallows out, and I push my exhausted body to its brink, sprinting flat-out through the softened grass, pearled in the ashen light of the moon.

Harper's screams reach me with decreasing frequency. I fear what

that means. The grass then transitions into a copse of trees, their trunks shattered, as if something massive recently crashed through.

The reek hits me first: rotting flesh overlaying thick, choking smoke. I'm leaping over fallen trunks and weaving through collapsed branches when I spot Harper, her white skin luminous in the night.

She crouches between the roots of a vast, ancient oak, trying to make herself as small as possible among the crowded ferns. The beast has cornered her. It is a wretched creature. An elongated spine rises to imprint the furrow of its back, a gross, abnormal protrusion that matches the bulging cage of its ribs, all clothed in heavy, streaming shadows. A long, whip-like tail thrashes between its bowed hind legs. A squat neck supports its blocky head.

Compared to me, Harper is tiny, a waif. But this creature? It dwarfs her. She could easily maneuver between its legs without touching the bottom of its abdomen. I've never seen anything like it, but then again, it hails from Under. It hails from the deep.

A second set of pitted eyes suddenly appears beyond the collapsed trees surrounding her meager shelter. She does not notice. She is frozen, terror having bled her features of color. And I am nothing but a body in motion, flinging myself into its path.

My appearance draws their attention, and the first beast snarls. I angle my hips to keep the second creature in sight. Harper visibly trembles at my side. Mud and sweat streak the front of her dress, the torn fabric peppered by blood from her run. My fingers tighten around my dagger—one blade, two foes.

“Your knife,” I hiss. “Give me your knife!”

“I don't have it!” Her voice cracks. She is a whimpering dog, flinching from the hand it has bitten. “My bag—” She gestures to the lumpy sack lying between the legs of the advancing beast.

I regret gifting her my extra knife. I'd thought it beneficial to armor her with a blade. Stupid.

The creature leans forward. Its rank breath stings my eyes. Those glistening lips curl back, unctuous saliva dripping sluggishly from a collection of serrated teeth.

My world has narrowed. There is no rock, no vegetation, no earth. The sky has peeled away and drifts in a fog-like residue. I am a woman standing still.

"Listen to me," I mutter, focusing on the creature before us, its smaller shadow padding closer from behind. "I'm not doing this for you." The first creature cants its head, rounded ears swiveling toward my voice. "I'm doing this for me." My thighs contract, tailbone tucked to gather power in my legs. Slowly, I lower my bag to the ground.

"I don't care who you're doing it for!" The whites of her eyes flash. "Just kill the damn beasts."

"I want my bedroll back."

"What?"

A fat, glistening tongue drags across the larger beast's upper canines. Branches snap as its companion shoves forward, shedding the lightless weight of the forest interior.

Harper shudders against me. We are pressed shoulder to shoulder. Fear is more than emotion. It is a stench, a sight, a sound, a taste. Harper reeks of it.

"I want my bedroll back," I state, carving the words into a crisp, clarifying declaration. "Agree to return it, and I will handle the beasts."

Her laughter pitches so unnaturally high my teeth grind together. "You can keep your bedroll. Keep *my* bedroll, keep it all. I don't care. Just kill the things. *Please.*"

That's as good of an apology as I will ever receive from her. "Stay

low and quiet.” I wipe my free hand against the front of my dress.

Harper swallows, then nods.

The larger creature faces me head-on. Its smaller companion paces to its left, limping from an injury to its right foreleg, more shadow than tangible shape. *Heavenly Father, give me strength.* Then I bolt for Harper’s bag.

The larger creature lunges, those tearing fangs passing near my arm as I duck beneath its concave stomach and weave through its legs, putting my training with Mother Mabel into practice. Noxious fumes clot my throat where the matted fur bristles, caked in old blood. I spring, closing the distance, and catch the bag with my fingertips as the second beast barrels toward me.

I fling myself out of range, dropping the bag in the process. Its contents scatter. The larger beast bashes the smaller in the ribs, and it careens into a nearby tree with a thunderous crack, the force tearing its roots from the soil. Tree and beast collapse with a deafening crash.

The larger brute stands over the contents of Harper’s bag. Between its forelegs lies the dagger, aglint, out of reach. I lunge for it, yet immediately retreat when its paw nearly decapitates me. My dagger isn’t long enough to keep it at bay.

In the corner of my eye, Harper crouches, silent as the dead. I cannot go through them. They are immense, unpredictable, foreign. I must go around them. Carterhaugh remains my only sanctuary.

I dive into the trees, drawing the monstrosities away from Harper. One beast flanks my left, the other my right. Ahead, a gnarled old tree drips shadow. As I reach the trunk, I kick off and land facing the opposite direction, sprinting back toward Harper as the creatures accidentally overshoot my location. Low-hanging branches whack my face and chest,

which sears with each heaving gasp. I'm nearly there. The second knife lies a few paces ahead.

"Behind!" Harper cries.

An ear-shattering shriek erupts at my back, and I dive for the weapon. As soon as the dagger hits my palm, I whirl, arm lashing out in a wild arc. The iron sizzles as it touches skin, melting the flesh of the creature's shoulder. It rears back, howling, allowing me access to its hind legs. Two cuts sever the tendons there.

The beast drops, unable to compete with lethal iron. Its end is my blade, and that blade thrusts downward, plunging into the side of its ribcage, the back of its neck, the base of its skull. Black fluid pours onto filth-caked fur. The first howling creature dies with its last exhalation incomplete. The second crashes through the brush, barreling toward me in feral-eyed rage.

Catching the curve of a trunk, I use my momentum to swing myself around the back. It slams face-first into the wood, but the tree holds. I dart across the clearing where their paws have gouged the soft earth. High ground—I need the high ground.

Leaping onto a stump, I twist as its jaws snap toward me, my dagger punching out to meet it.

Skin, cartilage, bone—the iron blade parts flesh, sinking through the top of the ridged snout with a hiss of smoke. It screams and recoils, but my hand clamps the hilt, keeping it within arm's reach despite the bright sting across my chest. I shove the blade upward, through bone, into the front of its skull, between the eyes. Their polished blackness dulls, and I leap backward as the beast crumples.

Blood roars in my ears and sweat drips down my face. Nothing stirs in the close-knit air. Carterhaugh, at last, is still.

My heartbeat cannot catch its rhythm. It skips every few breaths until

I begin to feel lightheaded. I brace my hands on my knees, puffing hard. Curls of red hair hang loose around my face, their ends crusted in blood, a garnet hue so saturated it appears black. The beasts' carcasses bleed out, two piles of steaming, rancid meat.

I feel moments from collapse, but I fear what creatures the disturbance will attract. We'll need to move, and quickly.

After collecting and cleaning my blades, I return to Harper. She cowers in a ball where I left her, arms clamped over her head, face tucked into her chest. Unfortunately, she's useless in a fight. But at least I have my bedroll back.

"Harper." I grip her shoulder, yet she jerks away with a scream, scratching at me with her eyes closed.

"It's me!" A hard shake snaps her addled mind awake. "They're dead."

Through chattering teeth, she manages to clip out, "How?" Her skin is pallid, sickly white. Her eyes have momentarily lost focus, bright blue rings constricting the black pupils.

The adrenaline has likely muddled my good sense, but I remove my cloak from my rucksack and lay it across her back and shoulders. She huddles beneath its warmth without complaint. "Dumb luck," I say. Anything could have altered the outcome.

Harper is too quiet. Shock has begun to set in.

Crouching down, I wrap the cloak tighter around her small frame. "Look at me." I cup her face in my hands. Their filth sullies her pristine skin. "You're alive. You're safe. We both are."

"I don't want to do this," she whispers in a rare show of vulnerability. "I want to go home."

This, I did not expect, and we have not even reached Under. We can't

go home. We've already lost precious time. Moving forward, what will the cost be?

"Why would Mother Mabel send us on this mission? It's a fool's errand." The hard click of her chattering teeth sets me on edge. "Have you thought of how easy the other women's tasks were compared to ours?"

I have. I'm still not sure how I feel about it. Last year, Lora was assigned to completely overhaul the library's organizational system. It took her four months to complete. Previous tasks included working the local soup kitchen or apprenticing with the physician to extend our healing services. None of the novitiates was required to brave Under.

"Look," I begin. "We've come this far. Do you really want to give up so soon?"

Clarity enters her narrowed gaze. "I'm not giving up. I'm being realistic. Is an appointment worth the risk of our lives?" Another shudder grips Harper's body. "I don't think it is."

She has a point. What occurred tonight is beyond my capabilities. And yet—

"I will make sure you return to Thornbrook safely," I say. "We can leave at first light."

"You're not coming with me?"

I shake my head. "I'm going to find Meirlach." No matter the obstacle, I will end this mission gripping the hilt of that fabled sword.

Harper studies me, suddenly unsure. If I'm not mistaken, respect lightens her gaze.

I'm probably mistaken.

Movement on the far side of the clearing catches my attention. I shift in front of Harper, dagger out. Zephyrus ambles from the bushes with a slow clap.

I stare. His appearance is more rumped than I have ever seen it. His

curls sit in piles of corkscrews, a few leaves scattered throughout. Dirt deadens the green threads of his tunic, the slim, nondescript trousers.

“Well done,” he says.

I do not understand.

“A mortal woman felled those beasts with nothing but a knife? I am duly impressed.”

Realization wars with the dull horror of implication. “You were watching the whole time?” My question wobbles. Rage? Disbelief? Perhaps both.

The West Wind shrugs, mouth pursed. I’d almost forgotten how hideous his countenance is, lumpy and misshapen in unfortunate cruelty. “The majority, yes.” He glances at the fallen beasts, curious. “Your dagger,” he says. “By chance is there salt on your blade?”

The change in topic momentarily confounds me. “I add salt to the water when quenching the blades.”

“Ah.” A vague nod. “That would explain how you were able to bring down the beasts.” At my puzzlement, he elaborates, “Salt greatly weakens them. Luckily, you were quick on your feet, with admirable swordsmanship. Whoever your teacher was, he taught you well.”

She taught me well. Mother Mabel.

My mouth hangs open for a moment before snapping shut. I understand this feeling: skin too tight, legs restless. They seek movement. Not to walk, but to run, to extend across vast distances between *here* and *there*. “Why didn’t you help us? We could have died!”

“You questioned whether you were capable of completing this journey.” He surveys me as though seeking whether something has changed since our last meeting. “Now you know.”

I am staring at a far-off wave. Nearer it comes, its white back arching into a ruffled white collar. Water swallows my ankles, then my calves.

When the wave hits, it rips the ground from my feet, and I tumble, caught in the churn of salt and sand.

That is how I feel, pummeled by those words. *Now you know.*

“You’re an ass,” I spit at Zephyrus.

The West Wind slides his hands into his pockets. “Do you deny that it was necessary?”

“What was necessary,” I growl, striding forward, “was your help. Instead, you watched like a coward in the shadows.” I am tired of making myself smaller for another. I am tired, period.

Lack of light imparts a leanness to his features, an effervescent quality to his skin. He appears more immortal than I have ever seen him, power suffusing his voice, brightening his emerald eyes as he says, “You have depended on the abbey for protection your entire life. It is time you learn how to weather what the world throws at you.”

Stepping around me, he bows to my companion, his mouth the shape of laughter before formation. “I do not believe we’ve had the pleasure of acquaintance,” he says. “I am Zephyrus, the West Wind, Bringer of Spring.”

Harper blinks in astonishment. “I know who you are.” She climbs to her feet, hands on hips. “There are tales written about you.” One dark eyebrow twitches upward. The cool, unimpressed motion gives no indication of her hysterics moments prior. “Is he the man from your room?” she asks me. “Oh, don’t give me that look. You’re a terrible liar.”

What I wish to say is the world would be much improved if she shut her mouth and never opened it again. Yet Harper looks at me, and she sees, and she knows.

Zephyrus ambles a few steps away before turning to face off with Harper. He stands a handspan taller, though she does not appear cowed in the slightest. “And if I was in Brielle’s room? What are you going to do, novitiate?”

My stomach bottoms out, a sudden free falling without end.

Her grin stretches so wide I'm surprised cracks do not fissure through her cheeks. "So you admit you are involved?"

"No!" I cry, stumbling forward. "You are misreading the situation. We are definitely *not* involved. I hardly know him."

That harsh smile chisels deeper into her features, a hunger whetting the elegant bones of her face.

"I discovered Zephyrus injured in the forest," I stammer, "and I took him back to the abbey for healing. He's a man, I know, but I couldn't leave him to die. He used my room for rest. That's all. Once he recovered, he left."

"You're forgetting the most important part of the story," the West Wind drawls, peering at me through lowered lashes. "Don't be shy. Tell your friend how we crossed into Under together."

Harper gasps, a hand flying to her mouth.

I whirl on Zephyrus. "Say nothing more."

"You went to Under with *him*?" And then she halts, realization darkening her eyes. "That's where you disappeared to last month. Don't try to deny it." She peers closely at our visitor. "You know who this is, right?"

"He is Zephyrus," I state.

She blinks at me. "You have no idea. None."

"I do," I snap, yet my voice wavers. "He is the West Wind, Bringer of Spring."

"And I imagine the title means nothing to you. Nor does his reputation."

I'm unable to shield my confusion. Reputation? What is she going on about?

Harper laughs. "Oh, this is wonderful, absolutely wonderful and

proves everything I have ever thought about you, Brielle. What a fool you are. What a stupid fool.”

My teeth grind together as the familiar hot wave of shame washes through me. Perhaps she is right. I trust too blindly. But why and how would she know him if she has never met him before? I’m obviously missing some clarifying piece of information.

Zephyrus’ gaze swings to mine for a heartbeat before moving elsewhere. I want to ask—demand—what Harper means, but I’m afraid to reveal more of my naivete. I suppose I already have an idea of his immoral reputation.

Harper tsks. “Imagine what Mother Mabel will say when she learns how you have erred.”

Imagine what she will do.

Mother Mabel could displace me from Thornbrook. This I know. Venturing into Under is one thing, but bringing a man into the Father’s sanctuary would imply disloyalty to Him and my faith.

“Are you going to tell her?” My throat strains.

Harper picks at her nails. “I haven’t decided. I suppose it doesn’t matter if you get the sword before me. Once Mother Mabel learns of your deception, you will never be allowed the honor of ascension anyway.”

That is true, which is why I must find the mythical sword first. Once Mother Mabel acquires it, might she extend to me mercy for having momentarily strayed?

“Did you say you were looking for Meirlach?” Zephyrus asks keenly.

“We are.” Harper considers him with a sidelong glance. “What of it?”

I suppose my companion’s desire to abandon the mission is a thing of the past. I knew it was too good to be true.

His mouth curves. It is too sly, as is everything else about him. “I am

acquainted with the Stallion and his Grotto. I can take you there.”

“We don’t need your help,” I cut in. “We know where we’re going.”

“Do you?” A sound of delight breaks free. “Let me guess. You’ve been using a map of some sort, only it has failed to lead you belowground.”

Harper’s cold glare cuts to me, as though *I* am to blame. “We have,” she says to Zephyrus. “It didn’t work.”

He chortles as if to say, *Of course not*. My cheeks flame with misery.

“Mortals cannot venture into Under on their own, as you well know.” He winks at me. It doesn’t escape Harper’s notice. “We can use one of the Wells to enter.”

She stares at him. “Wells?”

Now I’m certain Harper has not read a page of the Text in her life. “The Wells of Past, Present, and Future,” I tell her. “They are mentioned in the Book of Origin, when the Father sought healing from their purifying waters.”

The West Wind dips his chin. “Indeed, though according to the fair folk, their ancestors built those wells with their own hands.”

I cross my arms, then drop them. There is no mention of the fair folk in the Book of Origin. It likely isn’t true. Regardless, we don’t need his help. I tell him as much.

He shrugs. “All I’m saying is, it would be a shame for you to travel all that way, only to be barred from Under. You of all people know the danger in venturing below without a guide. Step off the grassy path, and who knows what dangers await.”

Harper’s frosty gaze swings to mine. “Is this true?” Her voice cracks out so forcefully I flinch.

“Yes,” I say, “but we can’t trust him.”

At this, the West Wind’s smile deepens. Pleased by my distress? The man is too twisted a creature. “Would you disagree that the presence of a

man could help you on your travels? The fair folk do love their maidens, after all.”

Harper blanches. We have heard the ignoble tales, when the innocent become the unclean. “He travels with us.”

I should not be surprised. “You know nothing about him,” I hiss. Meek I am, and obedient, but not now. I’m filled with too much foreboding. His company will lead to little good.

“I know more than you do. You know nothing, period.” She flounces nearer to the West Wind. “I’d rather take my chances with him than with those—” She waves a hand toward the carcasses. “—creatures.”

Grudgingly, I agree. But Zephyrus is a man whose danger lies in what he conceals, not what is evident. Harper does not understand. She does not know what lurks beneath his polished veneer.

“I would be an excellent asset,” he states, striding a few paces away to recline against a tree. “I know Under like the back of my hand.” He tosses one ankle over the other. “Do you know how to reach the Grotto?”

Mother Mabel gave me directions from the nymph-guarded entrance. Unfortunately, those directions have been rendered useless.

At my fuming silence, his mouth stretches a touch wider. “I am familiar with the unsavory areas. I have connections, debts to be called in that would get us out of a bind quickly. Neither would you be without protection.”

“What can you offer us?” I demand. “Pretty words?” Disdain drips readily from my tongue. “I am unimpressed.”

He chuckles. “I assure you my talents extend beyond what I can do with my mouth.” His eyes darken, and my heart leaps for reasons unknown.

Lifting a long-fingered hand, he flicks his fingers a few times, sending currents of air to stir our dresses, the fine strands of our hair. I watch a tendril of wind pluck a leaf from the highest branch of an oak tree,

glimmering silver and white against the night backdrop. It then tucks the leaf behind my ear.

Satisfied, Zephyrus drops his arm. “They do not call me the West Wind for nothing.”

Harper stares in open-mouthed wonder. I touch the leaf with a quavering hand, questioning all that came before this moment. Zephyrus never gave any indication of harboring power aside from the ability to irk me to no end. I feel foolish for having failed to figure it out sooner. Such power would come in handy on our journey. An extra set of eyes couldn’t hurt either. But most importantly, he can guide us to the Grotto.

“What do you want in exchange for helping us?” I say, because Zephyrus’ help will not come free.

He appears to ponder the question, though based on how readily he answers, he likely had a response prepared. “Consider this my debt repaid to you, Brielle. However, if it’s not too much to ask, I would like to accompany you to the Grotto.”

That ridiculous debt. But... fine. “Why can’t you travel there yourself?” If he already knows its location, why go with *us* into the Grotto? He’s the one who knows *Under like the back of his hand*.

As he shifts his weight, I temporarily lose sight of his expression. It must alter in that brief moment, because by the time it reappears in the pale beam of moonlight, I’ve lost something critical, a clue, maybe, of why he wants so desperately to aid us.

Zephyrus replies, “The Grotto is protected by the Stallion, and he only welcomes mortal women into his place of rest.”

“But you’re not a mortal woman,” Harper points out.

His mouth quirks. “No, my dear. I am not. The Stallion is blind. I can manipulate the air so your scent would mask my presence.”

Harper and I exchange a look. The quickest way to Under is through

Zephyrus, but I don't trust his motives. What, exactly, does he seek?

“What are you looking for, exactly?”

He stares at me for a time. “A prize that would change my life. Surely you cannot blame a man for helping himself?”

Again with the vagueness. “How long will this take?” I demand, arms crossed. In Under, time stretches and bends, and I fear we will spend months underground without realizing it, our deadline passing with nary a breath. “We must return to Thornbrook before the tithes.”

“I cannot guarantee a timeline, as you know. The more willingly you follow, however, the less time we waste.”

He offers little reassurance, and yet, what choice do we have?

I look to Harper. At least I'm not alone in my uncertainty.

“Let him do what he wants,” I say, hitching my pack onto my shoulders and striding past them. “I care not.”

CHAPTER 14

The shining blade parts the mist rolling across the ferned forest floor. I whirl, arm extended, imagining the dagger parting flesh—hip, gut, chest. My weight carries me through the arcing strike.

I am a blade.

If I were tougher in nature, I would not bend, and I would not break. I'd sting and sever, slice and wound. All who met the tip of my knife would weep blood. I would not be a weakly coward in the face of adversity.

My hand grips the leather-wrapped hilt with surety. The lightweight, tapered dagger appears frail, something easily overlooked. Maybe that is why I love it so.

As I move through the moonlit glen, striking and dodging an invisible opponent, I settle into the strength of my body, the power in my large, muscled arms. My feet barely touch the mist-soaked needles before springing to another spot. Duck, twist, deflect. I haul up the blade to block.

Sweat slithers down my cheeks and neck, but the mist kisses my heated skin, dispersing with each swinging arc. And if I imagine my target as Zephyrus' head, no one but me is privy to that information.

The West Wind travels with us now. He is our keeper, our guide. I'm

not sure how it happened. I mean, I *know* how it happened, but I question my good sense in having agreed to his accompaniment.

To my surprise, Harper has been amiable to this arrangement, proceeding to spend the days chatting his ear off, speaking of her time at the abbey. Most of the stories are lies. No, she did not invent the spinning wheel. Neither does she know how to speak four languages. But I've held my tongue.

A flying leap around a tree, and my knife thwacks into the solid trunk. Wood chips ricochet from the impact. I yank the weapon free, panting heavily, and repeat the exercise despite my wobbly thighs, the cramp searing white-hot up my back.

Why should I care of their burgeoning friendship? Zephyrus is free to converse with anyone he likes. If he chooses to speak with Harper, it is no concern of mine.

No, my concern is Meirlach. At our current pace, we should arrive at Under in one day's time. From there, it is another four days to the Grotto—or so Zephyrus claims. Who can say for certain how much time will have passed aboveground by the time we reach our destination.

Out of curiosity, I've been thumbing through the Text for additional information about the Stallion. The Book of Power, the final chapter of the Text, contains tales of strange creatures underground, in the deepest depths where evil lurks. Apparently, the Stallion guards a massive hoard of valuables: jewels and weapons, silks and armor and rare poisons.

I have not forgotten my mission. I must kill the beast to obtain the fabled blade. When I ponder what awaits, I'm almost inclined to return to Thornbrook empty-handed. The true danger of this quest, I believe, has yet to present itself.

Duck, dodge, strike, parry. Again and again, I bend and snap my body into the punishing repetition required of blade fighting, ending with

my arm extended, dagger hovering neck-high, its iron point catching the throat of an imaginary foe.

DRENCHED IN SWEAT and thoroughly fatigued, I return to camp.

Harper and Zephyrus sit beneath the lean-to, shoulders brushing as though they have had years to grow comfortable in each other's presence instead of a handful of days. I warned her not to trust him. Unsurprisingly, she ignored me.

I pay them no mind as I search my pack. The fire snaps merrily in broad daylight, though the smell of cooked meat makes my stomach turn. We live a vegetarian lifestyle at Thornbrook. Meat belongs to the old, the infirm. I should eat the crisping hare Zephyrus trapped and skinned, considering our dwindling food supply, but I've little appetite today.

Harper murmurs something inaudible to her newfound friend, who releases a warm chuckle reminiscent of summer. At some point, she removed her cincture, and I spot the white cord hanging over a branch, holding her pack off the ground. I bite the inside of my cheek at the sight. Disrespectful. She might as well spit on the church altar.

Zephyrus uses his cloak as a makeshift blanket, the laces at his collar loose, fabric gaping at his tanned throat. They are certainly a pair. The shapeless sack that is Harper's gray dress manages to brighten her eyes to vivid color.

Pulling my last clean uniform free, I stand and clear my throat. "I'm —"

"Tell me more about your brother, Eurus," Harper cuts in. She angles her body toward our guide, whose grin widens with knowing.

The announcement dissolves on my tongue. I swipe the dampness

from my face in frustration. Harper has hoarded Zephyrus' attention for days. I can barely get a word in.

I don't care for his attention, exactly, though we've shared decent conversation in the past, sporadic moments of vulnerability. But if he wants to entertain Harper, that's his decision, and I'll have no part of it.

"What were you going to say, Brielle?"

My head swings toward Zephyrus. The overcast haze has muddied the jewels of his eyes, though they appear no less direct. I swallow, and his gaze dips, tracking the motion.

"It's obvious she doesn't remember," Harper snipes, tugging his hand toward her leg. The motion ensnares me, and the breath stills in my chest. There are his fingers, slightly curled, in dangerous proximity to Harper's thigh. She voluntarily touches a man yet scolds his presence in my room?

"Calm, Harper." He tugs free of her grip. "I was talking to Brielle."

Her teeth snap shut with an audible click.

"I'm going to bathe," I announce, my clean, dry garments gathered in hand. "I won't be long."

Harper watches me beneath lowered lashes, cruelty razing her features. My heart skips at the sight, but I'm likely imagining it, anticipating the lash before it falls. Pivoting, I begin crossing the clearing.

"Sometimes, I question my worth as a novitiate. I question whether I am needed here, whether I will ever make a difference, or if I am only taking up space."

The cruel, icy proclamation slaps my back. Heat flees and cold proliferates, scouring my insides, closing my throat.

Paper rustles before Harper continues, "Today, I experienced a panic attack."

I can't move. I can only receive the blows as they fall.

"I was busy harvesting cabbage in the garden when I caught Isobel's

voice in the distance. She wasn't alone. She never is. There's always someone lending strength to her voice. This time, it was Harper.

"I tried focusing on my work, but it was impossible. She called my name, and I remembered all the times I'd been humiliated, an object of others' laughter and scorn. *Idiot. Pig. Pathetic.* My breath shortened, and the world grew dark."

I whirl, catch sight of my journal in Harper's hand, her toothy grin as she relishes my mounting distress. Zephyrus glances between us. I sense the change to my skin, how it tightens and folds, retreating inside the marrow of my bones. He would have seen her stealing the journal from my pack, right? Perhaps he turned a blind eye to the transgression.

"Give it back." The whisper emerges limp and threadbare.

Harper merely returns to reading. I remember that day. I remember feeling so overwhelmed I thought I might vomit. The darkness, Isobel's callous laughter as she cornered me, Harper's razor gaze. I could not bear it, and fled to the dormitory.

I stumble forward a step. *Stop. That's mine.* Demands I long to voice. But I am mute, powerless against her cruel declaration of my innermost thoughts.

"Now here I am," she whispers, still smirking. "Door locked. Chest tight. Sheltering in bed."

I wish I'd done things differently that day. I wish I'd stood up to Isobel. I wish I'd planted an impassable line. But I'd yielded to the weakness in me.

"That's enough," I croak. "Give me my journal." I stride forward haltingly, hand outstretched.

"If you want it," she says, "you'll have to take it from me."

Reaching over, Zephyrus presses a hand across the pages,

temporarily shielding the cramped, scrawling ink. “Return what is not yours, please.” Though he speaks to my companion, his gaze rests on me.

Her nostrils flare. Her spine straightens. “If she didn’t want me reading it, she shouldn’t have left it lying around.”

“It was in my bag,” I snap. “You went through my things.”

Zephyrus flips the cover shut, for which I’m grateful. Snatching it from Harper’s small hand, I shelter it against my chest. How much more did she read? Is this her first offense, or has she rifled through my belongings before, when I’m asleep, perhaps? One question tumbles into another, and another, and another. My chest pinches fiercely, my vision wavers, and I can’t breathe, I can’t *breathe*.

As if sensing my affliction, Zephyrus begins to push to his feet. “Brielle.”

I run.

THE RIVER TWEE glimmers in pockets between the trees, a bright line drenched in the afternoon sun. It branches into two currents, the larger vein winding downstream through the quiet woods, the narrowing rivulet transitioning into multiple tranquil pools lined with smooth rocks. A collection of brush and boulders secludes the largest basin.

Placing my belongings between two rocks, I peel away my clothes, the chemise momentarily sticking to my chest. I bite back a hiss as the skin tugs painfully.

The water’s reflection reveals my pale, round face and freckled skin. Above my breastband, a thin scratch draws my attention. Two days prior, it was pink. Now yellow-green ooze strains the puckered scab. Gently, I press

the pads of my fingers around the area. Its slight heat melts into a burn and carves deep.

My hand drops away. I'm panting, snagged within the vicious pain, or maybe it's the shame of having been stripped bare in front of two people I care little for. I loathe this weakness in me: my inability to function without a racing heart, circling mind, sweating skin, the desperation to flee. The salve I applied did absolutely nothing, but I haven't bathed in days. Infection has set in.

Tomorrow will be better. The sun will rise, the clouds will part their thick stitchings, and blue will return in an unfurling of exquisite color overhead.

After tossing aside my soiled garments, I lower myself into the cool water with a groan.

Relief.

It's shallow enough to stand, my toes gripping the slippery, pebbled bottom. I sink lower until the water encloses my skull. Let these thoughts empty out. Let the current carry them downstream. Zephyrus, Harper, this unsettling awareness of their togetherness, the memory of his hand on her leg.

Forgive me, Father.

I think of Zephyrus, and I am ashamed. Musings creep in like small rodents, unwanted and destructive. The night he slipped into my room, I'd unbuttoned my gown and exposed my naked back to his hands. In that moment, the thought of a man's touch did not disgust me. I pondered the sensation of his calluses, the scrape of toughened skin over my dipped spine.

My head breaks the surface of the water, and I wipe my face, slick back my heavy russet hair.

Zephyrus stands at the pool's edge.

I scream, recoiling against the far side of the basin. My face scalds, redder than an overripe tomato. “I’m bathing!” I send a splash toward him for good measure.

Grinning, he crouches on the balls of his feet. The water shimmers with dew-drop clarity, and the paleness of my skin against the dark rock draws attention to my shape, the curves of my breasts, stomach, and thighs.

I tighten my arms over my ample chest. How much of my body has he seen?

“You forgot your soap.” He holds up the bar of tallow soap.

Oh. That’s kind of him, I suppose. “You can place it on the ledge there,” I state, sinking lower so the water laps at my chin. “Thank you.”

There’s a distinct tightening in my lower stomach as he continues to peruse me.

“You can leave,” I say, in case he misinterpreted my dismissal.

The West Wind twirls the soap lazily. His long, naked fingers possess remarkable dexterity for someone who I’ve never seen handle a weapon.

“Zephyrus—”

“What were you doing under the water?”

An unwelcome tingle rolls across my skin. “Praying.” Sort of.

His impolite snort puts my back up.

“Do you have an issue with that?” I snap.

How insouciant he appears. “Your friend has humiliated you by reading your journal and you choose to *pray*?” He traces a fingertip in the dirt. “Seems rather avoidant.”

How little he knows of me, my situation, and my world.

“Harper and I are not friends.”

“You give her too much power.”

He dares speak of power when he is the one pulling strings? “I give her nothing.”

“Then what was that story about Harper and Isobel?”

I do not have to answer him. I do not have to even acknowledge his question, not for something as private as the heart. “I’m not discussing this with you.” My legs cross in an attempt to conceal the secret place where they meet. If I had more courage, I’d wipe that smirk off his face with the palm of my hand. Traversing the pool, however, is not an option.

He shrugs. “Your jealousy serves as fuel she will use against you.”

My mouth parts in astonishment. “Jealousy?” The word breaks, too loud, too revealing. I drop my voice to a hiss. “Jealousy?” Surely this is a joke.

The Bringer of Spring does not laugh. He awaits my reply at his leisure.

“You are delusional.” A voice of cold I do not recognize flows unhindered across my tongue. “What I feel for you is certainly not jealousy.”

“Then what is it you feel for me?”

Why does this sound like another question entirely?

“You exasperate me to no end.”

“I do.” His eyes sparkle, and I’m momentarily stunned into forgetfulness.

Zephyrus eases forward. One arm rests on his thigh. A trouser-clad knee digs into the soil. “What else?” he presses. “Tell me more.” A raucous crow peals through the tangled overgrowth, and my heart skips at what manner of creature it could be.

“You infuriate me.”

“Go on.”

“You refuse to think of anyone’s well-being but your own. Your voice is your favorite sound in the world.” Is this a confession? It feels like

one, the shameful weight of suffering. And I seek repentance for thoughts of this man. “I’m constantly doubting myself in your presence. You—”

He sidles nearer to the water, then stops. “You what?”

The dappled glow upon his face reveals both light and darkness. It is fitting. No matter how homely I find him, I’m unable to look away.

“Nothing.” I shake my head. Water hits my chin, sloshes into my mouth.

“Come now, Brielle. We’re friends, aren’t we?” The lovely melody of his voice seems to rein in the encroaching shadows.

“No.”

“I gave you my special salve,” he points out. “That was a friendly thing to do.”

“Yes.” He could have let me suffer. “Though you provoked my punishment in the first place.” Let’s not forget that particular detail.

The curve of his mouth loses shape. After a moment, he nods. “I did, and for that, I’m sorry.”

How little his sincerity moves me. “Please leave. I’m sure Harper is eagerly awaiting your return.” A shiver puckers my skin beneath the water, for my body has begun to cool.

Still holding the soap, he begins to round the pool toward me, his boots soundless on the damp stones.

“What are you doing?” When he does not slow, I move toward the center of the pool to avoid being cornered, my entire body submerged save my head and neck. The water ripples with my movements, but it cannot hide my shape, the curves I display for no one but myself. “Stay away.”

“I think you’re jealous,” he goes on, completely disregarding my stuttering command. “I think you dislike the attention Harper gives me.” His golden curls catch the light, and for a moment, I swear his face changes shape. “But why would you care, I wonder?”

“I don’t.” Zephyrus is free to flirt with whomever he wants. I hold no claim to his attention.

With every purposeful stride, he nears. My throat tightens. He will see. It is forbidden, but he will see.

“Why?” I whisper. “Why do you torment me so?”

Lowering himself onto the ledge, Zephyrus hangs his legs into the water, boots and all. “Because you intrigue me,” he says, “and I want to know why.”

He slides into the pool.

My back hits the rocks. If I flee the basin, he will see my nakedness. If I stay, he will continue to push my boundaries. Indecision winds through me, and tightens to the point of pain.

“You would touch a woman against her will?”

The West Wind’s eyes darken. “Never against her will. Never without her permission.” He says, “Tell me to go, and I will.”

“I’ve already told you,” I grind out.

“I’ll need you to repeat it, I think. My memory isn’t the best.” He tosses me an impish grin.

I stare into the water. “If you please—”

“Look at me.”

I’m helpless to do otherwise. What power is this, that I cannot even control my own mind? “You can’t be here,” I whisper. If Harper were to see, all my efforts to complete this quest would be for naught.

“Can’t I? Let your mind open. Let it experience the vast range of possibilities.” Pushing off the wall, he glides through the water. His soaked tunic clings to the slender, contoured chest, the lean strength of his arms.

Another step closer brings him within arm’s reach. The water warms between us, as though he carries sunlight in his grasp.

“Your gaze is bold today.”

My face heats. I glance away, but only for an instant. “I apologize,” I stammer, “for staring. I did not realize...”

His lips curve. They are like soft pink petals. Behind lies a set of pretty white teeth.

“Do not apologize for what you desire, Brielle.”

Look at him. The knob at his throat, an abrupt interruption in an otherwise muscular neck; the wet, curling tips of his hair; the hint of stubble along his jaw; the lovely dusk of his skin, flecks of gold having been absorbed.

“If I might offer a suggestion,” he all but purrs.

“Is the suggestion,” I whisper, tongue darting out to lick the water from my lips, “that you will leave me to bathe in peace?”

He tracks my tongue with his gaze. “Quite the opposite, actually.”

That stare unnerves me. It takes every effort not to break it. “Well?”

“A kiss.”

I rear back, forgetting about the sharpened stone at my back. A collection of points digs into my spine, and I wince. “No man may touch a Daughter of Thornbrook.”

“But you’re a novitiate,” he says, sliding closer. “You have not taken your Final Vows. Don’t you want to be selfish, Brielle, just once? Don’t you want to claim something for yourself?”

My arms tighten around my front even as my breasts begin to grow sensitized. Zephyrus and I are of a similar height, but in this moment, I feel small. It’s so rare a feeling I’m momentarily taken aback. The Bringer of Spring is not a large man, but he carries himself with confidence, a language I cannot speak, though I would dearly love to.

Admittedly, I think of these things. The life of a novitiate isn’t easy. We are given the basics to survive, but nothing more. I remember a time before the abbey. My mother and I, curled in bed, her delicate fingers

stroking my tangled hair. Sometimes I ache for that memory so much I cannot breathe.

But then I think of what followed. How her hands would tighten, dragging at my scalp. The shrill quality of her voice when her grasp on reality—the who, what, and where—warped. Screaming highs preceding the inevitable crash, days lying in bed, a young daughter forced to care for her ill mother.

Another shift brings his mouth closer to mine. His trousers brush my thighs underwater, and the coarse texture sends a dart of heat through my core.

“You don’t actually want to kiss me,” I whisper. His smell, like rain on baked earth, lifts to cloud my senses.

Zephyrus’ eyebrows creep upward. “Is that so?” The gold fringe of his lashes dips over his eyes, shielding them from view. “I have thought of your mouth since our last parting. I have thought of it too often.”

“You lie.” My voice wavers.

“I do not.”

Suddenly, he is that much closer. His breath exhales in one long stream, slipping into my open mouth.

“Why?” I hate the insecurity a single word can hold. I should not care. I have Thornbrook. I have the Father, and my smithing, and the Text. It has always been enough.

Yet his eyes gentle. “Because you are an enigma. Because you are most generous. Because you are discovering what lies beyond your abbey walls, and I find myself drawn to your bravery.”

“I’m not brave,” I stammer, searching his gaze for deception. I find none.

“Aren’t you?”

If I were braver, I would cut the lines of people leading me down

unfulfilling roads. I would have fought for myself years ago. Swept up in the whims of others? That is not bravery. That is complacency.

Zephyrus hesitates, then says, “I am old, Brielle. Very old. The world does not hold the same allure for someone who does not age.”

Pulling away, he lifts himself from the pool, water splattering onto the rocks. Grief shadows his features. “I have enjoyed watching you experience life,” he says sadly. “Do not take it for granted, because soon enough, it will end.”

CHAPTER 15

Despite Zephyrus providing dinner that night, I eat little before rolling into bed, dragged into unconsciousness before my head hits the ground. My dreams grow talons. Sweat oozes from my pores, and a dull pulse throbs alongside my bones. Then: dawn.

I drag myself upright, shivering as I store my belongings and shoulder my pack. Even in these early hours, the light glares potently, my eyes cracked the barest sliver against it.

Cheese and apples comprise breakfast, but I do not partake, considering the awful metallic taste in my mouth. Zephyrus and Harper stride ahead, chatting merrily, unaware that each of my steps falls slower than the last.

Noon arrives and departs with equal lethargy.

The flora smears together. The earth, springy and wet, begins to stink of rot. Dizziness arrives in waves, and as the afternoon wanes, I find myself reaching for low-hanging branches, the ground treacherous, pocked with holes. Black clots my eyes. I stop, swaying in place.

I cannot go on, not like this.

“I need a moment.” It emerges as a thought half-formed.

Despite the frail nature of my voice, Zephyrus hears me. I would recognize that long-legged stride among a hundred men, his tread muted as he returns to my side and helps lower me onto a stump, worry creasing his face. “You’re pale.”

My mouth is so dry I fail to swallow. “I’m always pale.”

“Wan, I should say.” He shifts nearer. “When did you last eat?”

Yesterday returns in flashes of color, sound, and light. “Last night. Dinner.”

“Oh? You mean the single bite you took before falling asleep?”

I frown at him. “Yes.” I was not aware he had been paying attention to my eating habits.

Harper retraces her steps through the brush, glowering at me from a patch of sunlight. Zephyrus catches my chin. He stares into my eyes, but I struggle to focus, so I look at his nose. That hideous, crooked nose, a blight on his features. Strangely, it comforts me.

“You have a loss of appetite,” he says.

What does that have to do with anything? “We’ve been hiking all day.” Exhaustion is my heart, my lungs, my bones. Every breath is a weight set free. “I just need to rest for a bit.”

“If you can’t keep up,” Harper announces briskly, “then maybe you should stay behind.”

“I can keep up.” Planting my hands on the stump, I attempt to push myself upright. Weakness cramps my arms, and I’m only able to lift my weight an inch or two before I drop, panting. Everything hurts.

Prowling over, Harper circles me, black hair freshly combed despite the long, sweltering hours trapped in Carterhaugh’s damp heat. She halts at Zephyrus’ side. “I said if you fell behind, I would not wait for you.”

“It rained for three days straight,” I say, slumping forward to rub at my pounding head. “It’s probably a cold. It will pass.”

The West Wind continues to study me. He does not seem to notice Harper's proximity, much to her frustration. "You are injured."

As usual, he thinks he knows things. "I am not. All my limbs are in working order."

"You're certain you weren't hurt from the chase the other day?"

"Are you suggesting I lie?" I'm too fatigued to put any heat behind it, though it irks me all the same.

"No." He exudes a calm that is quite unlike him. "But it was dark. Our eyes miss things. And yours are very mortal."

An oversight. No fatal wounds or severed appendages, but a scratch. A hairline cut parting the cotton of my dress.

Fumbling with the button at my collar, I slide it from the eye loop while the forest respire in great warm heaves around us. Harper leans closer despite feigning disinterest in what I'm doing.

We've traveled so quickly, and I've been so weary, that I haven't paid much attention to the ache atop my sternum. Filth sullies the wrinkled, crusted fabric sagging around my curvy frame. My arm twinges as I awkwardly tug the sleeve over my shoulder, the skin across my chest tearing painfully. When I reveal the slice on my sternum, Zephyrus pinches his mouth closed.

Yesterday, the scab had been intact, stretched by the protrusion of yellowing pus gathering beneath. It has since burst, widening to an open wound stuffed with graying flesh. A subtly sweet reek lifts from the sore. Harper gags.

My fingers quaver as I trace the veins branching from the glistening wound above my breastband. Black as soot, heavily multiplied. The salve I slathered on has cracked, leaving behind a white residue.

I may not know much about healing, but these colors are not natural. "One of the beasts must have scratched me."

Zephyrus' silence doesn't bode well.

A warm breeze grazes my skin. Even that sensation is too much, irritating the injury enough to draw forth a flinch.

"It looks infected," Harper states.

"It's not infected," Zephyrus says. His focus lands with suffocating weight, and I'm unable to hold his gaze for long. Eventually, I look elsewhere. "The creatures you fought are called darkwalkers. Brielle has been envenomated."

I'm boiling from the inside out. It hurts to move. And this news... I feel nothing. I've been sucked dry of emotion. Not even Harper's sharp gasp can rouse me.

"That explains why the salve didn't work," I murmur. "It's not meant to treat venom, only afflictions of the skin." Carefully, I button up my dress. I'd rather not look at the gruesome sight. "How do we treat the wound?"

A restless quality stirs the air despite Zephyrus' lack of movement. I've wondered if his emotion gives rise to wind. There must be some connection there. Fear hardens as a lump in my throat, for still, I have no answer. I must look at Zephyrus. I *must*.

"There is no cure, Brielle." A woeful tone. "I wish it were different."

Harper's gaze cuts to me, but I can't look at her. I'm afraid of what I'll see. Satisfaction. Pleasure, even, in my misfortune.

"How long?" I whisper.

He rubs at his jaw. I watch the joint pop in and out with nervous energy. "It takes around five days for the venom to work its way through the system."

We have been traveling together for four.

Sadness passes as a cloud over my heart, for I am helpless to turn back time. It is done. Soon, I will be, too.

"These darkwalkers. What are they?" Not that it matters. With my

fate carved in stone, knowledge for the sake of knowledge will make no difference. But I seek to know. It comforts me, knowing the what and how and when.

A heavy sigh trails a short string of curses. “They hail from the Deadlands—my eldest brother’s realm. In simplest terms, they are corrupted souls of the dead.” He toes the ground with his boot. I’m watching his face, witnessing pain he seeks to keep hidden. What tortures him? “I last heard the darkwalkers were cleansed, but I assume only those in Boreas’ territory. Some managed to cross into Carterhaugh, unfortunately.”

Deadlands. Darkwalkers. Corrupted. I’ve never heard of this place, these creatures. “The Deadlands? They don’t come from Under?”

“They do not. The Deadlands is where those who have passed on await Judgment. There, they find their final resting place.”

What absurdity. Everyone knows the dead ascend to the Eternal Lands—those who are worthy, at least.

“What is the progression of my demise?” What a question to ask, and so matter-of-factly. But I’d prefer to shed the veil of this unknown.

Zephyrus squeezes the bridge of his nose. “It will not be pretty.” His response is subdued, tight with reluctance. “Your fever will continue to climb. You will crave water no matter how much you drink. Your flesh will blacken with decay.”

Harper stumbles backward in horror. “By the Father.” She retreats among the ferns, arms wrapped around her torso.

My attention returns to Zephyrus. “Go on.”

“Brielle—”

“Do not spare me, Bringer of Spring.” The words collapse beneath the strain in my throat. My eyes sting, but I refuse to let the tears fall.

The Text teaches us not to fear death, and yet, I am afraid of

departing this good earth having failed the task I've been given. I'm so young. Too young, and untried. My hands shake as I straighten, for I will not shrink in light of this reality. I will face this upright as I should have done days, weeks, months ago.

His hands lift, spearing through those honey-brown curls. His head hangs for a moment. "The venom will reach your organs last. It will be... very painful. They say a quick death is preferred." He swallows, lifts his eyes. "Do you taste metal at all?"

I nod.

"Then the final stages have already begun to take effect."

I've gone cold. Is this where I will die? Carterhaugh, crawling with unspeakable horrors, not even a blanket to bring me comfort?

"I wish you would have said something," murmurs the West Wind with far more compassion than I expected. "This could have been prevented, had your wound been treated within the first forty-eight hours."

How was I to know? It makes me twice the fool, I suppose.

"You're sure there's nothing you can do?" I hate how my voice shakes. Vulnerability belongs to me, no one else, but I haven't the strength to shelter it safely, away from prying eyes. "No cure? Nothing at all?"

"Unfortunately," Zephyrus says, "there is not."

Hearing it aloud, without ploy or trickery, guts me. Had I known I would not return to Thornbrook, I do not think I would have left. I will die as a novitiate, having never taken my Final Vows.

"Is there someone you'd like me to inform afterward?" he wonders. "Family?"

"No." I stare at the ground. "I'm an only child. I never met my father. As for my mother..." I've little to say about my mother. Dead or alive, I know not.

I shake my head. "There is no one. The Abbess has acted as my

mentor for the last decade. She will want to know of my demise, but I would have her spared the gruesome details, if it's all the same." I look to Harper. With my death, she can claim Meirlach for herself. The acolyte's red stole will complement her coloring splendidly.

Zephyrus follows my gaze, then nods. "I will make sure your Abbess learns of this. You have my word."

It is the smallest reassurance. "Thank you." I lick my painfully dry lips, the cracks stinging where the skin has peeled free. "Will you continue onward without me?" Selfishly, I do not want to be alone. Companionship, even from those I'm not fond of, would ease my suffering greatly.

He lowers himself onto the ground against the nearest tree, one leg extended outward, the other pulled to his chest, an arm wrapped around his shin. "I have not decided. It would be cruel to leave you here."

Relief courses through me, though I try to hide it. That he has considered my well-being is more than I expected from him.

"Plus, I'm terrified of being alone in Harper's presence," he tacks on.

Against all odds, my mouth curves, and I snort. Harper, a vague shape in the fringe of my vision, turns away, head bent while Zephyrus' chuckle morphs into a deep belly laugh. He appears young and unburdened. Free.

"You haven't appeared too bothered by her presence," I point out, more harshly than I intend.

He shrugs. "Any conversation is better than no conversation."

His tone gives me pause. "What are you implying?"

"Well, if you chose to speak with me, maybe I wouldn't feel the need to talk to Harper."

I stare at the West Wind with dawning realization. Perhaps he enjoyed our discussions as much as I did. "I didn't know," I say. Disappointment hits, unwelcome and uncomfortable.

He falls quiet for a bit. “I am sorry, Brielle. For what it’s worth, I’ve enjoyed my time with you.” He scans my face. “Is there anything I can do to make your time left more comfortable? Anything you need?”

I bite my lower lip. *Rest*. Blessed slumber croons in my ear, but if I am to die, it seems pointless to rest, knowing the hole into which I will fall contains no bottom.

“Actually.” I clench my hands atop my legs. “Could you stay? And talk? I—” A blush scours my face. “I don’t have many friends to share conversation with.” I consider leaving the thought unfinished. “Actually, I have no friends,” I admit. Not one.

“No friends?” He frowns. “I find that hard to believe.”

It’s the truth, however painful. “Making friends doesn’t come easy for me.” I never know the right thing to say, how best to connect with my peers. Many of the older acolytes don’t even know my name. “My attempts always end in failure.”

“Isn’t the old adage to be yourself?”

What a naive thing to say. “And if I’m not good enough?”

He concedes my point with a brief nod.

“But you—” I gesture toward him. The West Wind can draw people in, make them stay. Make them *want* to stay. No matter the ways I seek acceptance from my peers, I never make any progress. “It is easy for you. The way you move, the way you interact with others. I can’t do what you do.”

“Easy?” A bark of startled laughter claps the air. “My darling novitiate, nothing comes easy to me. It never has. I’m just adept at appearances.”

To my eternal frustration, tears prick my eyes. Baring my soul was never the plan, yet my defenses have caved, my exhaustion is too great. So be it. Let Zephyrus see. I no longer care enough to pretend otherwise.

His expression softens, and he makes himself comfortable against the side of the tree. “You know something, Brielle? I don’t have any friends either.”

CHAPTER 16

“It’s a shame you’re going to die.”

Harper perches on a large, smooth stone near the fire, gazing at me with her enormous, all-seeing eyes. They shimmer like the most pristine orbs of lake water in her small face, the flickering light a golden sheen atop their surfaces.

I lie in my sweat-soaked bedroll, shivering, every warm breeze scouring me like the iciest wind. Initially, her words do not process. Zephyrus departed hours ago, seeking an herb to help dull the pain as the venom works its way through my system. Last night, my health began its sharp decline. My fever intensified, and my lips crack and bleed. Saliva gathers in wads at the corners of my mouth.

Here at the end of my life, the fight has all but gone out of me.

“For once in your life,” I rasp out, “can you show a little compassion?” Yes, Harper loathes me, but to wish suffering upon another? Allowing space for compassion should never be a burden.

“You know people don’t buy your little act, right? Perfect Brielle, who can do no wrong. What a joke.”

An edged pain jabs beneath my sternum. “I wasn’t aware it was an

act,” I grit, trembling from the spasm. “Why should I not treat others as I wish to be treated? They are our brothers, our mothers, our sisters, our children. That is what the Text teaches us.”

Harper scoffs, which only agitates my irritation to greater heights.

“Have you even thought about what becoming an acolyte means? Have you considered how you’ll use your mantle for the betterment of Thornbrook, and the world?”

If Thornbrook is a pillar of faith and goodwill, then novitiates are its bedrock. We are responsible for the day-to-day tasks required of keeping the abbey doors open. Meanwhile, acolytes actively shape the surrounding community. They travel to Kilmany, to Aberdeen, to the smallest towns perched on Carterhaugh’s fringe, spreading the Father’s word. *Come*, they urge. *This is the way*.

“And I’m to believe you have?” she snaps. “I was not aware there was any space in your head for such thoughts, considering your nose is stuck in the Text every spare moment.”

Again, this disdain for my continued studies. I do not understand it.

Over the years, I’ve jotted down notes, ways to expand Thornbrook’s influence, increase production, and extend our reach throughout the region. At times, I’ve brought these proposals to Mother Mabel’s attention. The herb garden? My idea. After its implementation, I noticed an increase in positivity and productivity, our meals brightened with color, flavor. Recently, I suggested purchasing sheep for milk, cheese, and wool production. Mother Mabel plans on acquiring the livestock next spring.

Abbey and community—stronger together, weaker apart. But Harper, a woman whose reflection is only herself? She covets the prestige gained in wearing the red stole and nothing beyond it.

“Not every acolyte is required to break their backs seeking lasting change,” she says, leaning forward on her perch.

As if helping the less fortunate truly is a detriment to one's physical prowess. "You do not think He expects your best effort?"

Her teeth snap together with an audible click. "Just because I haven't thought of some grand plan, doesn't mean I will do any less good." She crosses her arms. At least she's returned to wearing her cincture properly, the white cord knotted at the front of her wrinkled cotton dress.

I cough into my hands. "Spoken like someone who has given little thought to the responsibility."

I'm surprised steam doesn't billow from Harper's nostrils. She drags her pack closer and begins yanking out her filthy clothes, folding and unfolding them, as if to busy her hands rather than walloping me in the face.

"What are your ideas," she snips, "if you think they're so much better?"

I flip onto my side to ease the pain radiating near my tailbone. The day's warmth presses heavy hands against me. My damp blanket sticks to my legs, my bare feet. I cast off the insufferable weight, sighing from the blessed relief of a cool, constant wind, deepening shade as the sun creeps westward.

"Claiming my ideas are better implies you have something to compare them to." And we both know Harper has thought no further than the appointment ceremony.

Tension grips the lines of her body, and I do not imagine the air sizzling in waves against her skin. "Well," she murmurs, eyes reduced to haughty blue slits, "you are certainly opinionated today."

At this point, I've nothing to lose. "Do you want to hear my ideas, or not?"

She flaps a hand. It's the only consent I can hope to receive.

I say, "I was thinking along the lines of an apprenticeship."

“Elaborate, please.”

The heat is so oppressive I struggle to maintain clarity of mind. I fumble for the buttons on my dress, manage to wrench the sleeves down, then my chemise, exposing my sweat-drenched upper back to the air. Relief.

When I look to Harper, I find her face oddly pale, mouth slack. That’s when I remember Mother Mabel’s lash, the marks spoiling my shoulder blades, the length of my spine.

Teeth gritted, I rebutton my dress. Harper glances away. How could I have forgotten my penance? Clarity of mind, indeed. It is done. Pointless to ponder all those *had beens*. In a few hours, Carterhaugh will begin to bruise with approaching twilight. I wonder if I will even see the morrow.

“Thornbrook has an excellent relationship with Kilmany,” I say, too weak to do anything but lie in stillness, “but what of the smaller towns to the north and east?” I think of Veraness, its scattered remains. “Many of those children burden their families with another mouth to feed, lack of skills to bring in income. We could teach them how to harvest grain, how to read and write and complete simple mathematics, how to mend clothes, how to forge weapons. In return for work, they would receive food, shelter, and the means to provide a better life for their families.”

In my younger years, I visited Kilmany every few weeks to apprentice with their local bladesmith. Three years later, I graduated with the means to create any manner of blade, an arsenal of skills. From there, my knowledge matured, my craft shaped to bear my unique imprint.

Harper appears more contemplative than angry. Perhaps I’ve given her something to ponder. And yet, I’m imagining what will occur once my breath stills and my heart ceases to beat. Harper, sauntering into Thornbrook, Meirlach hanging from her waist. Mother Mabel’s grief at my

passing overshadowed by the acquisition of a powerful, fabled sword. Another red stole bestowed upon someone less deserving than I.

I think, *I am going to die*. Why fight when the Eternal Lands await? But in my life, there are still things left undone.

“You claim Mother Mabel favors me,” I whisper hoarsely. “What do you think she will do when you return to the abbey with the news of my death, sword or not?”

Harper crams the garb into her pack. Then she sits, glaring at me. She understands my logic, and she hates it. Alas, that is nothing new.

“I hate to be the bearer of bad news,” she says, though her tone suggests otherwise, “but novitiates are a drop in the bucket to Mother Mabel. Dozens pass through Thornbrook every year. Do not think you are irreplaceable.”

The possibility hurts. I am a valued member of the abbey. Only I can shape the blades that protect us from the fair folk. Harper is wrong. “Even if you become the next acolyte,” I counter, “your mantle will be forever tainted by my death.”

She scoffs. “You volunteered to take this journey. You knew the risks. Mother Mabel wouldn’t fault me for your demise.”

“Wouldn’t she?” I feed the dubiety crumb by crumb. “I imagine there would always be a certain amount of doubt there.”

She brushes dirt from the front of her dress. It improves little, considering its grimy state. “You think too highly of yourself. You are nothing more than a pair of hands, like everyone else.”

It takes mettle to hold the gaze of one with so much suppressed wrath, but I force myself to do it, racing heart or not. I am Harper’s most beloved target, and I haven’t the faintest idea why. “I think,” I say slowly, “you underestimate Mother Mabel’s affection toward me.”

“I’m confident I do not. If the Abbess favored you, why pass you

over for others less diligent? She only gave you the opportunity to try for the acolyte position because she pities you.”

Years of torment, and Harper knows exactly what buttons to push. I refuse to cave. The barbs will not stick with permanence. “Maybe you’re right. Maybe I am just another *pair of hands*, as you put it. But if I am not?”

“You are.” Trembling.

I shrug. “Fine. You’re probably right.” A cough rattles my chest. Hour by hour, my fever continues its climb.

Lurching to her feet, Harper stumbles toward the nearest tree. It is enormous, ancient, with deepest grooves carved into the bark. She braces a hand there, back bowed with the force of her breaths. I watch the press of her gloved fingers, and then, inevitably, their aggressive curl, the stretch of leather as her knuckles protrude, until a fist rests in its place. Only the seed requires planting. She can see it all unravel, this dream of hers, before it has even occurred.

“What do I have to do?” she whispers. “I’ve worked too hard to botch this opportunity.”

For once, I was not the first to cave. I feel lighter than I have in days. “You save me,” I tell her. “You do whatever it takes. Otherwise, you’ll be left with nothing.” And that, I’ve realized, is something Harper cannot bear.

A fraught silence sinks into place, then all at once, she deflates. “All right. Then what is the next step?” She is calmer. Good.

“You will need to convince Zephyrus to save my life.”

“But he already said there’s no cure.”

I give her my blandest stare. “And you believe him?”

Harper sniffs, peering down her nose at me. “You’re not giving me much time to organize a plan, you know.”

She doesn’t need it. “I have full confidence in you.”

Frowning, she searches my gaze, and in this moment, she appears as

deeply uncertain as I do, caught unaware by the support I've given. She considers this, then strides over to Zephyrus' bedroll.

"What are you doing?"

Harper loosens the tie on his satchel and begins to rummage through his possessions. "Searching for leverage," she states, as though it were obvious. She pulls out a small book, frowns, and shoves it back inside.

The only thing Harper loves more than proving a point is... well, nothing.

Another wave of heat scours me from head to toe. My mouth weeps for water, but I'm too proud to ask Harper for the canteen.

At least she finally agrees with me. The West Wind is too cunning, too keen.

"There's little point in trying to figure it out," I say. "You will learn whatever it is Zephyrus wants when he decides and not a moment sooner."

A twig snaps, bright where the day is dull.

"And here I thought I was doing a good deed," drawls the West Wind.

He emerges from the thicket in shades of gray. Crossing into a patch of sunlight brings color to his green cloak, the simple brown trousers. He moves so swiftly he is gone when I next blink.

Dropping the pack, Harper whirls on him. She is the most bull-headed woman I've ever met. Why else would she pull a knife on the West Wind?

He halts a hair's breadth from her outstretched hand, not alarmed in the slightest. She may as well hold a feather to his throat. "Do you even know how to use that thing?" he asks.

Low, throaty laughter washes out in a cascade of sound. "I stick the pointed side into your flesh. What more is there to know?"

His mouth smiles. His eyes do not. "Did you find what you were

looking for?”

“And if I did?” Harper is a dog with her teeth sunk deep into flesh. She will not pull free. It must be pried from her mouth piece by piece.

Zephyrus examines Harper as I have done many times before, with the understanding that the one you address hides many untruths, and you must search for every crack and crevasse, down to what lies beneath.

“Let me speak plainly,” Harper says. “We need Brielle for this mission. If she dies, so does the opportunity to acquire Meirlach. She will ensure our time is not wasted.”

I stare at my surly traveling companion in astonishment. Never has a word of praise flowed so naturally from her mouth, and certainly not about me. As with anything though, she speaks with conviction. Even I believe her.

She flicks her wrist, tossing the dagger toward her pack. I wince as it hits the dirt. No respect for a blade. It will need to be cleaned. “Our only option is to save her life.”

The West Wind’s attention shifts to where I lie prone. Another shiver rattles my insides, and he frowns at the sight. “As it turns out, I agree.”

Harper stands with her mouth unhinged, argument unfinished. “Oh.” She blinks, then straightens. “Very well.”

“Someone owed me a debt,” he says, “and that debt has been repaid.”

The West Wind kneels at my side. As always, he smells of sun-warmed grass. I missed his scent while he was gone. I did not believe I would.

“This,” he says, lifting a vial of pale liquid, “is the answer to your prayers. I know a hedge witch in Carterhaugh. A master healer. This is one of her more potent remedies. Although, it required a trade: a few drops of

your blood.” He lifts my hand, and I notice a small bandage wrapped around my thumb. “Hopefully you don’t mind.”

“That will cure me?” I croak. An oily film encloses the sky overhead and swathes the trees in shadow.

“It will.”

Harper speaks from behind. “If you knew this was an option, why didn’t you visit the hedge witch sooner?”

Admittedly, she has a point.

Glancing between us, Zephyrus says, “To tell you the truth, I did not want to get your hopes up. The hedge witch’s availability varies depending on the week. She travels great distances to procure necessary ingredients for her remedies. Thus, she is often absent from home.”

I want to believe him. Harper, as well, appears suspicious as she shifts into my line of vision. Then again, she believes nothing. “How convenient you managed to acquire it at the eleventh hour.”

“Yes,” he replies with a bite. “It is.”

Every pointed feature of my tentative ally pinches in wariness. “Very well.” She waves a hand. “Heal Brielle and be done with it.”

“It is not so simple,” he says, peering at me. “The cure must be passed from one mouth to another.”

It doesn’t immediately process. “You mean like...” By the Father, I can’t say it. My throat closes over the word.

“A kiss.” He nods. “Yes.”

My stomach recoils against my spine. “No.”

Harper studies the vial for a long moment, expression dubious. “I’ve never heard of a cure being administered through a kiss.”

At least we can agree on one thing.

Zephyrus chuckles. “I’m sure there are a lot of things you’ve never heard of, my dear.” He pairs this with a gracious smile.

She purses her mouth. Looks from me, to the vial, to Zephyrus, back to me. “She’ll do it.”

“I will not,” I snap, but it is an airless rebuttal, all the strength hollowed from my lungs. Death, or a kiss? The choice is obvious. Even I am not that senseless.

Kneeling next to me, Harper places her mouth at my ear, a faint, honeysuckle scent clinging to the long, inky threads of her hair. “You will,” she hisses, “if you wish to see Thornbrook again.” She clutches my hand, the squeeze so painful I bite back a cry. For a woman so dainty, she is surprisingly strong. “I will not have my appointment tainted by your death because you were too foolish to choose life when it was offered to you.”

She releases me, but doesn’t travel far. I shiver beneath the constricting fabric of my dress. I am sweltering, freezing, helpless, bound too tightly to my life to deny anything. Where will that leave me, should I do nothing?

Dead if I do. Spurned if I don’t.

“Once the liquid passes into your mouth,” Zephyrus says, crouching at my side, “the healing will begin to take effect.”

Just a kiss. I fumble for my gloves, tug them on. Pointless, really, but they give me some semblance of security.

He lifts his hands and, deliberately, rests them on either side of my head, effectively caging me in.

A small sound squeezes past my tightening airway. Fear? Despair? Humiliation? My teeth chatter as a rising cold licks through my chest cavity. *Deliver us from temptation.* With this touch, I will never know peace.

Slowly, he lowers his face to mine. The grassy scent develops in rich layers of complexity. “Brielle,” croons the West Wind. “Let yourself unwind.”

I'm too spineless to keep my eyes open. Lack of sight heightens the forest sounds: the rough, coursing river; leaves rustling sweet as moth wings; and the wind, sightless and scentless, winding knots through my hair.

Something brushes my mouth. I pinch it shut on reflex.

Zephyrus chuckles. "Relax, my darling novitiate." A cork pops.

Obedience, purity, devotion. Here, on the eve of my demise, my vows will shatter into a thousand unknowns. I feel sick with shame, for I am different, I am more, I am consecrated. But I want to live. I must. And so, breathing deeply, my facial muscles release their tension, my mouth softening. Something brushes against it. My lips part, and the potion slides inside.

I swallow. Lemon and herbs.

A tentative flick along my teeth. It comes again: Zephyrus' tongue, soft and exploratory. My stomach bottoms out.

"Trust," he whispers against my mouth. "Let your heart guide you."

My mouth widens of its own volition. Beneath the herbaceous taste, a rich upwelling floods the back of my throat. My pulse erupts—chest, neck, fingertips—a slow flush suffusing my overheated skin. His tongue slides against mine, fleeting, before he pulls away.

My skin tingles with the aftershock of his touch. All the world is darkness until I open my eyes to find the West Wind staring down at me. My vision brightens, crisp with definition.

"I see it in your eyes," he whispers.

All thoughts have fled. I am a woman made vacant. "See what?"

Leaning forward, he touches his mouth to my ear. "The hunger."

CHAPTER 17

The following morning, I'm surprised to be greeted by a lack of insults from Harper.

She will not look at me. Neither will she speak to me. But her eyes, those lake water pools—I cannot shake them free. She knows. And I know. The kiss, while necessary, was a mistake.

But that is not the truth, is it? The truth is this: I wanted it. Deep down, in an old, abandoned corner of my heart, I wanted to know what it felt like, just once, to be desired.

Midway through the afternoon, we stop for a break. It could not have come at a better time. Carterhaugh is particularly dense, holding close to the warm, stagnant air, its walls of greenery shuttering any outside sound. Saliva clumps my lips in white globs and sweat clots my pores. Zephyrus strides off to relieve himself, leaving Harper and I alone.

She sags against a fallen tree, clothing bagging around her slim frame. Once again, Harper ran out of water hours ago. Since we cannot afford the delay of a potential collapse, I set aside my complicated distaste and approach, waterskin in hand. "Here."

To my surprise, she accepts it without argument, draining half the

container in one swallow.

“Slowly,” I snap.

A gasp rings out as she rips her mouth free. Water sloshes down her chin, dampening the collar of her dress. “Don’t think this will stop me from informing Mother Mabel about that kiss when we return to Thornbrook.” She takes another greedy pull.

For a heartbeat, I’m caught in a freefall. There is the excuse, there is the lie, and there is the truth. “I can explain.”

A hair-raising cackle scatters the birds roosting in the trees. They soar off with raucous caws of distress. “By all means, go ahead. Explain how you were lured into a sexual act with a man. I’m sure the Abbess will understand.”

I’ve always considered Harper’s companionship less than agreeable, but here, now, I realize how horrible she truly is. She is bitter enough to drag me down into the blackest waters and let me drown. And I will, if I do not start fighting for myself.

“I did not have a choice if I wanted to live.”

“You think Mother Mabel cares about that? What will she think when she learns her favorite novitiate has been led astray?”

The crawling heat gathers to a point in my sternum. It climbs my throat, spreads like molten metal across my cheeks. “It was a life or death situation,” I saw lowly. “You were the one who machinated it!”

Her mouth pinches. “You are sullied, and I will ensure she knows of it.”

Helplessly, my eyes begin to sting. What is worse, the venom she spews, or my belief in it?

Do I regret kissing Zephyrus? That, I cannot answer. For from his mouth, I received life.

“Go ahead and tell Mother Mabel,” I choke. “The only reason you’re

doing this is because you can't stand the idea that Zephyrus might find me desirable." My fury crystallizes, a sharp, burning core alive inside me.

Harper stalks toward me, yet I hold my ground. She does not frighten me as she once did. What can she do? I possess three times her strength.

"He does not desire you," she hisses. "Is that what you think?" Without fail, another splenetic remark follows. "You are so simple, Brielle. I feel sorry for you. Honestly, I do. Zephyrus is playing you, don't you see?"

Tossing the waterskin at my feet, she hauls her rucksack across her back and dives into the brush where Zephyrus vanished earlier.

My hands shake as I gather my belongings. To choose desire is to choose oneself, and to choose oneself is to walk a path separate from the Father. Zephyrus did not put his hands on me, but why should that matter? He kissed me. I wanted it. That is an action I am unable to reverse.

It can't happen again. The West Wind is our guide, and I am his follower. From this moment forward, I will keep my gloves on. I decide who and what to touch, and when.

By mid-afternoon, the sun screams with heat, and not even the shade can curb its oppressive weight. The canopy begins to open in pockets of white and blue. A rush of cooling air sweeps through, relief against my red, patchy skin, and I glance at Zephyrus in time to see him drop his hand, fingers colored silver from the winding tendril.

I offer him a grateful smile. "How much longer?"

Something softens his expression, if I'm not mistaken. "See for yourself."

Even Carterhaugh must end.

As we push through a break in the trees, my footsteps falter. A squall hits us from the east, and I gasp. The earth, the sky. Blue, and beneath, rock of deepest red.

It is an ocean and a gulf. The space does not merely sit. It piles atop itself in deep folds so the vastness seems to expand in countless directions. Sunlight hammers the striated rock, squeezing out veins of quartz and gold, thinnest rivers of precious metal, stone splitting beneath the pressure of a thousand years. A layer of sizzling air skates over the landscape in ripples of heat.

I have heard of the world's endless stretch, but I never imagined *this*: the widest, deepest canyon, with plunging valleys and curved, mammoth walls. Look at how it bursts its seams.

Harper tromps up to my side, surveying the vista. Then she turns away, utterly unimpressed. "Give me the map."

I pass it over without objection. Following our failed attempt to enter Under, I'd retaken possession of the map with the agreement that she could handle it upon request. Or in her case, demand. Kneeling on the ground, she opens the oiled parchment. "I don't see a way to cross."

"There is," I murmur reluctantly, though it's not inked on the chart.

She lifts her head to where I point. A narrow rope bridge stretches across the ravine, creaking in the humid breeze.

Harper pushes to her feet, folds the map, and studies the hanging bridge. She appears neither frightened nor concerned, merely unfazed. "This is the only way to cross?"

Zephyrus speaks from behind. "It is."

This cannot be our only option. I study the canyon, every wide, meandering curve. Brown foliage spots the deep cracks a few paces ahead. The cliff's edge lies a stone's throw beyond. A shaded copse shimmers on the opposite side of the gulf, a dark green border where the sweltering red rock ends.

Harper passes over the map. "Might as well get it over with."

I tuck the parchment into my pocket. "You're not afraid it will

snap?”

She lifts those perfectly curved eyebrows in challenge. Even trekking through Carterhaugh, they are never less than expertly groomed. “Are you?”

Yes, because the bridge looks as if it hasn’t been repaired since its construction, however many centuries ago that was.

My palms begin to sweat beneath my gloves. “If we go the long way around—”

“We don’t have time,” she states with unflappable calm. “We’ve only until the tithes to return. We’re already behind.”

“Maybe we wouldn’t be,” I point out, “if you had bothered to help set up and break down camp the last three nights.” I gathered every scrap of wood, erected our shelter, cooked dinner, dug the latrine, despite my slow recuperation from my near-death experience. Zephyrus, as well, didn’t bother to lift a finger.

Harper hefts her pack higher onto her back. Those small, pointed facial features compress with distaste. “Spare me your righteousness, Brielle. I’ve done my fair share on this journey. You’re not the only one capable of contributing.”

I don’t bother mentioning that without my aid, she likely would have collapsed after the first few miles.

“Ladies.” Zephyrus steps between us. “Is this a war or a tea party?”

Harper pays him no mind. She says to me, “What will you do if you can’t cross? Will you stay here?”

She’s right. If I cannot cross the bridge, I will not reach the Grotto, or Meirlach, in time. This entire journey will have been for naught. And that is not an option.

As she brushes past me, I catch her sleeve. “Please reconsider. If we work together—”

She sighs. “Oh, Brielle. When will you learn? No one cares what you want. People act of their own selfish needs, and I am no exception. Neither are you.” A hard yank rips her arm from my grasp. “I’ll be sure to put in a good word to Mother Mabel for you—or not.”

With a cruel smirk, Harper plants one foot onto the nearest plank. The wood groans, and the bridge wavers. I watch it all without taking a breath.

Another step forward. The bridge sags beneath her weight, creaking like an old door in the wind. Each hand clamps the rope railings stringing waist-high, the long tail of her braid hanging down the center of her back, a dark sash against her crusted dress. Plank by plank, she shuffles forward. The bridge holds, but Harper is half my body weight. The lines would surely snap if I attempted to cross.

I can’t do it. I can’t put my trust in this shoddy contraption, one sneeze away from collapse. My throat prickles with mounting panic, lack of control. Helplessness—a feeling I know well.

“Close your eyes.” The command flutters near my ear, low, brimming with unseen power.

The gaping space beneath the swinging bridge distorts my vision, darkness and yet more darkness. A few planks of wood bound together with fraying rope is all that separates me from the drop, vicious rocks jutting from the bottom of the ravine. A screaming gust wrenches through the canyon.

“Brielle.” Warmth at my back, followed by the wind’s cool caress. “Let me guide you.”

“I’m not crossing the bridge.”

“You are going to cross the bridge,” Zephyrus says. “And I am going to help you.”

“I just said—”

“Then why are you here?”

That stops me. Why *am* I here? I thought I knew. But that was *before*. Before the darkwalkers, my illness, each excruciating second spent in Harper’s presence, an unnecessary battle of will.

“I shouldn’t have left Thornbrook,” I murmur. Harper is nearly across the bridge. “I should have stayed where it was safe.” Doing what I have always done.

“Safe?” Zephyrus shifts his weight. “Sounds dreadfully boring.” Then he sighs. “What is it you want, Brielle?”

I release a shaky breath. “To obtain Meirlach. To prove to Mother Mabel my worth. To give my life to the Father.”

“Then you will cross the bridge. If you cannot confront this fear, you will remain small. Is that what you want?”

What can the West Wind know of fear? He is a god, immortal, prevailing. He could shape the world in his image if he chose. As for me, what comes next? Another leg of this journey, I suppose.

He says again, “Close your eyes.”

It is easier to speak truthfully when I am blind to other things, and yet— “I can’t.”

“Why not?”

The answer is far too personal. It is an old wound, and I fear it has not scarred as well as I had hoped.

“The dark,” I whisper. “I fear the dark.”

He falls quiet, yet the wind unleashes itself, a great, howling, emotive creature. I do not realize I’m leaning into Zephyrus until his breath stirs the fine hairs on my nape, and I lurch forward to put distance between us.

“Steady,” he murmurs, not unkindly, and places a hand on my hip. “The dark is not inherently dangerous on its own, you know.”

I lick my lips, forcing out, “I’m aware.” By the Father, this will not be easy. “What do you fear?”

He makes a sound in his throat as the wind bleeds into a low hum. Curls of my hair have pulled free to tickle my face. “I fear the fall.”

The hand on my hip remains, his touch muted by the fabric of my dress. It feels strange to lean on him, metaphorically speaking. To lean on anyone, really.

“I believe fear lies in all of us,” he continues. “We ask ourselves if it will hurt. We wonder if we could have done something differently.”

What does he refer to? Here, now, me, this bridge? Something else? We share a conversation of mutual understanding. For a brief moment, I feel seen. “What part of falling do you fear?”

“What comes after.”

“And what comes after?” I whisper.

His hand tightens on my hip. “That which has been made unwhole.”

Normally, I would not pry, but a genuine openness radiates from the West Wind, new and tentative. My surroundings fade, and I feel only a man’s body against mine as my eyelids flutter shut. “You know this from experience?”

The fingers on my hip squeeze slightly. I’m startled by the tingle of heat in my belly. “Where are all these questions coming from?” He presses against my back.

I shuffle forward, peeling away from his slender strength. “You redirect.”

A soft, wry laugh. Roses—their sweet aroma—tease my senses. “I underestimated you, I think.”

This does not surprise me. The disappointment, however, does. “You think me meek.”

“I did. But I’m learning.”

Rocks scatter beneath the toes of my boots. I'm not sure why I care. I do not understand how a man can smile and laugh so freely, yet beneath resides a darkness I cannot see, only sense in waves of sadness, frustration, guilt. Against all odds, it is those lightless places I'm drawn toward. "Will you tell me?"

He pushes me forward another step, and the ground beneath me shudders. We're on the bridge.

I stiffen, but the hand at my hip directs me ahead, always ahead, the West Wind's body acting as a barrier against my retreat. The contraption sways wildly. My legs puddle out, quivering, on the threshold of collapse.

"Take me back." The croak dissolves into nothing.

"We can't turn back." He continues to nudge me along. My heart hammers so ferociously its pulse fuses with my sweat-coated skin.

"We can. We absolutely can." My voice ratchets to a shrill pitch. "Zephyrus!"

"Quiet your mind, Brielle." A subdued incantation, meant to soothe. "It will all be over soon."

I grab hold of that promise and cling for dear life. The quiet place nestled in my heart hangs as overflowing roses in a tranquil garden, a sweet perfume, a swing upon which I sit, gently swaying beneath the shade of a massive tree. When the world is obdurate and cold, I return here, to an evergreen spring.

"You asked me of my experience." Zephyrus draws me in step by step, shepherding me across the vast canyon. "There's not much to say, for it was long ago. I was an insecure, selfish fool, and someone paid a terrible price."

The bridge creaks beneath our combined weight. Fizzing panic tries to claw its way outside my skin.

What terrible price does he speak of? Death? Injury? Loss? This

person he mentioned sounds important to him.

“How much farther?” My right hand slides along the rope as the bowed planks shallow out. I can’t think. My mind spins off-kilter.

“Don’t worry about the distance. Think only of the next step.”

“You are the least helpful man I have ever met.”

He crows a laugh. “From you, I think that might be a compliment.”

The bridge falls quiet as my feet pass onto solid ground.

“Well done,” Zephyrus says, and releases me.

My eyes open. Harper leans against a collection of boulders, arms crossed, nonplussed at our arrival. In the distance, trees erupt to brush the sky. She glances between us, mouth pinched, yet says nothing.

Zephyrus skirts the rise of massive stone, gesturing us to follow. Those long, limber strides flow without interruption to a patch of thick, soft grass shaped in a perfect circle. A stone well squats in its center, a peaked roof covering the opening. Surrounding the grass: baked red rock, the wavering air of a place where little flourishes.

“This,” Zephyrus says, resting a hand on the structure’s rough edge, “is the Well of Past. Each of the Wells requires an offering to the Gods of Old for entry.”

“You mean the Father,” I clarify.

“No,” he replies. “I mean the deities the fair folk have worshipped for centuries.”

I bite my cheek in an attempt to hold my tongue. “There is no mention of this in the Text.”

Harper emits a low sound of derision. I ignore her, maintaining focus on the West Wind, who says, “Who the fair folk worship has nothing to do with your liturgy.”

It’s not intended as an insult, but it feels like one, nonetheless. The Bringer of Spring studies me with a fair amount of frustration. “They may

not be your gods,” he says, and his gaze is old in this moment, and sad, “but they are someone’s gods. The fair folk have their beliefs, too.”

I do not appreciate his judgment. “How can the fair folk possibly have something as advanced as organized religion?” I argue. “They’re vile, wretched—”

“Different?” Zephyrus counters.

I fall silent. The thought of offering anything to a god other than the Father sits like an abrasion upon my skin. It’s not fair. I don’t want to betray the Father, but apparently, this is the only way.

Harper brushes me aside. “We do what we must. Either accept it, or don’t.” She turns to Zephyrus, fingers curled around the straps digging into her shoulders, laden pack sagging against her lower back. “After the offering, what then?”

In answer, he draws up the wooden bucket from inside the well, the metal pulley creaking with each rotation. Water slops over the lip. “You will need to be lowered down.”

The West Wind is fond of jests, but I do not think this is one of them.

“The rope was recently replaced.” He flicks the braided twine. “Within the last hundred years, at least.”

Harper blanches. A cold sweat slides down the groove between my breasts.

“Anyway, the longer we stand here, the more time we waste.” He claps his hands encouragingly. “Let us begin.”

It means nothing. The offering is but an object. It holds no importance, no symbolism. It is necessary. I must remember that.

Following Zephyrus’ lead, we circle the well—north, east, south, west—then toss in an object. I pull a button off my dress. Harper gifts a coin. Zephyrus tears a strip from his cloak hem, the dark green fabric fluttering as it drifts into the cavity.

The ground shudders in response, then stills.

“Lastly, since this is the Well of Past, you must offer it a story from your life.”

“Is that all?” Harper demands.

Zephyrus tosses her a warm smile. “Yes, Harper. Are you volunteering to go first?”

“Brielle will go first,” she states, chin angled my way.

I’m too overcome with nerves of the upcoming descent to argue. “When I was seven years old, I accompanied my mother to the market. We lived in a small town, and figs were only in season a few weeks during autumn.”

This memory, I remember, does not end favorably. It ends in tears, the hoarse screams of the conflicted.

Of all my memories, why bring this one to light? Perhaps the nerves of impending darkness connect that memory to this one. How long will it take Harper to weaponize this story against me?

“The following night,” I continue, “my mother believed I’d eaten the figs she bought, having forgotten she had traded them for a block of soap. When I tried to explain, she grew angry.” My hand lifts to my right cheek.

The West Wind’s pupils narrow to pricks of shade. “Did she hit you?”

Never before had my mother laid a hand on me. Looking back, I think I knew something wasn’t right. The madness. The rapid, often incoherent, speech. The exhaustion and mental fog.

“She apologized a few days later,” I mumble, but the damage was done.

A gust of hot air slithers mournfully through the canyon at our backs. Zephyrus’ focus is so acute I turn away, fighting the roiling in my belly, the dormant coal flaring to life and continuing its long burn throughout the

night. Bitterness marks my tongue. I'd believed to have buried that memory ages ago, but it remains unfinished. I wished I could have asked my mother why. *I am your daughter*, I would have said. It is too late now.

"Harper?" Zephyrus' quiet command.

She sucks in a breath through her nose, then peers into the well. "There's not much to say. I grew up in a household where I wanted for nothing. My father was a silk merchant, my mother a florist. My sisters and I attended the most prestigious academy for women's education. They sought to become great seamstresses. I was on track to become a nurse."

I frown at this new information. I know nothing of Harper's past. I never cared to know. Why did Harper dedicate her life to the faith? Generally, a woman seeks the church during times of hardship. Harper's childhood sounds positively idyllic.

"As a girl, I had always wanted a dog, though my parents would never allow it. I found one abandoned in the old mill one summer. I named her Lily, because of her white coloring." She folds her hands at her front, voice subdued. "I loved that dog and spent the better part of a year secretly nursing her back to health. But one morning, I found the mill door open, and Lily gone."

Harper catches my eye. To my surprise, tears cling to her eyelashes.

"Days I searched, but she was never found. My sadness grew. The following week, I passed by the church and spotted fresh lilies planted in the courtyard. I believed it was a sign to give my life to the Father. The following month, I joined Thornbrook as a novitiate and haven't looked back since."

She sniffs, brushes her hands across her front. A beat of silence passes before I hear it—a low drone from the well's center.

Zephyrus nods. "We're in. I'll go first. Brielle will follow. Harper, you bring up the rear."

“I’m not going last.” She steps forward. “I’ll be in the middle.”

I bite back a retort. Is my sanity worth the argument? Probably not.

Zephyrus manages to fit into the bucket with ease, crouching on the balls of his feet as he takes the rope and lowers himself down, tanned fingers and curling hair vanishing from sight. A few minutes pass before the empty bucket reappears.

As Harper grips the rope, I reach out, snagging her arm. “Wait.”

I’m fully anticipating a counterattack of the fractious and cross, but here, a rare glimpse of weariness, a momentary doubt, each stamped onto my companion’s pointed face. “What?”

Amiable Harper is vastly preferred to disparaging Harper. “There are things you must know before passing into Under.”

She shrugs off my hand, yet gives me her undivided attention—an unprecedented occurrence.

“Firstly and most importantly—” I lower my voice so it doesn’t carry. “—you cannot speak your name, or my name, aloud. If any of the fair folk overhear it, they will forever have power over you, and me. Understand?”

Levelly, she says, “Is that all?”

“Secondly, you must not eat or drink anything offered to you.”

“Fine.” Her eyes narrow at the delay. “Anything else?”

“You cannot trust Zephyrus.”

Harper inclines her chin, fingers clamping the rope, but I do not miss the way her gaze darts to the well’s opening. “You’ve already said this.”

“It’s worth mentioning again. There are things he wants,” I say, leaning closer. “Things he has not made known. He is tied to Under, and he wants out.”

Another strong wind picks up dust and stirs the scattered pebbles across the canyon’s breadth.

“Why should I care about that?” Harper asks.

And she calls *me* the naive one. “You are a tool to him. We both are. At some point, he will manipulate the situation to his advantage. Stay alert.”

“If you had bothered to read anything other than the Text, you would already know of his reputation. You know he’s lured women into Under, right? His depraved behavior does not surprise me.”

I’m still reeling when Harper climbs into the well without comment and lowers herself down. Again with Zephyrus’ reputation. He’s lured women into Under? I believe it. I have lived the experience.

The empty bucket returns to the top. I wait a moment longer, but eventually, I, too, climb inside. My thighs are too large to fit, so I perch on the lip, my boots resting in the bottom of the container. It lurches with a squeak, then begins to descend.

The light above shutters. *Breathe*. In through my nose, out through my mouth. I hang suspended in eternity, my hands cramping from how tightly I cling to the rope. When the bucket hits the ground, I exhale and climb out. The chill of the underground stone radiates through my clothes.

It is dark like a mouth, dark like the world before the Father. Shades of coal and ash smudge the stone chamber—walls, ceiling, floor. A wide, darker strip represents the underground river. Water laps against the cave walls, womb-like.

Zephyrus stands at the bank, nudging an arrow-shaped boat with his boot. “We will reach the Grotto via the River Mur.” He lifts the long, slender pole resting atop the bench. “Get in. Sit toward the back, near the stern.”

“The River Mur is located many miles east of here,” I point out. “Surely you are mistaken.”

“Am I?” He sweeps a hand out in front of him. “This, too, is the

River Mur. It flows in the opposite direction of the one aboveground, but its waters are the same.”

And that, I decide, is officially too confusing for comfort.

Harper and I scramble into the vessel. Its cramped size forces us into close proximity, but for the time being, I accept the heat and weight of her back against mine, an odd—if undesired—comfort as we push off into the swallowing dark.

CHAPTER 18

A set of spiked wings protrudes from the blackness ahead.

Initially, its features lack distinction. The closer we drift in the low-ceilinged tunnel, however, bound to our cramped vessel, the larger it appears. Sharp, puncturing tips jut upward from bent bones, and tapered coal feathers fall in a cascade of lustrous color. Never have I seen a creature with so vast a wingspan. They are like dark mountains hammered into the wall, peaked atop the heavy gate below.

Red light bleeds upon the black bars, which rise to severe points. The water pools like oil before us. A gleaming silver lock secures the gate.

Angling the pole near the stern, Zephyrus drags the end through the mucky riverbed to cut our speed. *Don't speak*—the West Wind's warning. Harper and I remain quiet, pressed thigh to thigh. The current picked up about five miles back, and he let it carry us here.

I've lost track of the hours beneath the earth. Time passes differently here. Twice I have slept, shallowly, fitfully. Zephyrus assures we have been traveling for three days, but it feels longer, the hours frayed to threads. A shiver runs through Harper, and my body responds in kind, chill skin

pebbling from the bone-dry air pushing through the long tunnel. Soon, we will reach a place of openness, light. I have to believe it.

Eventually, we drift to a complete stop. My gloved fingers clench the hull's frame. Harper shifts beside me, hunched, her back rising and falling erratically.

“Hello, Bringer of Spring.”

A voice slithers from the shroud of encompassing darkness. It is ancient, like the oldest seas, the cleaving earth, a time predating the Text, when all the world was a void. It sounds like an end. To what, I cannot say, but an end nonetheless.

Zephyrus inclines his head. “My will is yours.”

A pulse in the gloom skates across my skin. “So you remembered.” The voice softens. “It has been some time.”

“A god never forgets.”

The air whispers as though the dim has become tangible: fabric or softened parchment. “Gods? No. But those who worship us? The world shines brightest for mortals. Every day brings something new. It is to be expected. But what brings the Messenger so far from his master?”

Even at a distance, I sense Zephyrus' rising tension, his legs locked, worn boots planted firmly despite the rocking boat. The sprite I'd met, Lissi, mentioned the Anemoi had been banished to this world millennia ago, the West Wind worshipped, adored. Do the people still remember?

Something faint clicks against the rock. Harper whimpers, leaning into my side. Another warm body, the only bit of comfort.

“We request safe passage,” Zephyrus says.

“I assumed as much. Brave of you.” A pause. “And terribly foolish.”

I struggle to control my breathing, but I fear the creature hears my increasingly fitful gasps. This cannot be the Stallion, right? Zephyrus

claimed he would manipulate the air to hide his scent. Unless that, too, was a lie.

“The tithe nears, Bringer of Spring. Whatever it is you’re planning, I urge you to reconsider.” The clicking unfolds with rapid punctuations. It reminds me of a thousand insectile legs scuttling over rock. “Do not underestimate Pierus’ wrath.”

“Let me concern myself with that,” Zephyrus snaps.

Something splashes in the distance. “Very well.” I hear the smile in its voice. “You are aware, then, of the payment.”

A dagger appears in Zephyrus’ hand that I’m certain wasn’t present a moment ago. He digs the tip into his palm, twisting. Blood wells black within the hollow. Tilting his hand, three droplets fall into the water.

The ruby shine streaking the walls softens to a rich pink. A sigh of relief fills the cave, and a moment later, the gates groan open.

Zephyrus directs us through with stone-faced resolution. We are nearly past the gates when something twitches above. I tilt back my head, scanning the top of the tunnel. A wing curls inward, limp feathers rustling. Whatever creature those wings belong to is not quite dead.

My head snaps forward. Harper hasn’t noticed the movement, her gaze downcast. For once, she has the right idea, but Zephyrus’ voice commands my thoughts more often than not these days.

You have already seen.

A frigid breeze wafts through the space. I rub my arms in an attempt to regain warmth, but to no avail. The sweet reek of rotting plants billows from the cavern ahead.

“I thought you said only mortal women could enter the Grotto,” I whisper to Zephyrus.

He pushes the pole through the current, angling it so we drift into a turn. “This is not the Grotto,” he replies. “We are entering the wilds of

Under, where Pierus' influence has failed to reach. Those who live in these parts are mostly water-dwelling creatures. They live by their own rules."

"And the Orchid King has no issue with this?" For a man bloated on power, I would assume no corner would be left unmarked by his hand.

"Sometimes, the best manner of control is to let people think they are free."

"I see." My attention drifts to the River Mur, black on black, bend upon endless bend.

"Don't touch," he murmurs. "It will likely be the last thing you ever do."

Taking a deep breath, I settle in for the remainder of the journey. The darkness has thickened since passing through the gates. We could be traveling in any direction. The river could suddenly drop off and I would not know until the fall.

"Why do you fear the dark?"

Zephyrus' voice, coaxed from the shadows.

I stare down at my trembling hands. It's so opaque I cannot make out their shapes. "I did not used to fear the dark." In truth, I loved nothing more than to wander the forest on the threshold of eve. "But that was before the storm." Before a lot of things, really.

"Storm?"

I shy from his gaze. "It's how I lost my mother. I was eleven."

Water laps the bottom of the hull.

"That spring," I murmur, "the weather was particularly harsh. Sometimes it hailed. There were long spells of drought, which killed the crops."

My eyes close as those weary, hard-edged memories wrench free.

"The storm was sudden. Clear skies, then the strongest winds you could imagine. It splintered trees, turned entire structures to rubble. My

mother and I fled deeper into Carterhaugh. She—” Two fists, pressed into the tops of my thighs. They open, return to clutching the boat’s frame. A few heartbeats pass before I’m able to continue. “She took me to the mountain’s base. An old tree had rotted through, and she told me to hide inside its trunk, told me I would be safe there.”

We drift, passing quietly through eternity. I pretend I am elsewhere, a bright, open field, free of the earth’s trappings. “For three days, I awaited my mother’s return. It was dark. Rainy. I heard the abbey bells marking the hour. On the evening of the third day, she returned, but I did not know that things had changed.” Or that it was the last time I would ever see her.

Zephyrus has stopped propelling the boat. By the Father, I swore I would never return down this road. Years have passed since that day in the market, the sting of my mother’s palm against my cheek. Her behavior had deteriorated, lapsing into the erratic, the far-fetched, the reckless, all motivation rooted in paranoia. My mother could not yank me out of that tree fast enough, hauling me toward the pealing bells in the distance, Thornbrook’s white spires.

“I do not fear the dark because there is no light,” I tell Zephyrus. “I fear the dark because of its inherent nature: solitude.”

And that is the most I have ever spoken of this weakness—to anyone.

The tips of his fingers brush the top of my forearm. “Give me your hand.”

Once I pry my grip loose, he places something in my palm. Round, light, delicate as a flower petal. I squeeze it in curiosity. No give to its shape. “What is this?”

“Tap the side.”

A faint ring echoes, and I blink against a sudden rosy light. “Oh.”

How lovely. And familiar. Yes, I'm positive he showed me this object prior to entering the Orchid King's lair.

"It's called a roselight." His face, caught within the disk of illumination, softens. I frown, peering closer at him. For a moment, I could have sworn his features had altered. "Once Under's roses reach maturity, their petals are harvested into a substance of eternal light."

"It's beautiful." I lift the object higher, let the brightness devour the gray as the walls open up and the River Mur empties into a vast underground lake. Holding its heartbeat in my hand, the darkness recedes, and I calm. This roselight, yet another unsolved mystery surrounding our immortal guide. There is much I do not know about the West Wind.

"You mentioned before you favor the bow," I say. "But I have never seen you carry one."

"Ah." Lowering the pole across the length of the boat, he crouches next to me, Harper at his back. "My bow is long gone. I gifted it to my elder brother's wife."

This statement is made of pieces, and I mentally examine each one. If he believes people are inherently selfish and goodwill is naught but smoke, what was his motive? There, I think, is a story yet to be told.

"Do you regret giving away your bow?" If he considers his weapon as I do mine—an extension of oneself—then his response will further clarify his character.

"In some ways, yes." A strained sigh follows. "His wife, Wren, is a gifted archer. I know she will care for the weapon. But I regret the manner in which I gifted it to her. As such, I am barred from Boreas' realm forevermore."

"Why?"

Zephyrus taps a finger against his leg. Tension climbs, cresting to cloud his eyes with what I believe is regret or grief, perhaps both. He

replies lowly, “Because I made poor choices. Because I was selfish. Because I did not learn.”

It tells me nothing. I want to know. I *must* know. Again, I demand, “Why?”

“Let me ask you something. Do you ever wonder why some people have all the luck? Doesn’t matter what they do. The world unfolds before them, shaping itself into the most pristine path. Others try to do what is right, but our attempts are twisted, impure. Any progress is countered by another obstacle.”

“All the time,” I reply truthfully.

“My brother is a good man. He’s made mistakes, but haven’t we all?” His throat bobs, and he runs a hand along his jaw, the hiss of skin on stubble loud in the dark. “He’s moved forward, moved on, and built a beautiful life for himself. He deserves it. Me? I question whether anyone could love someone with a past like mine. Someone like me.”

I don’t know how to respond. It is perhaps the saddest thing I’ve ever heard, and yet I understand to a frightening degree what Zephyrus feels—the inadequacy.

“Cold?” he murmurs, a low, tentative sound.

Despite his smaller stature, his hands swamp mine. They sit like wheaten gold against my slim brown gloves.

Though I have not answered his question, he lifts my hands to his mouth to blow on my fingers. Even through the leather, his hot breath engulfs my icy skin.

Our eyes lock across the shroud inundating the underground lake. Another exhale streams across my palms, and the sting begins to thaw into a pleasant tingle.

Zephyrus lowers my hands. “Better?”

My voice has fled. I can only nod. And I have officially been staring

for too long.

Shifting out of reach, I turn toward Harper to see how she is faring. The boat, however, is empty.

I whirl around. She's not here. "Harp—"

Zephyrus catches my shoulder in warning. Then, his mouth at my ear: "Remember yourself. Take care with your friend's name."

"Where did she go?"

A beat of silence passes. "She cannot be reached."

My head jerks in his direction. "What?" Louder, a sound like strangulation.

Grave is his expression, entrenched in the weight of mortality. But it is not his own mortality he fears. For Zephyrus, Bringer of Spring, cannot die. "They have taken her."

"Who has taken her?" My eyes strain as I scan the open water. What manner of creature dwells beneath the surface?

"The naiads," he whispers flatly. "Nymphs who dwell in fresh water."

Something has frozen inside me: my heart, or my stomach, or my lungs. The wide stone walls, the low, suffocating ceiling. I see nothing. I heard nothing, not even a splash. She could be just below the surface. I lean over the side of the vessel, searching—

A firm yank drags me backward, and I land hard on my rear, rocking the boat. The roselight hits the bottom of the hull with a crack and rolls beneath the bench. "Naiads paralyze their victims upon contact. She will drown once the paralysis wears off."

"Paralysis?" Have I killed Harper? Is my distraction the reason she was taken unaware? If I had been more attentive, if I had resisted Zephyrus' allure... "How long does the paralysis last?"

With a kindness I have not often encountered, the West Wind says,

“It is not a painful death. She will have no awareness of what is happening.”

I may dislike Harper, but to perish in water, away from life-giving sunlight, her soul will be forever barred from the Eternal Lands. I wish that fate upon no one.

Slowly, I push to my knees, adjusting the skirt around my legs. Reaching for the roselight, I grasp its sleek, cold shape. What do I need? Time, and it is already gone.

“Look at me.” Zephyrus grabs my arm, but I shake him free. “It’s too late for her.”

“It’s never too late,” I say, and dive into the oily black lake.

CHAPTER 19

Down I sink, and down. The embracing cold shortens my breath and cripples my lungs, my hair slithering through the gloom like strings of fiery grass. A stretch of gray-green discoloration blooms outward. The sound below is one of singularity: a heart that begins to drag, the spaces between beats lengthening.

Squeezed in my icy palm, the roselight dissolves the dim into fragments. Absolute cold dwells here, a hollow within the rocky shores of the lake, and in those farthest, lightless places—black.

Strange, ethereal creatures slither along the sloped, silty bottom. Their bodies resemble those of emaciated children, yet they possess unmistakable female anatomy, dips and swells peaked beneath shreds of wet cloth, limbs shaped into fins. The naiads peer at me with enormous milky eyes.

Harper drifts at the bottom of the lakebed.

Her hair, as thin and insubstantial as mist, hangs like a shifting veil around her face. The fabric of her garb showcases the bony angles of her body, the slight rise of her breasts. Two naiads guide her listless state,

bubbles trailing from her slackened mouth, boots dragging through the silt, which expands to cloud the water.

I kick upwards, head breaking the surface of the lake. Zephyrus screams at me from the boat, but I'm already diving, propelling myself forward with sturdy kicks. The deeper I swim, the greater the water's crushing weight, and with only one hand free, I struggle to maintain my speed. Shoving the roselight into my pocket, the glow shutters.

Harper's gray dress billows around her legs, the white cincture a solitary brightness. Another hard kick closes the distance.

As my fingertips brush her shoulder, cold slime wraps around my ankle. I glance down. One of the creatures grips my leg with webbed appendages. Bubbles burst from my mouth in a scream, and I kick once, twice, until the naiad releases me.

My arm flings wide, catching Harper's waist amidst a froth of bubbles. As her weight sags against me, we begin to sink.

My ears pop painfully, and pressure thrusts at my eye sockets. We hit the ground. Sludge slinks over my ankles, into my boots. I push off hard, Harper in tow, and swim with all my strength. The surface, its hazy aura above, seems an impossible distance. My head feels like it will burst, but we are nearly there. I can almost taste the fresh air on my tongue.

Eternal Father, guide me through the darkest waters.

Long, brittle fingers snag my hair, and my head snaps back. Something rushes the edge of my vision. I twist to meet my newest foe when the grip on my skull tightens, hair drawn up by the roots. All thoughts cut out. My heart howls for vengeance.

Snatching the dagger from my waist, I lash out, striking one of the creatures in the shoulder. The blade plunges into soft, rubbery flesh, and it recoils with a low keen, a stream of smoky liquid clouding the water.

A second naiad crowds my back. A sting alights on my arm. I spin,

cutting low to give myself distance as Harper slips from my grasp and my lungs begin to wither. I feel their collapse inside my chest, coiling into a white-hot star.

Kicking away from the advancing mob, I regroup. My head pounds with unrelenting agony, each pulse a knife driven into the base of my skull. I must live. *We* must live. But the group writhes, dragging up silt, fogging the water. One naiad strikes with curled nails. Pain erupts across my shoulder, and I swing the dagger in a wild arc. It rears back, the seam of its lips wrenching open to reveal chipped, triangular teeth ringed around a pile of rotting gums.

Another lunge with the blade, and the creatures scatter. I dive, grabbing the back of Harper's dress with one hand, and begin hauling her toward the distant light. In the corner of my eye, I spot Zephyrus gripping Harper's other arm, lending strength to the task. Perhaps his presence keeps the naiads at bay.

My head breaks the surface in a spray of droplets. I gasp, sucking in a mouthful of sweet, frosty air.

"Bring her to shore," he manages.

Together, we drag Harper's limp body onto the sloped, rocky bank. I'm already kneeling at her side, knees digging into sharp rocks, hands clutching her pale, waxy face. I give her a rough shake. No response. I slap her cheek. No response. I slap her a second time. No response.

"There's no point."

"Hush." Her sternum, the plate of hard bone, bows beneath my weight. I once watched the physician revive a man by pressing on his chest. I give two hearty pumps, and her head flops with the motion. She appears shrunken beneath her dress, the white, knotted cord squeezing her waist into nothing.

Zephyrus' soaked boots enter my periphery. "She was under for too

long.”

Harper will live, if only so that I can hold this over her head for the rest of her life. I switch to hammering blows against her back. It might dislodge the water in her lungs. “Come on—”

“It won’t work.” Quieter. His doubt reaffirms my commitment to bring this woman back. “The paralysis—”

“Let me tell you what I promised this woman on the first day we met.” I do not stop the rhythm. “I was alone, terrified, grieving. She saw my loneliness and took advantage. Tripped me in the middle of the refectory, food splattering the front of my dress. I told her I would never forget her cruelty. And I would never let *her* forget it either.” She cannot die. It is too sweet a temptation to let her live and watch the ruination of another’s dream when I eventually gain Meirlach for myself. Whether or not Mother Mabel learns of my broken vows, I will have my triumph.

A scream breaks free of my chest. “Breathe—you—wretched—cow!” I slam a fist against her heart.

Harper’s eyes snap open. She stiffens, her head wrenching sideways, vomit pouring from her mouth. She gasps, chokes on the wet retching. Her fingers scrabble at the rocky shore.

I sit back on my heels, weary to the bone with trembling. When her lungs have emptied, Harper slumps to the ground, hair tangled in her own sick. She is alive. It is enough.

“We need to build a fire,” I say, lifting my eyes to Zephyrus. He studies me, perhaps questioning whether I am, in fact, real. “Is there something we can use for fuel?” When he does not immediately respond, I snap, “Zephyrus.”

His mouth twists, and the motion pulls at the discolorations patching his skin. “There is a sea-nymph village,” he concedes. “It’s not far. But don’t expect a warm welcome.”

“I thought those creatures in the lake were sea-nymphs.”

“Those were naiads—freshwater nymphs. The sea-nymphs are a distant cousin.”

I struggle to keep track of the sheer variety of creatures. Sprites, naiads, dryads, sea-nymphs. What else? “Will our lives be endangered?” My teeth clack incessantly. I can no longer feel my fingers or toes. “We need to get warm.”

Harper’s limbs twitch erratically. Grasping her face, I survey her features. Bloodless skin and blue-tinged lips. She stares right through me, the color of her eyes dulled to tepid water.

And then I realize something else. The grassy path has disappeared.

“The trail.” I look to Zephyrus. “What happened to it?”

His gaze drops to the ground. “Ah. Under likely anticipated our arrival a few miles downstream. It did not expect you to jump into the lake.” He quirks an eyebrow at my alarmed expression. “Don’t worry. As long as you two stay close, nothing will befall you.”

“And the village?”

The West Wind’s hesitation concerns me, for he has always acted with unflappable conviction. “Difficult to say. If something were to happen, you would have to find another way out.”

Trusted guides are difficult to come by, but I would not consider Zephyrus one anyway. “We don’t have a choice, unfortunately.” After wringing out my dress, I stand. “Take us to the village.”

THE JOURNEY IS unending. Huddled beneath my cloak, I perch on the bench, struggling to muffle my heavy breathing as Zephyrus propels us down the River Mur. We may have gone feet or miles. The dim remains unchanged,

altering neither color nor form. Cupped between my palms, the roselight offers little warmth and even less reprieve.

“How is she?” Zephyrus asks quietly.

Curled in the bottom of the boat, Harper lies with eerie stillness, muscles twitching every so often in an attempt to warm her cooling, sodden limbs. She is present in body, but not in mind. The unfocused, small-pupiled eyes betray her mental retreat. “No recent changes.”

I wait in anticipatory silence, but Zephyrus adds nothing more. The sinking sensation in my gut is a most unwelcome visitor.

He has not asked after my well-being. I try not to let his lack of concern bother me.

“Will she recover?” I haven’t inquired until now, fearful of his answer.

Water splashes as the West Wind lifts the pole, allowing the current to drag us around a hairpin corner. Something massive shifts near the ceiling, catching my notice, but the darkness masks its shape. We float closer. My fingers spasm around the cold glass. But—nothing. We drift beneath the hollow without incident. Mayhap I imagined it.

“That depends on how the sea-nymphs will react to our arrival. Their clan has the means to revive her, but the matriarch has the final say.”

“You don’t think the matriarch will help us?”

“You? Perhaps, in exchange for something of value. Me?” A coarse, raw noise. Laughter, I realize. “Probably not.”

I turn to glare at him. “What did you do?”

He meets my gaze without flinching, almost as if he expected this question. “I have done much.” His mouth crimps beneath that large, unsightly nose. “I, too, have regrets.”

I grow weary of his evasiveness. While others plant their feet,

Zephyrus flits from hill to knoll, each landing brief. He has wronged many. Likely everyone in Under, if I were to guess.

Facing forward, I demand, “What will happen if she’s unable to receive help?”

There is a splash before all is quiet. “She will not die, but who is to say she will not be changed in irreversible ways? No one can know what the long-lasting effects will be.”

My deepening concern over Harper’s well-being unnerves me. I do not care for these unknowns. Irreversible change? I sincerely hope she will recover. I can’t return to Thornbrook with a senseless companion, but I can’t return without her either. Our physician hasn’t the means to heal this strange ailment.

“What if I talked to their matriarch?” I offer.

“It would not be wise. She is far older than you and would easily take advantage of a mortal. Let me handle it.”

I glance at Harper again. The decision to enter Under was shared, yet I can’t help but feel responsible for her misfortune. My involvement with Zephyrus led us here. Then again, we would not have been able to enter Under without his help.

Something keens in the distance, cutting through the silence of the cave. I clench the roselight tighter, watch the pink light seep through the spaces between my fingers.

“We’re close,” Zephyrus murmurs.

I pray there is a fire, or at least an extra set of warm clothes.

“Do the fair folk who live in the wilds participate in the tithe?” I wonder.

Zephyrus slows the push through the water. When I sense his gaze on my back, I shift on the bench to face him. “Have you ever attended the tithe?” he asks curiously, but there is something else, too. Shame?

“No.” I fiddle with the roselight. Its glow highlights the dirt crusting my dress. The chilly fabric rests heavily against my legs. “I was ill the last occurrence.”

I’d hoped Mother Mabel would select me as one of the twenty-one participants, but I’d barely had the strength to walk, much less make the journey belowground.

He appears relieved by this. “Those in the wilds typically do not participate. However, they indirectly benefit, since the tithe is necessary for Under’s continued health. Those in the wilds have their opinions, and many do not agree with the Orchid King’s rule. You can understand why their presence would irritate Pierus.”

I do. “He maintains order and law within the realm.”

“Exactly. The Orchid King determines which information disseminates through the population.” Ahead, the blackness lifts, easing into a storm-cloud gray.

I think of what Zephyrus said, and then I think of what he has not said. “What would you change?”

Our vessel glides unhindered across the water. Hushed is the underground, the long, coiling gullet through which the channel courses. Zephyrus’ silence says much, and yet—

“Everything,” he says. “I would change everything.”

As the conversation tapers off, we ease around a bend, and the tunnel widens into a wide, flat mouth, the River Mur stretching outward. A rocky shelf juts from the opposite wall atop of which a village has been built.

These creatures are lean and wide in the belly. They dwell in squat grass huts whose roofs rise to blunt points. They wear trousers shorn at the ankle, their torsos bare, even the women. Fish-pale skin and milky eyes give them the appearance of long-limbed salamanders.

I study the fair folk from the safety of the boat as we drift nearer to

shore. “What’s wrong with their eyes?”

“The sea-nymphs are among the first of the fair folk and have never stepped foot beyond this cavern. They have adapted over time to make do without their eyesight. Though I should warn you,” he murmurs, “their sense of smell is keen as a bloodhound’s.”

A group of sea-nymphs winds twine into fishing nets. What oddities. Their sinuous movements remind me of drifting fog. One angles its head toward the river, its wide, slitted nostrils flaring with each inhalation. The group follows suit, abandoning the nets with our approach, straightening their long, reedy bodies. Zephyrus calmly docks and gestures for us to remain seated.

The boat hits the rocky slab, allowing him to neatly disembark, his movements so smooth the vessel does not rock from the absence of his weight. Harper stirs, her gaze flicking from creature to creature. While my hand drifts to the dagger at my waist, I do not draw the blade.

A woman—or at least I believe it is a woman, judging by her garb—steps forward. “Bringer of Spring. It has been some time.” Her voice emerges reed thin, the words choked by fluid in the lungs. A blue tinge coats her rheumy eyes, which shift without sight.

Zephyrus eases along the outcropping, though I sense his desire to put space between himself and those congregating. They arrive by the hundreds at the edge of the river. “Annag.”

She holds out a waiting hand. A long, grimy dress hangs in strips around her shins, clinging to a body more skeletal than not. A white collar encases her stretched neck. From her shoulders sprout small protrusions, like malformed appendages.

Zephyrus sighs and draws his knife. A prick at his fingertip produces a drop of blood, which he lets fall into her outstretched palm.

The sea-nymph brings it to her nose, breathes in deeply. Momentary

color flickers across her white eyes. “Such strength,” she whispers, before lapping her skin clean.

Harper releases a low, torturous sound. My stomach turns at the sight.

Annag, the woman I assume is this clan’s matriarch, asks, “How have you faired since our last encounter?”

“Well enough.” Wiping the blade on his trousers, he returns the knife, freshly cleaned, to its sheath. Those gathered monitor his movement, their small, pointed ears twitching as the metal slides into its encasement. He once claimed the knife to be a disadvantageous weapon. Now look at him. “I hear we share an acquaintance.”

The matriarch cants her head. “The sailor.” She nods. “Ten years in Troy. Ten years at sea. The man was stronger than we first assumed, and clever. What was his name?”

“Odysseus.”

“Odysseus, yes.” A slow, preoccupied blink. “That witch, Circe, warned him of our presence. She ordered his sailors to stuff their ears with beeswax. They tied Odysseus to the mast of the ship.” A few of the female sea-nymphs chuckle in response.

Annag smiles. Her teeth remind me of broken shells. “Oh, how he begged. We sang to him the loveliest ballad. A feast for us it would have been. But alas, things do not always go as planned. They refused to be swayed.”

“I’d heard.” Zephyrus scans the crowd before retreating to the edge of the overhang. Harper and I continue to observe from the boat.

“I admit, I’m surprised to learn you’d helped Odysseus.” She picks at something caught between her teeth. “Unless I am mistaken?”

He fails spectacularly at hiding his bitterness. “Can’t a god give aid without having his morals questioned? I did my best to steer Odysseus back

to Ithica, but men are fools, as you know. Too suspicious, too mistrustful. His sailors released the bag of winds gifted to them, which sent them hundreds of miles back out to sea. They alone are responsible for their misfortune.”

“A pity.” The sea-nymph’s eyes track slightly to the left, unable to pin his exact location. “But let us discuss the present. You have brought company. It is not every day we encounter mortal women.”

Zephyrus angles toward us. My pulse skips a beat. Dark are his features, shrouded in secrecy. “One of the women is in need of a healer. Both require warm clothing.”

“And you expect my clan to provide this for you?” A smile sweetens her voice despite the lack of curve to her mouth. “You expect much, Bringer of Spring.”

“I understand this will not come free.”

“Indeed.” A long, insectile tongue pushes between her lips, fluttering with gentle undulations against the air. “One of the women tastes of fire. The other, salt.”

His gaze meets mine, and holds. “We encountered the naiads a while back.”

The matriarch’s attention sweeps outward, across where Harper and I sit. She knows the general location, but no specifics. “I see.” She shifts toward Zephyrus. Her breasts resemble misshapen gourds beneath her threadbare dress. “If it is a trade you seek, I would rather trade with the woman who tastes of fire.”

“No.” I’ve never heard a command so sharp from such a honeyed tongue. His eyes glitter dangerously. “Your quarrel is with me.”

A small, serene smile graces the sea-nymph’s mouth. He’s revealed too much, I fear. “Very well,” she says as the crowd at her back spits out a guttural language I cannot understand. “Let us discuss.”

“And my guests?”

“Allow them to take refuge in our guest house until an agreement has come to pass. They will be fed and kept warm.”

While I appreciate the sentiment, I cannot accept the food offered. But a fire and a warm bath? For now, it will do.

Zephyrus catches my eye. When I nod, he responds, “I appreciate that.”

“I’m sure you do,” she says quietly.

As the matriarch draws him into one of the huts, two female sea-nymphs approach, skinny arms laden with baskets of cloth. Their large, round, white eyes stare straight through us.

“We smell your filth, human women.” They speak simultaneously. “Come. We will show you to the baths.”

I disembark, thankful for the solid ground beneath my feet. Harper, however, hasn’t moved. I shake the boat to get her attention. “Come on.”

Her expression blurs into an unfocused vagueness. Her mouth opens, hangs there a moment, then snaps shut.

Again, I shake the boat. “We need to get you warm.”

“I won’t,” Harper mumbles through chattering teeth. “Have you seen those things? They’re hideous. How do you know they won’t drag us off to some distant corner and strip the flesh from our bones?”

“I don’t.” The farther we stray in this dark realm, the less I know and the less I am certain. “But you need to get well. They can help us.” Harper, especially. Her skin has remained wan all these hours.

“You trust Zephyrus’ word?”

Days prior, I warned Harper not to trust Zephyrus. Now? He has gone great lengths to ensure our safety. Maybe I misjudged him.

She scratches at the wood, then stops, her breathing shallow. “I feel

the water on my skin. The voice in my ear... I do not think it is the Father's."

Gently, I lay my hand against the hunch of her upper back. I'm not sure what is more alarming: her words, or that she sounds completely sane. "You hear a voice?"

She lifts her face. A sheen films the whites of her eyes. "You don't?"

"Harper," I whisper, so, so softly, making sure her name will not carry, "you're not alone. I'm here." She clutches my hand with iron strength. She will not let go.

A wave of concern moves through me with startling intensity. A weakened Harper, an uncertain Harper, a frightened Harper. None sit well with me. "Come." I coax her from the boat onto the rocky shelf. She shuffles forward on stiff legs, as do I.

The two sea-nymphs lead Harper and I to separate huts. Clay walls, fired red by the single candle sputtering in the room's center, enclose the circular interior. A tub full of steaming water awaits, and a change of clothes rests on a sturdy wooden chair. Once I remove my boots, the sea-nymph departs to give me privacy.

My knees creak as I hobble toward the tub, but I'm unable to unbutton my dress, so stiff and icy are my fingers. My teeth chatter incessantly, no better than a handful of stones rattling around in my skull.

Blast this fabric. I step into the tub fully clothed, sinking into the water with a helpless whimper, the warmth much-needed after hours spent shivering. My prickling flesh flares from the abrupt change in temperature, yet eventually tapers off.

It's the first true solitude I've had in days. I will not squander it.

I take my time unthawing. Once I regain use of my limbs, I'm able to slide off my gloves, unbutton my dress, and peel it from my soiled skin.

They have provided soap, which I use to scrub away all remnants of that nightmarish lake. I briefly remove my undergarments and wash those, too.

Skin pink with irritation, I climb from the tub and don the long linen dress provided, my cincture and gloves, and a burgundy cloak. Then I go in search of Harper.

She huddles near one of the cooking fires skirting the edge of the huts, hair wet from her bath. Instead of wearing the clean clothes provided, she changed back into her filthy, sodden dress. She shivers, blue eyes locked on the dancing flames. Stubborn to the core.

The fire snaps, bright and illuminating, yet shadows lurk beyond its wide, orange mouth. Harper flinches whenever a sea-nymph wanders too close, curious of its newest visitor, a mortal woman with sweet-smelling blood.

Her eyes track my approach, and she does not appear so certain at the moment, her spine curved and wariness abloom in those dark pupils. Well, good. That makes two of us.

With a sigh, I remove the cloak from my shoulders and drop it onto Harper's lap. She stares at it before handing it back.

"Take it," I snap. "Otherwise you'll freeze and I'd rather not have your death on my conscience."

Her fingers tighten around the fabric. After a moment, however, Harper tugs it around her body.

Sinking onto a nearby log, I join her in studying the lash of the red-orange flames. The air reeks—fish and char. "So you didn't accept a bath," I say, "but did you at least let them heal you?"

"I still feel the water on my skin." The words are mumbled. "They gave me a tonic. The voice stopped."

I'm relieved. I hate that I am relieved.

Our packs sit at Harper's feet. Someone must have brought them

from the boat. Tugging mine over, I pull out a few strips of dried hare. Chewy, musky, slightly sweet. I've grown used to the taste of meat. When I offer some to Harper, she shakes her head.

“Why did you save me?” she whispers.

I stow the food in my pack, taking the opportunity to think of an appropriate response. “How do you know it wasn't Zephyrus?”

Harper snorts, hunching lower, and stares at the ground. “Why should the West Wind care for me? All I do is irritate him.”

I'm not going to argue with that.

Along the shore, a trio of sea-nymphs drags a net from the water. It bulges with sleek, writhing, eel-like fish. The clan eats what the River Mur provides them.

“To be perfectly honest, I don't know why I saved you.” Looking back, I did not decide. I acted—without thought, without regard for my own safety. “If you ask me, it was a senseless decision to save the woman who has spent the last decade doing everything in her power to make my life miserable.”

Harper frowns, hands clenched in her lap. “That's not—”

“Don't say it's not true,” I growl. “Don't you dare say it.”

She falls quiet.

What, exactly, compelled me to desert the safety of the boat and dive into those dark unknowns? We believe water acts as the entrance to Hell and eternal woe. Those who drown may never know peace. I had a choice: my life, or hers. Yet I leaped without regret.

A knot clots my airway, warping the emerging sound. “Maybe I should have let you drown. The Father knows you deserve it. But I suppose I can't stand to see someone die, however cruel that person is.”

Funny, how circumstances have changed. Harper: cowardly,

defenseless. Yet I stand invulnerable, fueled by a decade's worth of misdeeds. The irony does not escape me.

And yet, she is not heartless. I have witnessed Harper's kindness, however twisted, however rare. Maybe she's just heartless to me.

The stillness remains unbroken. She will not look at me. She will not speak. The first prickle of rage sears my chest.

"Nothing to say? Not even a *thank you* for saving your life?" Clumps of fabric fist between my clammy hands. I have failed myself, not once, but again and again in lacking the conviction to stand up for myself, having believed I didn't deserve that grace. How sad I feel for that girl now.

"I'm sorry," Harper whispers.

My gaze burns with unshed tears. She hasn't respected me enough to take accountability for her poor choices and even poorer character. That has always been the problem.

"I've spent the last ten years waiting for those words." One glimpse of remorse, genuine regret at her actions. It's all I've ever wanted. "But it's not enough."

Her head snaps up. In the blotting shadows, a distinct sunken quality presses upon her cheeks above the bone.

"You're apologizing to appease whatever guilt you feel," I say. "But you don't mean it. You don't care. You've never cared."

Maybe that was my downfall. I, Brielle of Thornbrook, have always cared, and because I care, I place others before myself. I become timidity. I remain nothing more than the inked markings in my journal, ostracized, misunderstood. I forget the parts of myself I actually like. I forget my dedication. I forget my skill with a hammer and blade. I forget my kindness.

"Why me? Why was *I* the target of your vitriol?" With some effort, I unclench my hands. Anger can so easily lead to violence. "Was it because you felt threatened by me? Because Mother Mabel favored me over you?"

With each word spoken, a weight lifts from my chest. How long have I carried it? Years. But today, now, I cast it far and wide.

“Or maybe it was insecurity. Deep down, you don’t actually have what it takes to become an acolyte. You don’t study. You shirk your duties. You treat the other novitiates like dirt. You barely respect the current acolytes.” My voice—my entire body—shakes. But Harper remains mute. I didn’t expect a response anyway.

“You want to know something truly sickening?” My admission thickens with the raw, hoarse evidence of one whose heart has been torn open, innards exposed. “For so long, I wanted to be your friend. I wanted to be accepted into your circle.” It seems silly, yearning for something that would never come to pass. “But I’ve felt like a stranger at Thornbrook for a decade, and that is your doing.”

Harper’s mouth quivers, then flattens to a line. Still, she says nothing.

“The thing is,” I whisper, “I look at what you’ve become and I feel sorry for you. You may acquire Meirlach first. You may even become the next acolyte. But I will fall asleep at night knowing I did right, even when I didn’t have to.”

Pushing to my feet, I stride off, abandoning Harper to her own wretched company. I cannot continue on this path. I cannot bare my stomach for someone else’s blade. That life was mine, but no longer.

Not anymore.

CHAPTER 20

Guests arrive by the hundreds. Dryads and sprites and every manner of creature drift toward the village on their narrow vessels, propelled forward by long, slender poles. Men with feathered wings. Women with hooves and small, curved horns. Children with their eyes plucked out and their skin stitched over, scuttling through the assembly on four legs. Boys with tails and girls with beaks and the elderly so shriveled they appear to have baked in the sun for a century.

The air cracks with a thousand cries, a shatter of sound skipping across the water and ricocheting against the sloped walls. I flinch, reaching for the hilt of my dagger. They are unearthly, these noises. A scream peaks and dies like wind on sere-hot stone.

The village has bloated itself, welcoming fair folk from the wildest depths of Under. From where I sit near a cooking fire, I count a few hundred boats drifting atop the water, freshly abandoned. A man with black stripes marking his snowy skin and protruding canines flits among the clustered arrivals, brandishing a long coat clinking with small glass bottles. He accepts coin for payment, gradually lightening his load. Only after he meanders off do I realize those bottles likely held stolen mortal names.

A trio of women surrounds a flat stone upon which three goblets rest. The first woman plucks a chalice between her slender fingers and downs the liquid in a single motion. She is undoubtedly fair folk—flaxen hair luminous against mottled ashen skin. Her neck, stretched unnaturally long, undulates with each swallow, the motion noticeable yards away.

The second woman shares a similar appearance to the first, yet possesses short antlers. The third, however, appears quite normal despite the heavy scarlet veil concealing her face. Mortal, even. Tucked between the two bright-haired creatures, she wears a plain cotton dress and scuffed boots. She sits demurely, hands folded in her lap.

I watch her companions drink. One boasts a stuffed vulture atop her shining white hair. The other wears an entire stack of hats, their combined weight tilting the structure sideways, a precarious pile one untimed movement will send toppling. I can't stop staring. The woman with the vulture hat catches my eye and grins, her mouth a dark grotto save for two needle-like fangs.

My head swivels back to the fire, heart drumming. I haven't seen Zephyrus in hours. As the night progresses, the celebration has devolved into absolute frenzy, and I am not even sure of its purpose other than the art of merrymaking, which the fair folk seem exuberantly fond of. Harper was healed hours ago. We shouldn't linger. After all, Meirlach awaits, and who can say how many days will have passed once Harper and I return to Thornbrook?

Admittedly, I am quite fatigued. The day was long. I would retreat to my sleeping quarters had a group of fair folk not already claimed the space for certain questionable activities.

Against my better judgment, my attention returns to the woman in the red veil. She sips from the goblet offered by the lady with multiple hats, who wipes her mouth with a square of cloth.

“Do you desire a mistress, or master?”

My head snaps sideways, and I recoil from the massive shape looming over me, my chest contracting around a scream.

It’s the most animalistic creature I’ve seen yet. Its face holds resemblance to a bear. Small, curved ears poke through the dense fur atop its blocky skull. It wears a pair of loose trousers torn at the knee. Its bare chest is wider than two men standing abreast. If I’m correct, it is male.

When I fail to answer, he leans closer. “Well?”

If I were to lean back any farther, I’m afraid I’d fall off my seat. I don’t want to be rude, but what if this creature takes offense? “I don’t understand.”

“That mortal woman you’re staring at? She’s a pet. Those two banshees are her mistresses.”

Slowly, I shift my gaze back to the trio. I am familiar with banshees. At night, if one hears their lamenting wail, then one’s death is supposedly foretold. And the third woman? Mortal. How is that possible? And what does the creature mean by *pet*?

The mortal woman is obviously cared for. Well fed, pampered, her head resting against one banshee’s shoulder while the other massages her back. I wish I could see the mortal woman’s face. I question if she’s fully aware of the situation.

When the hulking creature settles beside me, my hand drifts to my knife once again, and I swallow to draw moisture to my mouth. The iron blade will pierce the flesh of any fair folk easily, if required. “Are there many pets in Under?” I ask hoarsely. I am polite, if nothing else.

“Oh, yes. It’s more common than you might think.”

My stomach turns. I’m afraid to distance myself from this situation for fear of how my unwanted visitor will react. For now, I stay put. “So the fair folk take advantage of these humans.”

“You misunderstand. That woman *voluntarily* entered Under. She sought out a new opportunity, a different life.” I stare at him blankly. “You mortals are always running from something. Here, it is easy. You gift your name to another, and all your troubles and worries disappear.”

For the first time in weeks, I wish Zephyrus were around. He knows how to navigate sensitive topics of conversation. I, unfortunately, do not. “But the woman has no control over her life anymore.”

“It is the sacrifice one makes.” He looks me over. “Pets are well cared for. They are akin to your small, triangular-eared gods.”

It takes a moment before the inference sinks in. “You mean cats?”

“Cats, yes.” He beams. “Haughty things, aren’t they? So self-absorbed. I love it.”

Indeed, they are rather self-absorbed, even the nastiest barn cats.

“If you seek a master,” the beast goes on, “I can be of service to you. It is the most beneficial of relationships. You would be cared for in all ways.” Then his great bear paw settles atop my thigh.

My gut churns in warning, and bile laps the back of my throat. I clamp my knife with a trembling hand. I don’t want to use it. I don’t want to draw attention. If I scream, who will come to my aid? I doubt anyone would care.

But the creature removes his hand and says, “Here.” He offers a glass chalice full of clear liquid. “You look thirsty.” He points to a vat simmering over a fire. “We collect water from the river. Once boiled, it is potable.”

Zephyrus mentioned not to drink anything, but surely water is an exception. This is the River Mur, the same river that flows aboveground. If I bless the water prior to drinking, I should be safe, and I *am* parched. With a forced smile, I accept the goblet.

“Stop!”

Someone slaps the glass from my hand. It shatters on the rock, and

the scent of cherries hits, momentarily veiling the cloying odor of rotting plants. When I glance at the spilled drink, I notice the liquid is red, not clear as it had been.

“Get out of here.” A tiny creature shoves the much larger beast from its seat, utterly fearless. “Go!” The bear-like brute trundles off in obvious disappointment.

My savior turns.

I blink, stare into a pair of smooth, ebony eyes, in contrast to the snowy hair and skin. “I remember you,” I whisper as the sprite’s name comes to mind. “Lissi.”

Those slime-coated gums flash. Small, cracked teeth protrude from their moist pulp. “And you are Zephyrus’ companion,” she replies, cupping my rounded cheek. “I did not think I’d see you in Under so soon before the tithe.” Her long white dress pokes beneath her battered overcoat, which contains more tears than our previous encounter, suggesting she lost a fight against a thorn bush. “Do you seek a violent end?”

It takes a great effort to maintain a neutral expression, even as my organs curl beneath my skin, recoiling into safer territory. A violent end?

Lissi plops onto the rock beside me. “Do not fret, sweet. You will not remember the tithe once you return to your own realm. What occurs in Under, stays in Under. But do tell me, are you participating? Miles Cross is not far from here.”

“I don’t know.” Mother Mabel has yet to select the twenty-one women for the ceremony. “It hasn’t been decided.”

“Do let me know if you’ll be in attendance. Perhaps we might sit together.” She sidles closer, linking her skinny arm through mine, head propped on my shoulder. Strands of her hair slither down my front. “How are you enjoying my village?”

“Oh.” I was not aware Lissi lived here. She, a sprite, lives with these

sea-nymphs? “It’s quaint.” I suppose.

She beams at me. “See my home over there? It’s small compared to your larger mortal dwellings, but I don’t need much, just enough space to sleep and store my poultices. The matriarch is fond of my tinctures. She offered me housing in exchange for my healing services, when needed. But tell me. Has Zephyrus been a decent guide?”

“For the most part, yes.” When he is honest. When he does not act in his own self-interest.

“And your mortal companion? She has been sitting alone the entire evening.” Lissi pairs that with a salacious smile. “It is rare we encounter a face so lovely belowground.”

With her pale skin, black hair, and azure eyes, Harper is indeed eye-catching. Unfortunately, she must endure the fair folk’s attention, like the pair of horned, bare-chested men currently circling her fire, their lips slick with drink. Harper scoots to the far end of the log and hunches forward, eyes downcast in an attempt to disappear.

“Do not be fooled by her beauty,” I inform Lissi, voice darkening. “Her heart is rotten to the core.”

She laughs. “Even better. I imagine she would taste delicious.”

I think that’s a joke. Maybe. “My companion is not for eating, I’m sorry to say.” Though I would not necessarily shed tears over her death.

“Well, poo.” The sprite swings her legs, back and forth and back and forth. Each of her bare feet possesses six toes. “I admit, I am curious. Why return? It seems like an unnecessary risk.”

Information has always been the fair folk’s preferred currency. But she will receive no payment from me.

“My business is my own,” I say, and leave it at that.

Lissi appears thoroughly pleased by my avoidance. “You are learning.” She leans into my personal space, her gangly limbs pressed

warmly to my side. “But I must warn you,” she says, an edge to her voice. “If word gets back to the Orchid King of your presence, he might get involved, and that is the last thing you want. The agreement between Under and Thornbrook is quite clear. Mortals are only allowed to enter on the eve of the tithes.”

I struggle to maintain slow, steady breaths. If this is true, then I am trapped mid-fall. There’s nothing I can do but let the drag take me. “I was granted permission by my Abbess. Surely that is an exception.”

“I don’t know. Historically, the Orchid King and your Abbess have not had the most affable relationship. But if you claim she granted you permission, well, then the Orchid King must be aware, too.”

Nothing is certain. That frightens me. “Will you keep my presence to yourself?” I urge. Just in case.

Lissi tugs on one of my curls, watching it spring back with its release. “That is quite the favor.” A small, secret smile plays across her mouth. “But I like you, sweet. You are too pure for this world, and I would not see the Orchid King crush a flower in winter.” She glances around. “Yes, I will keep it to myself, but for my own safety, this is the last I can speak with you. I do not want to be punished for further engagement.”

The sprite continues perusing the merriment. She is small, easily overlooked. Dangerous because of it. Zephyrus’ initial warning resurfaces: trust no one. The fair folk, however, cannot tell a lie. Thus, Lissi speaks the truth.

“I understand,” I say, and push to my feet. My nerves catch the fray of the air. Somewhere quiet, I think, will do. “Best to you, Lissi.”

Her stony eyes take me in. “And to you, my sweet.”

Skirting the edge of the village, I retreat deeper into the cavern, relieved when the rock softens to grass, which eventually empties into a glen sheltered by towering oaks, the yellowing enchantment of the moon

casting light onto the ground. With a sigh, I unlace my boots and tug them free as the festivities fall into hazy stirrings. The cool air feels wonderful against my sweating feet.

“I see you and your prickly companion came to a head earlier. A bit harsh to speak to a friend that way, wouldn’t you agree?”

Zephyrus slides into my line of vision, clothes rumpled, hair unkempt. Frail moonlight paints his skin a lovely, sun-kissed gold, cheeks infused by a rosy flush.

Angling toward him, I notice the trailing laces of his tunic, its collar open at the throat. Chest hair, slightly darker than the curls on his head, sprinkles the toned pectorals. I question whose hands wrinkled the cloth. The thought leaves an unpleasant taste in my mouth.

“Harper and I are many things,” I snap, hating the burn beneath my fire-hot skin, “but we are not friends.” With stiff movements, I sit, adjusting the skirt around my legs.

His eyebrows lift, and he peers around. “Careful,” he murmurs.

My stomach twists. Right. In my frustration, I’d forgotten to keep Harper’s name to myself. “Maybe she deserves to get it stolen,” I mutter.

“She is your only ally belowground,” Zephyrus states. “I would not be so quick to toss her aside.” Drink in hand, he saunters closer, the hem of his emerald green cloak swaying around his legs. Not even the grass stirs beneath his footsteps, so weightless is his tread. “Might I suggest attempting to bridge that gap?”

“Why? So she can craft more insults?” He does not understand. If I were to write out every horrible offense Harper has hurled my way, there would not be enough time in the day to list them all.

The West Wind considers me before settling at my side. “Why do you think she has targeted you?”

“I don’t know!” A low hiss of frustration flames across my tongue.

“If I knew, do you think I would be in this predicament?”

“You have never asked?”

As if I would bare my neck to Harper’s blade.

“You know nothing about me or my situation. You know only the surface and haven’t bothered to look any deeper than that.” My eyes narrow, daring his dispute. “I don’t have to explain myself to you.”

Placing the glass near his feet, Zephyrus draws his knees to his chest, slings an arm around the front of his shins. “She continues to beat you down, yet you will not do the same to her. Why?”

I shrug. It is true what they say. Misery loves company. “It’s not in my nature to be cruel.” My mother taught me to place loyalty and kindness before anything else, but what did she know? Her last words to me: *Be good, Brielle.*

“Maybe I’m just weak,” I mutter.

Sadness does not suit his smiling mouth, but it manifests more readily as the days pass. Sometimes it appears with an effortlessness the grins lack. “Soft does not mean weak,” he responds, “but does your faith teach you to be kind, even at the detriment of your own self-worth?”

I consider his query as if Mother Mabel had asked, bestowing upon me a situation requiring critical analysis. “We are Daughters of Thornbrook,” I explain. “Our mission is not to build ourselves up. Our mission is to spread the Father’s word no matter the cost.” We must climb mountains, cross rivers, overcome differences in language, customs, belief, upbringing.

“The cost being your own individuality.”

He has no idea what he’s talking about. “Everything I do as a novitiate is a choice. Individuality? No one is more accepting of individuality than the Father. There is nothing I want for myself that He can’t provide.” In my darkest years, He stood by me. He did not abandon

me when the world grew dim, the ground unstable, my childhood mere dust.

Zephyrus studies me beneath lowered lashes, that penetrative gaze roaming over my legs, mapping out each curve, before coming to rest on my pinkened face. “Not even that kiss?” His voice lowers, the tone deepening, running hot fingers across my skin.

I swallow, glance around. We alone occupy the glen. “The kiss was a mistake.”

He leans forward. “Because you enjoyed it so thoroughly?”

“You misinterpreted,” I stammer.

The brightness of his teeth provides temporary relief from the darkness, and a breeze teases the curls of my hair, similar to the touch of a long-fingered hand. “Did I?”

“It was necessary to save my life. I would not have agreed to it otherwise.”

“If only I believed you.”

I straighten, fully prepared to challenge his claim, when I notice the drink he holds, the subtle sway of his body against the overgrown grass, the glaze of his green eyes.

My mouth flattens in distaste. “You’re drunk.”

“Enchanted,” he corrects, lifting a finger. “I am *enchanted*.”

“I thought you said the wine doesn’t affect you.”

“It doesn’t. Well, not in the way it affects you. This isn’t wine, however.”

It looks like it. “Then why drink?”

Raising the glass, he swirls the amber liquid around, lifts it to his mouth, and takes a sip. “What you see here is a taste from my homeland. This, as it turns out, is the last of it.”

His words alone do not give me pause. Rather, the longing behind

them. “Is it a liquor?”

Tilting back his head, Zephyrus stares up at the strange, oily sky, beyond which lies the earth, grass, Carterhaugh veiled behind a blackness without end. “It is not, though it may alter your state of mind.” He leans back, supporting himself with one hand, and considers me. “Never fear, darling novice. You would only feel the effects if you consumed it. But we both know you would never broaden your horizons in such a manner.” With a satisfied smirk, he downs another swallow.

Oh, he dearly loves to push my buttons. Who decides my character? I do. No one else.

As he takes another mouthful, I rip the glass from his grip.

Zephyrus lurches forward, blinking a few times. When he spots the drink in my hand, his eyes glimmer, as though delighted to have been proven wrong. “I have spoken too soon,” he murmurs.

My palm grows sticky inside my glove. I pray my hand does not shake. “What would happen if I were to try the drink?”

His eyebrows climb toward his hairline, where the curls tumble with boyish exuberance. “Perhaps you should see for yourself,” he hedges.

“Perhaps I will.”

Lines furrow the corners of his eyes and mouth. For a moment, I’m certain I spot a hint of fang. “Then by all means,” Zephyrus murmurs with a gesture of his hand.

I take a small—very small—sip. *Oh*. “What is this?” I peer through the dense, gold substance. “It tastes like...”

“Beets,” he says.

It tastes nothing like beets. “It tastes like freshly baked bread,” I correct him.

“To you, yes. But to me, it tastes like beets.” At my look of confusion, he elaborates, “Where I come from, we call it nectar. It tastes

like one's favorite food. Thus, the taste differs depending on who consumes it."

I see.

"Your favorite food is *beets*?"

Zephyrus looks affronted. "And?" A gust snaps the tree branches. "Do you have something against them?"

Indeed, I do. "They taste like dirt."

Slowly, he crosses one ankle over the other. Ponderous. The effect suits him. "I agree. I wonder what that says about my tastes?"

"That they are poor."

Zephyrus smiles, as do I—the first we have shared.

"I wouldn't say poor, exactly." His grin widens to encompass his mien. It eases the dreadful planes, the awkward segments with inadequate fit, and helps them slip into something more harmonious. Pleasing, even. "After all, I kissed you, and I thoroughly enjoyed that."

Despite my burning face, I force myself to maintain eye contact. His dancing gaze meets mine, and slowly warms as silence ensues, my heartbeat tripping over itself. At some point, I have managed to relax in the West Wind's presence.

Lowering the glass into my lap, I examine the gold substance, if only to avoid enduring the knowledge of something undesired coming into sharper focus. "This is the last of the nectar?"

"Correct."

It seems a shame to waste the drink on someone who will not savor it. "Here." I offer him the nectar.

He straightens from his languishing, abruptly suspicious. "You do not want it?"

"No." Not after learning it cannot be replenished, this reminder of his home.

The West Wind moves as though afraid he will frighten a rabbit back into its burrow. A reach of his long arm. Warm, clever fingers curl atop mine. However briefly, we cradle the curved crystal in togetherness.

Two heartbeats pass. I am frozen. Pinned. A scream from the distant festivities shatters my paralysis, and I relinquish my hold on the drink, watching his throat muscles work as he swallows the last dregs.

Zephyrus sets aside the glass with unusual care. Gone is his previous amusement. “To answer your earlier question, I drink because the nectar helps dull the pain.”

I am drawn to this version of him, this grave immortal who has seen the world. My attention is his to manipulate, his to bend. “What pain?”

“The pain of life. What else?”

There is a certain ambiguity to the response, which tempts me into questioning further. Zephyrus has never given me so much in so few words. “Life isn’t just pain, you know.”

“How young you are. How little you know.” Before I can defend myself, he says, “Imagine this,” and sweeps both hands in front of him, framing the image of the spreading grasses before us. “A god, beloved and adored by all. A hero, in some regard. Yet one mistake tears down the legacy he had built, his name forever tainted. *Coward. Murderer.*”

My eyes widen. *Murderer?*

“I was the West Wind no longer. Now I am simply Zephyrus: outcast, prisoner.” His head hangs. “You deny the pain of life? That is very naive of you.”

“You aren’t listening,” I snap. “Of course we experience pain in our lives. That is the nature of our world. But if you find your life to be *only* pain, *only* suffering, then I question the manner in which you live.” I point to his hand. “You continue to gift your blood to this place. Why? Why must

you continue to harm yourself for their sakes? Will you spend an eternity suffering for others' benefit?"

He sobers then, lifts a rough hand to his face, scrubbing across his skin, up into his hair, where he fists the strands between his fingers, near the scalp where the sting is greatest. "You must understand. It is the price I must pay."

"For *what*?" That is the question that remains unanswered, that plagues me during my sleeping and waking hours, that I have brought forth into the light for careful study, and still I lack an explanation. "Why are you trapped here?" Was it because he wronged someone, killed someone, waged war?

Murderer.

His hands fall into his lap. "It occurred long ago. I've accepted my situation will not change." When his eyes lift to mine, they shine with clarity, any traces of the enchantment having vanished. "I am not like you. My beliefs are full of holes. The water pours through."

It hurts me to see those with little faith—in anything, really. Zephyrus' people abandoned him, I assume, because of whatever action he carried out. Why else would he look so poorly upon his own beliefs?

"Then what do you believe in?" I demand. "Surely there is something."

One of his hands slides atop mine, pressing it into the grass. I stare at the place where we touch, and my toes curl inside my boots. Despite my gloves acting as a barrier, his wide, callused palm imprints heat into my skin.

"You ask what I believe?" His lashes dip, gold fringe in the dying light. "I believe there is more to you than I first assumed. I believe you are many shades, not just one."

"That's not—" I falter, unsure of how I feel about his admission. It

warms me even as it frightens me. “That’s not what I meant. Belief in a higher power. Faith in the good forces of the world.”

“Why can’t I believe in things that move me? Are you not a good force in this world? Do you not spread kindness and compassion wherever you go?”

I’m helpless to stop the blush reddening my skin. I didn’t realize Zephyrus viewed me in that favorable a light.

“You,” he says, “are a bright, willful woman who understands the sacrifice required of dedication. You are complex. It takes strength of character to extend compassion to so many, even those who don’t deserve it.”

He is wrong. “We are all deserving of compassion.” Even those who have strayed beyond hope of redemption deserve an extended hand.

“Are we?” And then the despair manifests, fully formed to blot his eyes, dredged from a place I cannot reach. He seeks answers. If I’m not mistaken, he’s been searching for a long time. “I have questioned more about myself in your company than I have in the last thousand years.”

Thousand years. The detail trickles through me, yet is quickly forgotten in the presence of what precedes it. *Bright.* A word gifted to objects of illumination: knowledge, a star. Never did I believe Zephyrus to have the ability to see deeper than one’s skin, to hear anything aside from his own laughing voice.

“I believe there are few good things in this world,” he says, the air between us pinching in undeniable ache, “but the kindness of your heart might be the best thing I have ever experienced, in any lifetime.”

I understand, as I had not previously, what it means to desire. How the wanting is a flood. It does not seem so terrible a thing in this moment.

“My darling novitiate,” Zephyrus murmurs. “I would very much like to kiss you.”

A puff of warmth washes across my mouth, and the sweetness of his breath lures me nearer. Mossy rings encircle the welling blacks of his eyes.

“You’ve already kissed me,” I say.

His mouth quirks. “That was not a kiss.” He slides one hand forward, loops it around my wrist, where glove and sleeve meet. “I would kiss you the way a man kisses a woman he hungers for.”

I am not thinking of my vows. I am not thinking of my faith and what a betrayal it would be to accept the West Wind’s mouth. I am thinking I’ve been a good servant this last decade, and I am no closer to the acolyte’s red stole.

The meadow grasses whisper with tentative musicality. Light and laughter from the festivities trickle through the shifting blades. “What about you and—?” I gesture to the village where Harper remains.

“We are traveling companions, nothing more.” He squeezes my hand in reassurance.

My lips purse. A likely story. “You picked a funny way of showing it.”

The West Wind shrugs. “What can I say? I enjoy getting under your skin.” His eyes flash, full of impish cunning. “It’s the most fun I’ve had in ages.”

At my droll look, he laughs, drawing my hand up so it rests atop his thigh. My skin leaps at the heat there, the hardened muscle beneath, and I say, “Tell me the truth. When I was poisoned by the darkwalker, did the cure really require a—” My voice fades, blast my shy tongue. “A kiss?”

“Ah.” He leans back, considering me with a devious smirk. “You are more observant than I gave you credit for.”

Unsurprisingly, he attempts to evade. “Well?”

“Did the cure require passing the antidote from my mouth to yours?” The smirk breaks open, gives way to a hearty chuckle that washes over me

in the most enchanting warmth. “Not exactly, no. But let me ask you this.” He eases forward, thumb pressed to the thrumming vein in my wrist. “Would you deny a parched man water from the cool mountain stream?”

The gall of this man. I can’t believe I caved to his whims. I should have challenged his claim, and yet, I’m ashamed to admit I wanted his mouth. I relished his taste, however brief. Too brief.

“No,” I whisper. “I would not.”

His voice comes low. “Would you deny me this desire?”

A kiss. “I don’t know how.” I feel completely unhinged. Maddened by the *what if*.

The green of his eyes deepens, as though a shadow has fallen across the moon. “Then let me guide you.”

Cupping my face, he tugs me forward, nose to nose and breath to breath. “All right?” he whispers.

I swallow thickly. He touches my bare skin. Am I to burn in the blackest depths of Hell? “Y-yes?”

“Is that a question or an answer?”

“Um.” I bite my lip. Each of his fingertips sits as a brand upon my face. “Answer.”

Leaning closer, Zephyrus bypasses my mouth, skimming the tip of his nose along my cheek, across my jaw. The fragile, butterfly-wing whisper spreads warmth down my neck. I hold still, trembling, awaiting the anticipatory touch.

His mouth brushes mine, and I catch fire. A wash of heat explodes across my tongue, pulls down my throat, fists in my lower belly.

It is pure marvel. The drag of flushed lips, a darting tongue licking my lower teeth. Stubble marks his cheeks and scrapes my skin. The heat of his saliva contrasting against the coolness of the air peaks my nipples behind my breastband.

Tremors wrack my body. I try to follow Zephyrus' lead, but I have no idea what I'm doing, which is undoubtedly evident. My fingertips dig into the soil—an anchor. Then I'm swept far and wide from this place, dragged beneath waves I cannot climb, the arches of white foam collapsing over me in dizzying sensations: sight and sound and taste and, by the Father, his *smell*. Restful springtime, the sweetest aroma. My mind, my entire being, spins out of control.

I break away, shaking from head to toe. My body has seized, the energy coiling so tightly inside me it ruptures, shockwaves extending down my limbs.

“Sorry,” I whisper through chattering teeth. “I’m no good at this.”

“Do you see me complaining?” he asks with a raised eyebrow.

“No.” But the insecurity creeps through me regardless.

Zephyrus rubs my upper arms in soothing strokes. I'm likely twice his weight, yet in this moment, I feel small. Delicate, even. “We can take it slow. There's no rush.”

“I've never done this before.”

His eyes soften. “It's an incredibly frightening thing, giving someone access to your body. We move forward if and when you decide.”

His patience helps soothe my frazzled nerves. The West Wind can be incredibly accommodating when he wants to be. “What should I do? Is there a better way to... you know.”

“Better way to...” Zephyrus regards me expectantly.

He will make me say it, the fiend. “Kiss you.”

A bit of playfulness lightens his expression. “Do whatever feels good.”

“That's not helpful!”

“Maybe.” It emerges as a throaty purr. “Do you dare test your

boundaries?” At the next breath, he catches my mouth with his own. And when my lips part, peeled open by his eager tongue, I whimper.

He makes a sound in turn, a low, breathy exhale coasting down my throat, his taste so much more potent, layering itself upon my tongue. The slow, indulgent practice is worshipful, possessing a concentration I have only experienced in deep prayer, when I consider every detail, when I go outside myself.

I don't know where to place my hands, so I rest them against his chest. There is strength here. Lean, wiry muscle holds tight to the compact, slim-hipped physique. Tilting his head, Zephyrus slants his lips over mine and begins to find a rhythm.

I've never experienced true breathlessness. I'm shocked by how good it feels, this need to press forward, rub cat-like against him so the simmer sparks fire. I do not recognize my body. It carries a new weight. It has come alive in frightening ways. My mouth throbs, raw and abused, as the kiss deepens.

“Give me your tongue,” he murmurs.

“H-how? I don't know how.” I squirm in place, trying to ease the tightness coiling between my legs. He has stolen all that I might say and taken it into his mouth.

The West Wind presses a brief, chaste kiss against my chin. “Relax.” One of his hands envelopes the front of my throat like a warm collar. “Part your lips. Yes, like that. Ease your tongue past your teeth. Good girl.”

Everything we have done thus far, each deliberate unfolding, descends into increased complexity. Together we climb and together we fall. For the second time, I break away, swaying.

Zephyrus' nose bumps mine. The affection in that gesture warms me. “You're lovely,” he says. “So perfectly pristine.” The hand at my throat

tightens slightly. When I swallow, my muscles strain against his grip. “And yet, I find myself wanting to do filthy, depraved things to you.”

My heart knocks against my ribs so forcefully I’m certain his immortal ears catch its harrowing rhythm. Filthy. *Depraved*. I dig my fingertips into his shoulders, bruising the muscle there. If I seek to know the contents of his mind, what does that make me?

My whisper, when it comes, must belong to someone else, someone brave and bold, brash and daring. “Like what?”

The banked heat in his eyes reveals those impious corners, the fiercest cravings. Greed. Yes, I see it. Taking what does not belong to you.

Conqueror.

“I will show you,” he murmurs, nipping at my jaw, “in time. For now, let us indulge.” His low, roughened tone slows. “Let us feast.”

The West Wind plies open my mine too easily. The slide and curl of his tongue. The hard plunder that follows, which drags all those rough, embarrassing sounds from the wet depths of my throat. He cups the back of my head with one hand, stabilizing it. My breasts brush his chest, and I whimper.

“Brielle.”

I’m spiraling, too far gone to care that he has spoken my name aloud in a place that would surely snatch it. Zephyrus claims he is faithless, but my name rings like the holiest of prayers.

“Tell me how it feels,” he murmurs, lips tickling the shell of my ear. “Tell me I am your undoing.”

His hand skims up my shoulder, down my arm, across my stomach. He skirts my chest, returns to my heaving back, where his palm sinks between the shoulder blades. I cannot deny him, for it is true. His touch is my undoing.

A moan unfurls behind my teeth. My body, too, coils and bends,

bowing toward Zephyrus as he shifts his attention to the curve of my neck, a glance of damp heat above my collar, mouth always in motion. *Yes. More.* As soon as the thought forms, it evaporates. My thighs clamp tighter around the budding throb that lies between, a strange, yet not unpleasant, sensation. I cannot adequately put into words how his touch has managed to scramble my thoughts so even the simplest actions require effort.

As Zephyrus grips my hips, the timbre of his voice drops. “Sit on my lap.” He squeezes my waist—the area I’ve always been most insecure about. It freezes me in place.

To kiss is one thing, but to press my body against his? “I’m too heavy.”

“Says who?”

“Everyone.”

He is too quiet.

I have overstepped. I have spoken out of turn. When I attempt to move away, he halts me in place. “Wait.”

The inward retreat has already begun, but I lift my gaze anyway. My weight has never mattered to me. It has only ever been a topic of contention for others.

“Your body,” Zephyrus murmurs, eyes intent, “is beautiful to me. It has always been so.”

The flush sears across my face with renewed ferocity, scalding the tops of my ears. “You don’t care if I’m larger than you? That I can carry you without breaking a sweat?”

“Absolutely not.” He smiles, drags his hands down to my wrists, fingers encircling them like bracelets. He looks almost handsome. “I love your shape. I love your curves and the muscle in your arms. I love how physically strong you are. The differences in our bodies? That is the headiest allure.”

I lick my lips nervously, and my stomach clenches as Zephyrus locks on to the motion. He strokes up my back, then down. My dress shifts and sighs beneath his hands.

“Sit on my lap,” he says again.

I do not fight the temptation. I’m too far gone. Straddling his waist, I ease my weight against him. His legs are sturdier than they appear. A deliciously rough oath falls between us.

Hands anchoring my hips, he sinks his fingers into my flesh, the fabric of my dress so thin it may as well not exist. “Do you trust me?”

What a dangerous question. I have never trusted the West Wind, but over the course of this journey, I have come to better understand him. Perhaps that is good enough for now. “What will you do?”

“I will show you,” he whispers, massaging circles into my skin, “that exploring one’s body is not selfish. I will show you,” he goes on, in a voice of pure temptation, “that indulging is no sin.”

As Zephyrus once said, I must move forward in order to learn. I may not trust the West Wind with my heart, but there is trust enough for this: allowing him to bring my dormant body to life.

As if reading the uncertainty in my expression, he bypasses my mouth, pressing soft kisses down to my jaw. The fragile sensation suffuses my skin with an unbearable heat. I hold still, poised on a knife’s edge, a trembling deep in my belly.

When his mouth slants over mine, I am prepared. Eagerly, I feed the kiss, edged in these feelings I dare not name.

A scrape of his teeth against my bottom lip has me opening wider to accommodate him. He nips there, suckling softly, before sliding his tongue inside. My head tips back, throat curved. Zephyrus drinks deeply of everything I offer. But it is not the end. Shifting me to the side, one of his

legs slots between mine, and he holds me there, rocking his thigh against my core until the sensation takes root and I begin to move.

Oh. My eyes roll into the back of my head, and all at once, my body loosens, contouring around his hard, flexing muscle. Then, a brightness, something igniting in my core. I falter.

“Let it unfold,” Zephyrus whispers.

Whatever *this* is, I can’t control it. Pressure, the sweetest agony. I shift my hips harder against him, his hands securing me in place. The pleasure brightens as it nears its peak, and though my body seeks to chase it, the gaps in my mind prove treacherous, a lack of understanding veiling what awaits me at the end, and fear shadowing all. Abruptly, I go cold.

“That’s enough,” I gasp.

Immediately, Zephyrus stops.

My thighs continue to tremble, muscles locked tight. He studies me—this panting, red-faced, wide-eyed novice. “Did I hurt you?”

“No.” I shake my head. “I just need space.”

Expression grave, he nods and loosens his hands from around my waist.

I slip off his lap. The ground is cold beneath me. Grass pricks through the fabric of my dress. For whatever reason, I want to cry. How can I miss his touch when I’m the one who demanded distance?

“Sorry.” I’ve never offered a more pitiful apology.

Zephyrus catches my hand, gives it a reassuring squeeze. “Don’t apologize. You did nothing wrong.”

Then why do I feel so inadequate?

“I thought—” A frail, helpless sound escapes. “I thought I wanted to do... *that*. But—”

Despite the abrupt shift in mood, his eyes soften. “You don’t have to

explain anything to me.” Reaching out, he cups my cheek, brushes his thumb across its curve. “Rest,” he says. “I’ll watch over you.”

Curling into the grass, I rest my head on Zephyrus’ thigh. He startles, then weaves his fingers through my hair, pushing the curls away from my face. The meadow, the stars, and the West Wind—infuriating, too clever by half, yet unexpectedly sweet.

When my eyes close, I dream of spring.

CHAPTER 21

My eyes open toward a dark sky. The stars have waned, and low, sinuous clouds drag their bellies across the forested canopy. In my periphery, the grass marks a silhouette, tapered blades stamped against a murky backdrop. Evening ladens the long stalks.

“Zephyrus?”

Pushing upright, I peer around the glen. An imprint in the grass beside me suggests someone had lain there. The West Wind, however, is nowhere in sight.

A chill courses through me, though the air itself is pleasantly warm. In the distance, the fires have died. Night sounds, hushed and drowsy, blanket the village. As suddenly as it manifested, the gathering has reached an end.

My attention shifts to where the shadows are thickest, beyond the wooded fringe. Nothing stirs. The air holds itself in suspension. To all appearances, I am alone. And yet, something watches me.

Climbing to my feet, I brush off my grass-stained dress, limbs loose and mouth bruised. My glove-clad fingertips press softly into my lower lip, tender to the touch. I remember the drag of the West Wind’s tongue, the

abrasiveness of his unshaven cheeks. His taste lingers, a honeysuckle sweetness.

I touched a man. Kissed him. Ran my fingers across his muscled torso. It was a reckless act, driven by emotion rather than logic, too rash for the life of a novice. And if it ever comes to light, I will lose—everything.

“Brielle.”

I whirl. No sign of whoever called my name. “Hello?”

“Where are you, Brielle?”

The call seethes through the forest undergrowth, rough with pain. My stomach takes a sharp dive. That definitely sounds like Zephyrus, though he knows better than to speak my name aloud.

Grabbing the hem of my skirt, I race across the clearing, plunging into the obscured wood, the trees closing at my back.

A few paces ahead, the grassy path appears, brown with age. Right, left, left again, the trail winds and bends, leading me into a darkness near absolute. As blades crunch beneath my boots, an ashen residue coats the hem of my dress. By the time I reach the trail’s end, my breath draws short and I stand before the entrance to a cave, a hole in the rock shrouded by climbing vines. My name drifts from its cold depths.

Nervous energy jitters beneath my skin. It tells me *no*. It reminds me of all I have to lose. But if Zephyrus is in need, who will help him, if not me?

I force my legs forward, ducking into the low-ceilinged tunnel. The passage narrows, then widens. Keeping my hand to the cool, damp stone, I follow the warren as it descends beneath the press of the earth overhead, its walls hemmed in with nary a crack. Sweat soaks my pores. It slides down the backs of my knees, and my breath shortens further. At least the roselight keeps the gloom at bay.

When the tunnel empties into a large, moonlit chamber, my footsteps

falter. A field of pink flowers nestled within silver-painted walls. I have been here before.

I quickly scan my surroundings. To all appearances, the chamber is empty. “Zephyrus?” I step forward.

“He is not here, young novitiate.”

My attention snaps upward, and I lurch back with a frightened cry.

The Orchid King clings to the ceiling with his grub-like roots, those horrible, open-mouthed buds dripping a clear, oozing liquid. He hangs suspended in the vines, his lower torso veiled behind the cluster of leaves and bright green shoots.

The bare, gleaming white skin of his naked torso ripples with strength as he twists around, evaluating me as one would a particularly compelling enigma. A messy silver braid snakes over the curve of one muscled shoulder.

How could I have entered the Orchid King’s den unaware? We traveled miles from the first entry point. We crossed nearly all of Carterhaugh to reach the Well of Past, which was located far west of the spring. I should be nowhere near the Orchid King.

“Do not be frightened,” he soothes lowly. “You are safe here.”

“You will not punish me?” I search his gaze. One of the carnivorous blossoms snaps its mouth shut. “I’m forbidden to enter Under except on the tithe.”

The Orchid King finds amusement in my concern. His eyes cut like shards of ice. “I do not care to punish you, my dear. My relationship with Mother Mabel takes precedent. I do not wish to taint it by penalizing one of her charges.”

I do not trust his word, though his reasoning makes sense. “If Zephyrus is not present,” I say once my pulse slows, “then why was I called here?”

The Orchid King cants his head in puzzlement. “You tell me. You arrived—uninvited—into my home. There must be a reason for it.” His upper lip appears swollen, engorged with pus or blood.

“A voice called my name,” I say with far more calmness than I feel. “I followed it.”

“Zephyrus’ voice?” I nod. “And it brought you here?”

“Yes.”

A grotesque vine drops to the ground with a slap, followed by a second, third, and fourth. Grunting, the Orchid King lowers himself from the ceiling, the span of his roots extending from wall to wall. I shuffle backward to put distance between us. *Run. Flee.* But I fear what would happen were he to give chase.

“How curious,” Pierus replies, and the tip of a curved, blackened nail dimples his chin. “There must be a reason. Have you considered whether the voice was your inner self nudging you in this direction?”

The hilt of my knife presses against my wrist in comfort. “Why would my mind lead me here?” I swore after witnessing Zephyrus’ torture never to return. That awful ritual is forever stamped behind my eyes.

The Orchid King shifts his bulk through the field of flowering grass, then clambers atop the mound of dirt heaped against the back wall. “Who is to know? The world is full of mysteries.”

He settles in, white roots diving into the soil like hungry worms. Blue eyes placid, he sinks down with a sigh.

“If Zephyrus is not here, then where is he?”

“I cannot answer that question, my dear, for I do not know.” Innumerable spines erupt from his back and shoulders. Their ruby petals part to reveal the fine needles that attach to skin and draw blood. “Has he finally abandoned you?”

From anyone else, I would assume it to be a harmless question. From

the Orchid King? I guarantee he voiced the matter because he knew it would stutter my heart's rhythm, however briefly.

A long moment passes before I'm able to speak, no quaver to my voice.

"Zephyrus gave his word to help us find Meirlach. He would not break that promise."

"Meirlach." Pierus drags a claw idly down one cheek, expression ponderous. "This is why you have returned to Under?"

At once, I realize my error.

"You do not seek this weapon for yourself. No, you were sent, you and your companion. Yes, there is talk of your presence. I am well aware. Who sent you? Mother Mabel?"

I am remembering Pierus' visit to Thornbrook, how my peers flinched in the presence of this unexplainable creature, neither plant nor man, something caught between two worlds. But mostly, I am remembering the clamp of Mother Mabel's claw-like hands.

The Orchid King smiles from his perch. He sits as an asp in its nest, flush from its recent meal.

"Do not fret, my dear. You do not have to answer. I understand your need to protect those you love, and I would not put you in a position to do otherwise. But I'm concerned for your safety. You see, I do not think the Stallion will welcome you, not after its last visitor. Oh, it was long ago, but a kelpie's memory is longer still."

Does he imply I will be unable to enter the Grotto? If this is an attempt to throw me off-balance, I daresay it is working.

"But," he tacks on, "perhaps this time will be different. You are, after all, merely a novitiate. A servant, lowly in the church. Mayhap the Stallion will spare your life, if you ask nicely."

Spare my life? That cannot be. He seeks to frighten me. Fear is the

dream-killer. “I heard nothing about the Stallion sparing my life,” I say with impressive calm, “only that it guards a massive treasure.”

The Orchid King sighs, the bridge of his nose pinched between two fingers. “I would not expect Zephyrus to divulge such an important detail. After all, he wants to ensure you reach the Grotto. Without you, he’s completely out of luck.”

Frustration throbs at the base of my skull, the pressure bleeding up to the crown, behind my burning eyes. It makes no sense. If visiting the Stallion puts my life in danger, wouldn’t Zephyrus be in danger, too? Although, Mother Mabel’s order to kill the beast makes a lot more sense now. Better it dead than me.

Thou shalt not kill.

I voice these thoughts to Pierus.

“He is a god, my dear.”

“That doesn’t explain why he wouldn’t warn me of the steps I’d need to take to reach the Grotto. I’m going to find Meirlach. He knows that.”

“And how do you expect to acquire Meirlach?” He searches my gaze. When I do not immediately respond with a proper defense, he nods, as if my lack of comprehension was to be expected. “Kelpies do love their valuables. I imagine it would allow you to take something if you provided a decent replacement, though I think you will find yourself uninterested in what the Stallion has to offer.” He peers at me with those keen blue eyes. “But Meirlach? A sword forged by the gods, for the gods? It will not part with a treasure so rare. You are wasting your time.”

“Enough,” I growl, stepping forward. “You’re trying to confuse me. It won’t work.”

Tilting back his head, Pierus studies the ceiling, the distinctly human gesture of a man seeking patience. “I understand we have not known each other for very long. I’m aware you do not trust me, and believe me to lead

you astray.” Fingers interlaced, he rests them against his flat, corded stomach and returns to examining me. His claws prick naked skin. “Have you weighed the risks in allowing Zephyrus to accompany you on this journey?”

“I am aware of the risks.” Deep in my core, the trembling manifests, first as hairline cracks, then greater waves. I cannot forget whose motives the Orchid King cares for: his own.

“Have you considered that Zephyrus offered to help not out of kindness, but because he wishes to claim the sword for himself?”

The idea forces itself inside my mind, past my defenses, and slots into place, a previous suspicion I’d denied, emerging from the deep. Why would Zephyrus wish to claim Meirlach? I’ve asked myself this question before. The answer has continued to evade me.

A cant of Pierus’ head as he takes me in: wild, curling red hair, my borrowed, ill-fitting dress. “Tell me what you know about the sword’s properties.”

I cross the room, needing space from the Orchid King despite standing on the opposite side of the cave. The small, gnashing teeth of those opening buds escalate my disquiet. “It is said to pierce any armor. It can cut through walls, shields. It claims mastery over the winds.” Since Zephyrus already has power, it seems pointless he’d want to acquire more of it. “It also demands the truth when held to the throat of another.”

As I speak, I pace. I cannot run, not when there remains questions unanswered, so much left to learn. No, I must see this through to the end.

Pierus listens without interruption. When I am done, he inquires, “You know nothing else?” I shake my head. “Then let me inform you that should Zephyrus claim Meirlach, he will be able to sever our contract by killing me. Only a weapon forged by the gods can kill a god.”

Just as frost crisps the mountainside, so too does a chill encase my

skin. "I see."

"Do you? My dear, let me explain. As soon as Zephyrus gets his hands on Meirlach, he will no longer have any use for you."

My hands grow cold. The chill becomes internal. "He wouldn't betray me. We had an agreement."

The Orchid King shakes his head in mild sympathy. "You do not know the West Wind as I do. Every aspect of his life is driven by selfishness. To learn of an opportunity that would free him from this sentence? He would stop at nothing."

Zephyrus knows how much becoming the next acolyte means to me. Whatever my reservations, I've moved past them. I have given him pieces of myself. Was that a mistake?

I'm busy pondering options when a thought comes to mind.

"I told him he could accompany us to the Grotto, but I could leave him behind, right? He wouldn't be able to follow us." Since he is neither mortal nor a woman, he would be barred from entering the Stallion's lair. I could ensure Harper and I reach Meirlach first, guide or not.

"That depends. Does he have access to your blood? Entering the Grotto requires an offering of mortal blood to the River Mur."

"Of course not." That's absurd.

Pierus inclines his chin, as if he anticipated the pushback. "Are you certain?"

My pacing slows. Something nags at me, sliding deeper, so deep I am forced to peer inward, down and down and down. My sickness. Zephyrus mentioned requiring my blood to barter for the remedy needed to heal me after I was attacked by the darkwalkers. I thought nothing of it. I only cared for my recovery.

"I don't understand." Deadened words fall from lips that have gone numb. "Why blood?"

The tips of his talons connect, forming a bridge in front of his mouth. “The blood of a mortal,” he says, “contains powerful properties. You humans and your beliefs. They are strong enough to take a life. Strong enough to save one, too. If the Stallion is feeling amiable, your blood would appease him, for however short a time.”

I stumble toward the wall, bracing a hand there. I feel old in this moment, the years of a bygone era pressed upon my shoulders. I’m not sure whether to cry or scream, deny or repent. How could I have known this was Zephyrus’ plan? If I cannot trust the Orchid King, if I cannot trust Zephyrus, or Harper, then who can I trust?

Pierus must know how I’ve grown to trust Zephyrus. He would undoubtedly plant these seeds. What does he seek? Control. He will do whatever is necessary to keep those spidery fingers wrapped around the West Wind’s neck.

“No.” I push away from the wall, point a trembling finger at him. “I don’t know why, but I do know you’re trying to manipulate me. You do not know Zephyrus.” Raised chin and crossed arms. Why, I can almost imagine myself as Harper in this moment.

The Orchid King wrenches his roots free of the soil and slithers forward, pushing upward to give himself additional height. “This is not a means of bettering myself, young novitiate. Zephyrus is a god, and gods do not change.”

Quiet: a place where doubt grows roots.

More frightening than standing here alone with Pierus is the knowledge that the West Wind, the person I have come to know these past weeks, is only a shade of his true self. What has been true? What falsities have erected the image of Zephyrus in my head? With no evidence to hold its shape, my impression begins to crumble.

The Orchid King crawls toward a shelf carved out amongst the

damp, glistening rock. He removes a small book, saying, "From what I understand, you suffered a great loss as a girl. It is a terrible thing, wandering the earth motherless."

I did not think it possible to shrink further. "How do you know that?"

"I have known Mother Mabel for years. At times, she has confided in me." Azure eyes, soft with compassion, meet mine. "Your Abbess is concerned for your well-being."

I'm not sure how I feel about Mother Mabel informing the Orchid King of my painful past, but then he offers me the book. It appears to be a diary. "I've marked the page. Read it. Let history guide your decision."

Curling my fingers around the soft leather, I slip it into my dress pocket.

"There is good in Zephyrus," I say, more to myself than Pierus. "I have seen it." With that, I take my leave, striding toward the exit.

"You have seen what he wants you to see," the Orchid King calls to my retreating back. "You and I both know your trust in the Bringer of Spring is tenuous at best. What has he given you except his lies?"

Something splinters in my chest, a great, straining fissure within me. The world is vast, and there is much I do not know. I thought I knew myself, but it seems even one's heart can deceive.

With this new information brought to light, I must consider the next step. The tithe nears. Harper and I must return to Thornbrook, Meirlach in hand. The choice is clear: the Father, or the West Wind. I cannot presume Zephyrus has been telling the truth. If I am wrong, everything I've fought for will be lost.

I turn to face Pierus, his long, angular face awash in wan moonlight. "What is the quickest way to the Grotto?"

He seems pleased by my question, scarlet blossoms gushing from his alabaster skin like fresh wounds. "You will need to take the boat upstream.

When the River Mur diverges, go right. Eventually, you'll pass through a gate and reach an island of sand, where you will disembark. Follow the grassy path until you reach a bridge. It marks the boundary to the Grotto." He takes me in a moment longer. "Another word of advice? Offer the river your blood. The Stallion will at least hear you out before deciding to kill you."

CHAPTER 22

I run straight from the cave to the boat moored at the village's edge without stopping. My task remains: acquire Meirlach before Zephyrus, before Harper. Return to Thornbrook with the prize in hand. Anything else is extraneous.

The rope thumps against the bottom of the hull, and then I'm off, using the pole to direct the vessel across the water, pushing as quickly as I dare. When Harper wakes, she will ascertain my absence, but I intend to return. I will not abandon her to the fair folk. As for Zephyrus, he will know I have gone, perhaps sooner than I think.

When the River Mur branches off, I steer the boat into the dark tunnel. Then I settle onto the bench, roselight squeezed tightly in hand, and pull the book from my pocket, letting the current carry me to my destination.

A small piece of cloth has been tucked between the pages. I flip to the bookmark, squinting down at the markings. Inked words bleed beneath the faint pink glow.

Day eleven, second month of spring.

I was right. It is a diary. And if I'm not mistaken, this is Mother

Mabel's elegant script. So how did it fall into the Orchid King's possession?

Hunching nearer to the page, I begin to read.

Tragedy has struck Carterhaugh.

A message arrived from Veraness. Seemingly overnight, the entire population was wiped out, having succumbed to a storm the likes of which I've never seen. Days prior, I watched the system approach Thornbrook. Low, roiling clouds swelled with thunder and the bright clap of lightning.

My charges were frightened. I told them to pray, that the Father would take care of the rest. But sometimes, His kindness comes at a price. For though we were spared, the people of Veraness were not.

My eyes snag on a single word: Veraness. The town that had once been my home.

Once the storm cleared, I took my charges to Veraness, or what was left of it. We searched for survivors. There were few. I sent a message to Pierus, questioning if he knew the storm's cause. It would be days before I received a response.

Supposedly, the West Wind had attempted to sever his bond. As one of the Four Winds, his power was unsurpassed. Although he was unsuccessful, Carterhaugh's destruction was immense.

A sense of foreboding slinks through me. The Four Winds. I wondered why the name sounded familiar when Lissi mentioned it during our first meeting. I have read of this event not in the Text, but in the history books. And if I'm not mistaken, these books would have warned any who read them of Zephyrus' deplorable reputation: a swindler, a thief.

My hand shakes as I flip to the previous page and note the date inscribed on the top right corner—three days prior to my mother's abandonment. Mother Mabel's personal account of those events ring with bright clarity. Zephyrus is responsible for my home's destruction, the trigger that set alight what followed: a harrowing journey through the dark,

awaiting my mother's return, abandoned on the abbey steps. As for Thornbrook's damage, I knew of that, too. Part of the complex had to be rebuilt.

I shove the diary into my pocket, my breathing choked. I recall an earlier conversation with Harper.

He is the West Wind, Bringer of Spring.

And I imagine the title means nothing to you.

This must be what she'd been referring to. She had known of the West Wind's history, yet she'd chosen to keep the information to herself. Had I known how deeply his influence would alter my life, would I have allowed him to accompany us?

Fury and loathing spread so far beyond the bounds of my skin the air itself feels potent. I was wrong about Zephyrus. He cares for nothing and no one. I've often wondered how different my life would be if that storm hadn't blown through. If my mother had stayed.

I bite the inside of my cheek so hard it bleeds. Curse Zephyrus. Curse the Orchid King. Curse this vile place, its rotten core. The naivete of a sheltered woman. Is that what Zephyrus saw upon our first meeting? Was it then he decided to exploit my goodwill?

A pointed ache pinches my sternum. No matter the desire to wring Zephyrus' neck, I must remain focused on the task at hand. But unless I can pacify my slow-growing panic, my throat will close, the world snuffed out. It's as close to a feeling of dying as I've ever experienced.

"Eternal Father." The strained plea comes unbidden. "Lead me to your quiet waters."

Pushing to my feet, I reclaim the pole and steer around a bend where the current drags. Another push. The tunnel curves ahead, cast in the glow of the flickering roselights. My vessel drifts past the open gate the Orchid King mentioned. The river, the divide, the gate, and lastly, the island.

“Grant me protection, and in your protection, strength.”

As I round the bend, a shallow strip of land comes into view, a dulled brightness floating atop the river. Once the boat bumps against the sandy shore, I scramble onto dry land.

A brittle wind rushes through the passage. It smells of old growth and decay. A narrow bridge—planks of wood haphazardly nailed together—spans the water ahead. Beyond lies the entrance to the Grotto: an impressive archway inlaid with rubies, their color darkened to rust in the frail light. I cannot see what lies within. It begins and ends in obscurity.

“May your light be my guide,” I whisper hurriedly. “May you walk with me through darkness. In Your name I pray. Amen.”

A groan from the damp, wooden planks as I shuffle across the bridge. The rush and retreat of the ebbing tide has dissolved the limestone walls into vast pockets and warped pillars, the ceiling scooped hollow. The bridge deposits me at the entrance to the Grotto, which lies partially submerged in the black water of high tide. Perhaps a quarter-mile ahead, the bright sheen of precious metals and rare gemstones dulls behind the lurking shadows. A strip of water separates me from the Stallion’s cache.

The tips of my boots brush the water’s edge. No sign of the Stallion, though I have no idea what the creature looks like. I will have to swim across. I haven’t a choice. I’ve come to meet my fate, whatever form that might take.

But first, an offering.

The point of my dagger produces a spot of blood on the pad of my finger. I let the red bead drop into the water, shallow ripples disturbing its glass-like stillness.

Toes, ankles, shins, thighs—the icy water drags at my dress. Beneath, sharpened pebbles line the riverbed like teeth, the smallest bones.

My boots skid along the bottom. As the water hits my waist, the roselight I tucked into my pocket gutters. A hiss seethes between my teeth.

I'm halfway across the channel when a long, shallow ridge manifests, hurtling toward me in an elongated, unbroken wave.

My heart leaps, and I scramble forward, my arms cutting through the chest-high water, its crash explosive, shattering the echoing chamber. Whatever creature lurks below, it gains speed. I'm still yards away from shore.

A rounded snout breaks the surface. Two large nostrils flare, exhaling steam. I bite back a sob and plunge blindly through the churning river. I didn't come this far to die, but it feels like the end. No matter how I flail, I am no closer to those piles of gold.

My boots gain traction, and I shove upward, ripping free of the water's hold. My knees fold, and I collapse onto the shore, shivering, puffing hard. At my back, the River Mur settles.

A mortal woman. It has been a long time.

My skin pebbles in the stale air, for a voice blossoms inside my mind.

Pushing to my feet, I glance around the expansive cavern, its smooth floors laden with gold: mounds of sloping hillocks, towering peaks crowned with gem-studded collars and tarnished diadems. All gleam beneath the rosy glow emanating from the various roselights pulsing through the main cavern. One wall contains an extensive array of shelving stuffed with bound manuscripts, piles of loose parchment, scrolls secured with velvet ribbons, precarious stacks of dusty tomes. Silk garments drape a coat rack in one corner. And still, there is more. Cluttered chalices. Gold-spun thread. The most lovely tapestries paint the walls, their colors undimmed. The treasure of a thousand lifetimes.

Pulling my eyes away from the collection, I search for whoever

spoke. The weight of my dagger reminds me I am not without defense. “Are you the one they call the Stallion?”

I am. A thread of intrigue colors the voice—male, I believe. He sounds incredibly young. But I admit I do not know who you are. Why have you come, mortal woman? It is a long way from your abbey.

A half-turn toward my right. I’m certain something moved, but upon closer inspection, nothing appears out of the ordinary. An ornate mirror leans against a heap of purest emeralds. It does not show my reflection, but a scene, almost as if I peer through a window: the climbing white spires of a city perched atop a mountain’s crown, a shadow cloaking the base of its valley.

“How do you know I’m from the abbey?” I ask lowly, continuing to scan the area. No sign of a sword that I can see.

The Stallion makes a light humming sound. *You smell of the incense they burn on the Holy Day.*

The air is alive at my back, my every sense heightened. “We burn it,” I clarify, “to clear the air of impurities.”

So I have heard.

His voice fades as abruptly as it manifested. The ensuing quiet does not feel entirely stable. Water patters from my soaked clothes, chipping away at the silence.

“Will you show yourself?” I ask. “I have traveled far to meet you.”

As do many who believe they are capable of besting me. They send the strongest, the swiftest, the cleverest. None can. A pause, as though he studies me from wherever it is he hides, but how can that be if he is blind? You seem neither strong nor quick, unfortunately.

I force myself to stand tall. “It is true I am not the swiftest, the strongest, the cleverest,” I state, backing toward a wall, “but I have made it this far. Surely that is a testament to my will.”

Your will means nothing to me. You, Daughter of Thornbrook, are not welcome. Pray to your god, girl, for your death will be neither quick nor painless.

My eyes cut to the shadowy corners, fingers squeezing the hilt of my dagger to the point of pain. So the Orchid King was correct. I am not welcome here. It seems my blood didn't appease the Stallion either.

"Why?" I search the water again. I'm certain something lurks beneath the surface. "Does my faith offend you?"

It is not your faith that offends me. It is your interpretation of it. A faith that stipulates it is acceptable to steal from others? I will have no part of it.

"Such an interpretation does not exist," I snap. Formidable creature or not, I will defend the Father by any means necessary. "We spread good and kindness through His teachings."

Then why must I defend my cache against yet another Daughter of your faith?

I glance upward, peering into the chamber's farthest corners. Still, nothing. "I do not understand."

Only once before has a mortal entered my Grotto and escaped with their life, a stolen treasure in hand.

No wonder the Stallion doesn't trust me. "I'm not here to steal from you. I'm here to bargain."

Nothing you offer interests me. You are young, girl. Untried. Too innocent for this world. I will extend to you this mercy: leave, if you cherish your life.

"I won't go." Not without Meirlach.

Then you have welcomed your own demise.

The river shatters into a thousand lapping waves. I stumble back, retreating farther into the cavern as the Stallion emerges in pieces: long

snout, tapered head, water pouring from its sloped back and massive hindquarters. It bears an impenetrable coat of glossy pitch. Four legs, elegantly streamlined. A strong, arched neck. River grass clumps its equally dark mane and tail.

The towering creature extends perhaps twenty-five hands, maybe more. Its rheumy eyes are filmed in white, without pupil or iris.

Zephyrus was correct. It is blind.

The Stallion clops toward me. Muscle shifts beneath the coal flesh encasing its musculature. I scuttle backward, dagger in hand.

“You will not even hear what I have to offer you?” I stutter, wide eyes pinned to its sleek, oily coat. “I thought kelpies enjoyed a good bargain.”

You wish to bargain? Climb onto my back, the Stallion says, milky eyes locked on my cowering form, *and I will gift you a treasure from my cache.*

Mother Mabel’s warning resurfaces. *Whatever happens, do not take off your pendant, and do not sit on the Stallion’s back.*

And the Orchid King: *A kelpie’s memory is longer still.*

Indeed, I have heard the tales of the water-horses that prey on women. Once I mount its back, it will return to the river and drag me down, the violent, quiet death of drowning.

According to the stories, however, they also have a human form. Perhaps that is where salvation lies.

“I will not sit on your back,” I say, “but I will fight you for the opportunity to win an object from your cache. A duel. That is fair.” And by the end, my blade must be buried deep into its heart. “Will you flee?”

Flee? The horse shakes its head. Water sprays, flecking my cheek. *What have I to flee from? Come, girl. Climb onto my back. Let the bargain be fulfilled.*

I retreat until my spine hits the wall. "I have told you. I will not."

Water drips in the quiet pooling between us. *What a stubborn thing you are.* Eventually, he replies, *Very well. You request a duel? Then let us fight.*

Air ripples around him, and when it settles, I blink in surprise. The Stallion is neither a man nor a terrifying beast. He is a child, on the cusp of adolescence.

He wears brown trousers shorn at the knee and a thin white tunic. He stands with a relaxed posture, hands loose at his sides. A flop of pale hair falls across his brow. He is all bones, yet staring into his white eyes, I understand I am quite young in comparison.

For those eyes are old. They have seen things.

The kelpie pads forward on bare feet. "Are you frightened?" His attention rests slightly off-center from my face.

A trickle of sweat slithers down the side of my neck, and my hand tightens around my dagger. "Yes."

The boy smiles. "Good." His teeth are small and square. "You should be."

My muscles contract, braced for an explosion of movement, the demand to parry a sudden strike. Killing a kelpie is one thing, but a boy? I will not do it. I do not care if the Stallion merely wears a human skin. Somehow, I will have to gain Meirlach without losing my life. The sword remains concealed, likely buried beneath a mound of gold. At first, I did not believe myself capable of obtaining it, but I was wrong. I am more than capable. I am capable of so many things.

I push off the wall to face the Stallion.

Tucking his hands at the small of his back, he begins to circle me. "Before we begin, let us discuss particulars. What treasure of mine do you seek?"

“Meirlach.”

He shakes his head, continues his circling. I turn in reflection of him. The last thing I want is to expose my back. Despite his lack of sight, I sense the boy would strike with precision. “Meirlach is not for the taking I’m afraid, but you are free to select something else.” He flutters a small hand toward the eclectic display.

I readjust my grip. The leather wrapping clings to my damp glove. “I don’t want anything else,” I state. “I came here for Meirlach. I will not leave without it.”

“You will leave,” the Stallion cries, face pinched in irritation, “when I say you do and not a second later.”

Calm, I think. Yet my heart thunders with the despairing knowledge that things are not unfolding as I imagined they would. “You said I could choose any object in your collection.” Round and round and round he goes.

“Any object,” he counters, “but Meirlach.”

“Why?”

“Because it is mine. That is reason enough.”

I swallow, squinting through the half-light in an attempt to locate the shining pommel of a sword. Mounds of treasure pile against the Grotto’s curved walls. A few precarious towers extend all the way to the gutting stalactites, carved points protruding from the gray shroud veiling the ceiling. “Do you fear I will beat you in a duel?” I dare ask.

Silence stretches and reforms around this statement, as if the Stallion considers the question from all angles. He stops, his arms crossed, mouth mulish. “It has been long since I have battled.”

If the Text has taught me anything, it’s that we are all born with equal potential. Me? I am but kindling that has yet to burn.

“Don’t you tire of your loneliness?” I press. “Don’t you seek to remember what it means to connect to another, however briefly?”

The Stallion barks a crow-like laugh. Then he sobers. “Very well. I will give you the opportunity to win Meirlach, Daughter of Thornbrook.” A sword appears in his childlike hand. The long, slender blade exudes elegance, its form enshrouded by an ethereal light. “Lovely, isn’t it?”

It is a weapon worthy of a song. The hilt—pommel, handle, and guard—has been shaped from gold. A ruby winks from the disk capping the pommel, and the guard, a collection of spiraling strips, shapes a protective sphere around the hand.

“If you draw first blood, the blade is yours.” The Stallion gives Meirlach a twirl. “However, if I draw first blood, you will climb onto my back and dwell within my Grotto forevermore.”

Never have I desired anything more than Meirlach in this moment, with the aftermath of recent betrayal roiling hot in my belly. I have the will. Of this, I am certain. But if the Stallion draws blood first, I am as good as dead.

Slowly, I draw my blade. He studies me with that adolescent face, those primordial eyes. In his mind, I am a child. Even when my body becomes dust, he will likely still be here, guarding his cache.

There is little I can do now. I’m committed. From the moment I stepped beyond Thornbrook’s walls, shoulders weighed down with supplies, I vowed to return with the sword or die trying. I have trained for this. Besting the Stallion is but the last obstacle on this journey.

Planting my feet, I take stock of my opponent. His sword offers greater reach. A knife, however, is the most impressionable of weapons, a many-faced foe. What I lack in speed, I make up for in strength. Let him think me untried.

I do not see him move.

A rush of air stirs to my right. My muscles engage, and I swing on a half-turn, meeting his blade. The clang peals out.

The Stallion deflects, lunging for my left flank. Our blades kiss before he spins away in a ripple of darkness. He returns, hacking at my neck with immense strength, frightening calculation. A complex pattern of cuts keeps the Stallion at arm's length, but he is ancient, this creature. He is no mere boy. I must remember that.

His next strike lands with back-breaking force. The impact rattles my arm, the roots of my teeth. Once more, he breaks away to enfold himself in the shadows. I scan the cave, weapon raised, my heartbeat marking the passing time. He has disappeared.

I could step forward, but the wall guards my back. An acclivity of tumbled gemstones, gold bricks, brass nuggets, and shimmering silver ripples in waves of color beneath the roselights. I fear losing sight of the bridge were I to proceed deeper into his lair.

A droplet of sweat rolls with aching slowness down my spine.

I am a blade.

A dark shape rushes from a murky corner. I pivot around the blade, yet slip on a few scattered jewels, crashing into one of the golden mounds. Coins plink across the floor. The Stallion lunges. I spin out of reach. A glance over my shoulder reveals his sword buried in the mound up to the hilt. By the time he yanks it free, I'm already across the room.

He reconvenes, brushing a lock of hair from his sightless eyes. His other senses must be highly attuned if he's able to pinpoint my location so accurately. At the next attack, I leap sideways, the hiss of air passing against my right arm, scream-like. As the blade completes its pass, I stab toward the Stallion's thigh. He skirts free with a high, tinkling laugh.

"You'll have to do better than that if you wish to escape this place alive," he says.

Again, he disappears. My attention leaps from mound to mound,

knife at the ready. By the time I sense movement, the fall of his sword is nearly complete, hacking with brutal severity toward my unprotected neck.

A clash rings out. Zephyrus has inserted himself between the kelpie and I. As they rain blows upon each other, I look beyond them. Harper stands in the arched entryway, eyes wide, Zephyrus' cloak clutched around her slender frame. I brush aside the stab of vicious jealousy, turn my back on her.

Zephyrus cuts toward the boy, who swipes low, nicking his opponent's thigh.

“Leave it,” I snarl, striding forward. “This fight is mine.”

Zephyrus attempts to gain the upper hand despite his poor handling of a sword. I'm not even sure where he managed to procure one. His strategy is to continually evade, never landing a blow directly. This does not surprise me. It reeks of cowardice.

Wherever he lands, flowers bloom. He springs from place to place, and the warm air buoys his feet, pushing out the whiff of lingering decay. The Stallion trails him, equally limber. His lack of sight is no hindrance. Thousands of years he has dwelled here. He likely knows the location of every coin, every crystal chalice, the darkest nooks, the faults in the walls.

“Your fight,” I call to the Stallion, “is with me!”

As Zephyrus retreats, scurrying toward the archway, I ram him from behind, and he slams face-first into the wall, his sword clattering on the ground. He claps a hand over his face, blood pouring from his nose.

Standing between two piles of gold, the Stallion pads forward, his nostrils flaring, taking in the coppery scent. Sweat glistens along his hairline and sticks his oversized tunic to his skinny frame. I stand my ground. This time, he will come to me.

The Stallion advances, and I meet his aggression with equal fervor. The West Wind's presence changes things. My strikes land with greater

weight, my parries fleeting, memories before they're made known. Blade to blade, we battle for dominance. Betrayal spurs me onward. I've always felt the need to prove my worth. And this? This is for Mother Mabel, for future me. Meirlach will be mine. It is a symbol, after all. And symbols hold power.

The Stallion ducks, and the flat of my knife passes over the warm heat of his skin. I complete the drive upward, cutting across his face, forcing him back. His spine hits the wall, my dagger at his throat.

The boy pants through his teeth. Sweat sheens his skin, the color feverish in the low light, but he is not the one I wish were on the receiving end of my blade.

He must recognize this. "You will not kill me?" the boy whispers, and he does not seem so old now, with dirt streaking his ripped trousers and a slice reddening his cheek. His eyelids sink low over rheumy eyes.

Wrath boils holes into my stomach. Never have I felt more alive, and yet, the Stallion is not my foe. Merely a scapegoat for my fury.

"A life is a life in the eyes of the Father." Stepping back, I lower my knife. "I will not kill you."

Something like respect lines his features. "Well done. It is clear you are no helpless mortal." Holding out his hand, he offers me the blade. "Meirlach is yours."

How could I have known my journey would lead me here? Abandoned on the doorstep of Thornbrook like so many children, I wondered what I did wrong in life to receive such a punishment—motherless, fatherless until I discovered my faith. But the path I've trodden, rutted, littered with broken stones, has shaped me into Brielle of Thornbrook. So yes, I will take Meirlach. I fought for it fairly, and I won.

As soon as the hilt touches my skin, a warm current licks at my fingerbones and slithers up my arm, a light, exploratory touch. I shudder.

The sword is far lighter than it appears, its pommel a perfect counterweight to the steel blade. The guard encases my hand in curved strips of gold.

My eyes lift to the Stallion. His bloodless lips curve. “Take care with that sword. Power is a dangerous temptation, after all.”

I am well aware.

“Farewell, Daughter of Thornbrook.” He transforms back into his equine form, eliciting a gasp from Harper. A blink of those sightless, chalky eyes and he returns to the river, ripples flattening into calm.

Footsteps, carried on a loam-soaked breeze. I turn, sword in hand, to study Zephyrus, who halts a few paces away. The front of his tunic has been split down the middle, sternum to navel.

“Are you all right?” There’s a harried look about him, the curls of his hair clumped with sweat and blood. Fool. He’s lucky he can wear his immortality like armor.

“Fine.” I brush past him. Harper and I will need to return to Carterhaugh as quickly as possible. I only hope time has not altered too severely—months or, dare I think, years.

Harper’s frightened gaze flits to the bloody knife in my hand. It must be cleaned. If all mortals are His children, then this dagger is mine. I have honed it, nurtured it, released it into the world. It is mine no matter the battles it sees. It will forever bear my mark.

“Wait,” Zephyrus calls.

There was the old Brielle, the green, narrow-minded novitiate of Thornbrook. The Brielle of today is a much wiser creature. She understands one’s space is not obligation.

Slowly, I pivot to face the Bringer of Spring. His mien does not belong to the man I rescued in Carterhaugh. It possesses smoother skin, sharper bone structure, a comely symmetry.

“If it is a fight you seek,” I clip out, “you will have to look

elsewhere. I earned Meirlach fairly.”

“You did,” he concedes. I do not miss how his attention fixates on the weapon. “You fought well.”

I already know this. Ten years prior, Mother Mabel put a blade in my hand. I have not wasted that time languishing. “What do you want, Zephyrus? Be forward, for once.”

A muscle flutters in his jaw. Anger? Not quite. It is something decidedly more deadly. “Why did you leave for the Stallion alone?” He searches my face. “You are not rash.”

It seems I will have to spell it out for him. “Ask me what I learned, Zephyrus. Go on. Ask.”

His pupils dilate, swimming against the mossy rings surrounding them. A hare, I think, caught in the eye of a snake. “What did you learn?”

Admittedly, I’d believed myself capable of civil conversation. In my mind, I would lay everything out, every hardened fact. Information would be picked over, torn apart, arranged in its proper location, where all made sense.

But it cannot be done. Between one breath and the next, my eyes fill. Once, I’d excelled at hiding my hurt in the face of those who sought to tear me down. I’m not sure why that is no longer the case. Zephyrus, a perpetual thorn in my side, or so I’d believed.

“The Orchid King told me of your plan. How you would lead us to the Grotto. How you would use my blood to gain Meirlach for yourself. How you would then kill Pierus, thus breaking the curse chaining you here.” *How you would betray me.*

“You sought him out?” Zephyrus is frightened—for *me*, I think. “Pierus is dangerous.”

“How dangerous can he be when he speaks the truth?” The words

grow broken and coarse. No matter how I try to dam the eruption, it surges forward with renewed ferocity, an unbridled torrent. “Do you deny it?”

He steps forward, palms lifted in repentance. “I can explain.”

He did not answer my question. I should have anticipated that.

“You lied to me.” The accusation hurls out, thick and sour enough to choke me. “You lied, and you lied, and you lied!” A straining pitch, followed by a crack, and my voice slides into a furious scream. Never have I raised my voice. Never have I so thoroughly lost control. “I trusted you.”

For that is the true hurt, after all. I should have known better. I warned Harper of Zephyrus’ motives. I reminded myself to maintain distance. Daily, I thought, *Do not trust him*. Yet I witnessed change in him. I believed, truly believed, my feelings for Zephyrus were reciprocated. If I cannot trust my own heart, what can I trust?

“All this time I thought you were here to aid us in our quest, to repay your debt, to gain your *own* prize. But you weren’t, were you?” I weep openly. “You wanted Meirlach. It didn’t matter that we wanted it, too. *Needed* it. Everything was for your own gain.”

For the first time, I see the West Wind clearly. The light in his eyes is cunning and vicious. The hands that break, the vows that bind. “I have given you every opportunity to show good,” I whisper. “Why—” My throat closes as I stare into his face. “What kind of person manipulates someone who has only been kind to them?”

His expression falls slack. Mourning something that will never come to pass? It matters not. Meirlach will remain in my possession until I step foot aboveground. Zephyrus will have to pry it from my cold, dead fingers before I ever let him touch it.

“Nothing to say?” I demand. “I want the truth. Tell me the only reason you agreed to help us was to get Meirlach for yourself.”

“It’s not—”

“Say it.”

He looks physically ill as he replies, “Initially, that was my intention. When I learned you sought Meirlach, I planned to go along until the opportunity presented itself. But as time went on, as I came to know you, I began to question what was right.”

A likely story. “It didn’t stop you though.”

Briefly, his eyes close. “You have to understand my dilemma. I have been captive for centuries.” His mouth twitches, thins. “I would have done anything to get free.”

“And whose fault is that?” I fire back. While I do not know the reason for his captivity, I am almost certain it is justified. “You have only yourself to blame.”

“I know.” His voice has never been smaller.

For a good, long while, I stare at this man. The blown pupils well with dark, twisted imaginings. Freedom: a captive’s greatest, most elusive hope.

“It didn’t have to be this way,” I quaver, fresh tears wetting my cheeks. “Had you simply *asked*, I might have agreed to part with the sword.” For a time, at least.

He stares at me, dumbfounded. “You wouldn’t have given up Meirlach.”

“You don’t know that!” I cry, flinging up a hand. “You assumed things of me. You shoved me into a box and your mind did not change. Instead of being honest from the start, you deceived. You thought little of me.”

But I am not through with him. On the contrary, there is so much I might say, had I the time to do so. But I strike where he is weakest. Fell him with a single blow.

“You once asked if anyone could love someone like you.” My breath

catches. It is agony, this strain upon my heart, each scalding word rolling into the next. “Me,” I whisper. “I could have, had you given me the opportunity. But you are a lyre that plays only itself. That is why you are alone, why you will continue to be alone during your long, miserable existence.”

Pain fractures his expression. “I’m sorry.”

“Sorry you were caught,” I spit. “Sorry you will return to the Orchid King empty-handed, no nearer to freedom.”

“Brielle, please.” He eases forward, yet I raise my knife, its blade still dripping with the Stallion’s blood. He is too careless, tossing around my name. He must be truly desperate for my attention.

“One more step, and I will slit your throat, immortal or not.” My voice trembles with restrained rage. “Let this be your final warning: if you ever show your face in Thornbrook again, I will kill you. I don’t care what it takes or how complicated the steps. I will find a way to end your life.”

His eyes widen. Zephyrus, however, says nothing more.

After today, I will return to Thornbrook and I will not think of the West Wind a moment longer. With Meirlach acquired, I can move on with my life. I doubt Zephyrus will be let off his leash anytime soon, if ever. A just punishment if I have ever heard one.

His attention slides to the blade, perhaps debating the likelihood that I will carry out my promise. “You need me to guide you back to Carterhaugh. It’s not safe.”

A hiss seethes between my clenched teeth. I do not even recognize it. “I don’t need you, Zephyrus.” A lesson I have learned too late and at the cost of my trust in another. “I never did.”

Turning my back, I wait until his footsteps recede. It doesn’t take long. And when the stillness coats the Grotto’s every darkened hollow, I break, and the dam sunders. My knees hit the ground, knife and sword

slipping from my grip, impacting the stone with a harsh clatter, my hands lifting to cover my face.

Why must I suffer so? Have I not been a dutiful servant? The Father would not give me a test I couldn't handle. I understand Zephyrus' betrayal is a lesson learned. And for what? It does not seem worth the heartache.

Sound shatters up my throat, garbled with weeping. I think of that eleven-year-old girl left on Thornbrook's doorstep. I am still that girl, even now.

A hand curves gently over my shoulder. "I'm sorry," Harper whispers. I did not hear her approach.

Sorry. I'm growing sick of that word. "Did you know?" I croak. Tears continue to slide across my knuckles, down into the grooves between my fingers, sticky with salt. "What he planned to do with the sword?"

"I swear to you I didn't." A prolonged pause follows. "I honestly believed he cared for you."

Then we were both fools. Mother Mabel warned me of Under and its trappings. To think I knew better than she.

"What of this?"

I drop my arms, glancing up. The roselight throbs like a pale rosette in the center of Harper's palm. It must have fallen during the match.

Something goes cold within me. Snatching it from her hand, I heave the orb far into the darkness. It hits the stone with a chime, then bounces, rolls, before coming to a stop somewhere in the murk. I wish it had shattered.

Harper studies me in concern. "What now?"

A shaky exhale steams the air. I have traveled farther than I could have dreamed in my lifetime, but I am tired. I believe I could sleep for years if given the opportunity. "It's time to return to Thornbrook," I whisper flatly. "We have been gone long enough."

PART 2
THE FAITHLESS

CHAPTER 23

It is morning. Green, golden, warm. The church shutters lie open, welcoming the Holy Day, pools of light curled sleepily upon the stone floor. As the sweet, silvery tone of a bell fills the nave, bright as a shimmer on glass, the Daughters of Thornbrook congregate, our chant rising to catch the wave, the voices of one hundred strong.

The build gathers, soaring into the ceiling rafters, sinking with new weight. I let my voice carry from where I stand in the back pew, joining the choir. My lungs contract around the air until the sound begins to hollow, folding onto itself, smaller, smaller, gone.

Standing at the base of the sanctuary, the altar at her back, our Abbess on High spreads her arms wide, palms lifted toward the heavens. The chasuble drapes her shoulders in shining gold. “Blessed are we to be welcomed into His Kingdom. In power and in glory.”

We respond as one. “Amen.”

A shared sigh unfurls throughout the congregation. Together, we begin to file out.

Following Mass, I return to the dormitory to change, donning my

gray dress in place of my white alb. Then I hurry downstairs, crossing the sunny grounds at a clipped pace.

As I step into the forge, its hot, close air reeking of char, the tightness in my chest unravels. Here lies familiarity and comfort, the quiet of solitude, every piece of this workshop touched by my hand, whether tool or table or coal or blade. It is the only place in Carterhaugh where I can breathe freely.

With the tithe a mere week away, every moment counts. Mother Mabel has requested five additional iron daggers for the event, bringing the final count to twenty-six. *For the Orchid King*, she'd told me, *as a gesture of goodwill*. I'd held my tongue.

Slipping on my weighted apron and toolbelt, I tend the fire and shape the metal without complaint. Time spins out. Sweat pours from my face, the skin reddened, pinched from the heat. My back twinges as I drive the hammer down, the impact shuddering up my arm, into my shoulder joint. The cowhide apron chafes the front of my thighs, and heat blankets me like dampest cotton.

New thoughts begin to intrude from those far, dark corners. They appear as flashes of light and darkness: the gleam of a metal sword, the curve of straight white teeth. My heart thunders sickeningly. I swiftly block them out.

I'm beginning to shape the bevels into the knife when a shadow falls across my worktable. I startle so hard I almost drop the hammer on my boot.

Harper, her coal hair clasped in an elaborate updo, stands in the doorway backlit by the sun. A warm halo softens her shoulders in buttery light.

"I don't know how you can stand to work in these conditions," she

remarks, waltzing in as though she has every right to. Her nose wrinkles. “I’m melting already.”

As usual, Harper’s commentary is unwanted. “Is there something I can do for you?” My attention returns to the blade’s fiery tip, my tongs clamping the tang to hold it steady against the anvil.

“Am I not allowed to visit? This isn’t your forge, you know. You just work here.”

I scowl at her. “If you’re here to start an argument, I will bodily remove you from the area. This is my space. You have no right to come here and make it unsafe for me.” Flipping the metal over, I finish shaping the tip. “And to be clear, this *is* my forge. Mine.”

Bowing my head over the anvil, I return to hammering, effectively ending the conversation. Maybe Harper will finally leave me in peace.

Shaping a medial ridge requires an aggressive slant with the hammer, pushing the metal rather than drawing it out. This ensures the angles marking the ridge do not cross at the center, which thins the blade, thus weakening its structure.

Harper watches me work for a time, a dark shape in my periphery. “Do you mind if I look around?” she asks.

Lifting the dagger to the light, I examine the ridge. Almost perfect, but not quite. “Mother Mabel requires these blades by the end of the week. I can’t afford a distraction.” Back onto the anvil it goes, the hammer impacting the edges with short, punchy clinks.

“I won’t distract you. Promise.”

I cut her a sidelong glance, my suspicion evident.

Harper sighs. “I want to see the work you do. That’s all.”

And she does not view this as completely out of character?

“I wouldn’t recommend it.” Again, I inspect the ridge. Much better.

The spine is sharply defined, and the angles do not cross. “You’ll dirty your alb.”

Harper smooths a palm across the pristine white fabric. She wears her red stole atop it, displayed diagonally over the chest to represent service to the Father, and has for the past fortnight. Following initiation, acolytes are required to wear them for twenty-one days. The cincture, tied into three knots, hugs her waist. “I’ll live.”

Who am I to deny Harper what she wants? Anyway, I’ve a deadline to uphold. “Fine. But keep your distance.” The last thing I need is to accidentally burn her.

She nods and steps farther into the space. Fire hisses from the forge’s stony mouth, a wash of orange and bright.

With the medial ridge in place, I can begin working my way down the dagger, hammering in the bevels so its shape maintains uniformity. I heat the blade in sections, my fingers aching from how tightly I grip the hammer. At the next blow, another vision flashes: a tanned hand cradling a glass of golden liquid. My stomach turns.

“You really made all these?”

I pause, glance over my shoulder. Harper faces the line of daggers and knives hanging from the wall.

“I did.” I should think that would be obvious.

A touch, finger to blade, dragged down the peaked center where the bevels meet, across the swirl of silver and darker iron. Pulling her hand away, Harper pivots to face me. “They’re amazing.” Awe colors her tone. “I didn’t realize your skills were so extensive.”

I gaze at her coolly. “You never cared to know.”

Harper picks her way around the various worktables. “You’re right.” I do not imagine the regret softening her admission.

With a heavy sigh, I set aside the partially-finished dagger and shove

my hammer into my toolbelt. It's impossible to concentrate with Harper present. Better to address the cause for her visit. I can work on the knife when she leaves.

Grabbing an old rag, I wipe the sweat from my burning face, toss it into a nearby bin piled high with dirty cloth. "Why are you here, Harper?"

She sets a small container on the ash-streaked table separating us. "The lunch bell rang. I didn't see you in the refectory, so I brought you something to eat."

Her unexpected benevolence takes me aback, and I lift a hand to my chest, rubbing the twinge there. Since my return to Thornbrook, I have had difficulty eating with any regularity.

"Thank you." Of all the recent oddities, none are stranger than Harper's kindness. We are not friends, exactly. But neither are we enemies. "If that's all..."

"Actually, I wanted to ask your opinion on something." She begins to perch on one of the rickety chairs, then draws away, likely noting its dusty state.

"Very well." The sooner she asks, the sooner she can depart.

Harper again glances at the vacant seat, frowns, and sits. The sight pleases me. "I've been speaking to Mother Mabel about Thornbrook's future." She fiddles with the tasseled ends of her stole, blue eyes keen. "I wanted to ask about changes you'd like to see implemented. We're to begin planning after the tithe."

Sinking into the opposite chair, I study the woman who was once my most abhorred rival, yet who has recently become someone I might one day respect—a leader of the faith.

She squirms beneath my gaze. Crosses and uncrosses her arms. "Well?" A snap. "Do I need to repeat myself?"

There is the Harper I know. "Mother Mabel requested this of you?"

Once a year, the Abbess meets with the acolytes to outline proposals regarding fund allocations, renovations, community presence, and miscellaneous projects. While novitiates do not vote on final decisions, we are often petitioned for suggestions of improvement.

“No,” says Harper. “I approached her myself.”

“I see.” The chair creaks beneath my shifting weight. “You remembered our conversation from Under.” When we spoke of duty, responsibility, neglect. It feels like a lifetime ago.

“I did.” She straightens, hands arranged artfully across her lap like lovely glass figurines. “Is that a problem?”

Strange, how Harper’s aggressive nature comforts me now.

“I think it’s admirable you want to implement change.” Unwittingly, my face softens. Faith is not stagnant. Neither is Harper, it seems. “Have you spoken to the other novitiates?”

“I have. They’ve given me much to consider.”

Knowing Harper, she will not leave until I comply with her wishes. I’m impressed by her dedication. “I mentioned the idea of an apprenticeship program. Children would learn valuable skills while receiving food, shelter, an education. It would ease the burden of chores, allowing the Daughters of Thornbrook to deepen existing relationships within the community, and build new ones.” I keep my gaze steady. “I believe such a program would benefit both parties. If you could bring that to attention, I’d appreciate it.”

“Consider it done.”

Since Harper’s ascension, I’ve seen little of her. This new post requires long days on the road, traveling from town to town, spreading the Father’s word. Admittedly, it was a beautiful ceremony. A hush blanketed the church as Mother Mabel drew the red stole across Harper’s white alb.

I cannot deny my envy. That could have been me. It was I who

obtained Meirlach. But I was not the one to gift it to Mother Mabel, proof of my worth.

“How are you?” Harper abruptly asks.

A bead of sweat trickles down my temple, which I swipe away. “Well enough.” Though I have not opened the Text since my return. It sits on my desk, gathering dust. “And you? Hopefully Isobel isn’t too put-out that you’ve moved to the lower level.” Harper’s cot currently sits empty. Whoever next enters Thornbrook will have the pleasure of cohabitating with Isobel.

The fire spits embers in the silence. Harper, hands clasped in her lap, worries her lip, perhaps hesitant to voice her opinion. “Actually,” she says, “Isobel and I are no longer friends.”

“Truly?” Now that she mentions it, I’ve noticed they dine separately during meals. As well, they no longer arrive to service together. No wonder the halls are quieter.

She shrugs. “Our values no longer align as they once did.”

Years Harper has spent feigning assurance. To witness the walls having crumbled, vulnerability displayed fearlessly, she has transformed in ways I did not believe possible. “Do you miss her?” They were friends, however shallow and manipulative the relationship.

Tilting back her head, she blinks to clear the welling emotion, a sheen across her blue eyes. “Sometimes. But it’s not Isobel I miss, per say. It’s the security of her presence.”

“You’re lonely.”

The declaration falls as a weight upon her back, forcing her to stoop forward in the chair. Harper swallows, then nods. Whatever animosity I once felt toward her is gone. I feel only sympathy, the faint ache of repressed pain.

“I do not regret distancing myself from Isobel,” she whispers.

“Serving the Father as an acolyte has made me feel closer to Him. I feel more certain of my place.”

The twinge returns, though dulled. “I am glad.” A strained smile is all I can offer. “It’s what you always wanted.”

“But I didn’t earn it.” She holds my gaze until I look away.

We have had this conversation before. Thus far, it has remained unchanged. “You earned it,” I say quietly. “We both entered Under. We both faced terrible things.”

“But you bested the Stallion,” she argues.

“Luck, pure and simple.” It sounds like the truth. It tastes like a lie.

“It was not.” She speaks gently and with newfound compassion, another positive change since her appointment. “You knew what you were doing wielding that blade, just as you knew what you were doing when you ordered me to take the sword to Mother Mabel and claim it was I who had found it.”

My attention slides to the open doorway. Since my return from Under, Mother Mabel has not visited me in the forge. Neither has she approached me in the halls. She has given me space, as if suspecting I need the solitude.

“You are an acolyte.” My gaze returns to Harper. A furrow draws her dark eyebrows inward. “I thought this was what you wanted.”

“It’s also what you wanted,” she points out.

Wanted—a word stuck firmly in the past.

The truth is this: I no longer know what I want or what drives me. Under broke something in me, and I fear it is irreparable.

To Harper, I respond with a half-truth. “It did not seem appropriate to move forward if I was questioning my place here.”

Indeed, I questioned much when Harper and I emerged from Under weeks prior, bruised and battered beyond belief, my heart in tatters. The

grassy path had not failed us. I thought, I have given my life to the Father. How could He lead me astray? Have I not been a steadfast follower? Or was I punished for involving myself with a man?

“Aren’t the times of uncertainty when we need Him the most?” Harper counters.

My face pinches, folds of overly warm skin sinking into deep crevices. “You know, I think I liked you better when you were unbearable.”

Harper laughs. Surprisingly, I do, too. It is not a belly laugh, one whose ring lingers, but it is something. When we grow quiet, I say, “Once the tithe is done, I will reconsider my place. Until then, I’d rather not think about the quest at all.”

“About that.” Her mouth flattens into a thin line. “There’s something I think you should see.” Pulling an object from her pocket, she sets it in her palm, a glass orb in a flood of morning light.

My heart knocks once against my ribs, then stills.

When I last saw the roselight, I threw it as hard as I could into the Stallion’s Grotto. Miraculously, it remains whole. Not even a crack. Harper must have retrieved it prior to our flight from Under.

My eyes lift to hers. For a long while, no one speaks.

“You see it, don’t you?” Harper murmurs.

Reluctantly, my attention returns to the roselight. Inside the delicate casing, the soft pink glow I’ve come to expect has muddied to gray murk and bloodshot scarring—a hemorrhaging.

I lean back in my chair, needing distance from the orb. “Why would you take this?” A dull thump behind my ribs. “It belongs to Under. Nothing good can come of it.”

“Call it an impulse.” Harper taps a fingernail against the glass. Its chime momentarily brightens the cloud that has drifted over me. “Things

ended messily between you and Zephyrus. I suspected it would not be the last you saw of each other.”

A familiar dread oozes through my gut. “That was not your decision to make.”

“It’s been four weeks, Brielle.”

“And? Why does that matter? I’m never going back.” As for the Bringer of Spring, he can rot.

Harper takes her time responding, perhaps remembering our return trip to Carterhaugh. Under’s strange enchantments offered us safe passage via the grassy path. We returned to Thornbrook unscathed. She did, anyway.

“I’ve watched you,” she says. “You’re listless, unhappy, unmotivated. You sleep and work in your forge. You do nothing else.”

She is wrong. I don’t sleep. I spend hours in bed, it’s true, but I am wide awake, my heart galloping despite my listless state. When the sun finally breaks over Carterhaugh, I wipe the crust from my eyes and go about my day. I think only of numbers. Ten knives, twenty, forty, more. Numbers do not stray. Numbers are absolute.

Harper lifts her chin. “I think you need closure.”

“What I need,” I growl back, hands clamped around the arms of my chair, “is to be left in peace.”

“Is it peace you’re after,” she challenges, “or denial?”

Irritation seethes through me. I’ve half a mind to chuck a hammer at her head, though her skull is so hard I doubt it would leave even a dent.

With some effort, I calm. I’m not angry at Harper. I’m angry because she asks all the right questions.

Tucking a strand of hair behind her ear, she says, “You do not wonder about this?” Another tap against the glass. When I fail to respond, her face falls. “Very well.” She heads for the door.

I’m halfway out of my seat before I realize I’ve moved. “Wait!”

Her pitying gaze weakens my knees, and I fall into my chair as Harper offers me the roselight without judgment. I don't want to touch it, but I must.

As soon as I grasp the cool sphere, my pulse begins to palpitate with increasing distress. The firm, steady heartbeat I once felt has diminished. Upon closer inspection, the russet threads sliding between the gray look akin to blood. "What happened?"

"I wish I knew," she says. "It's gotten worse since we returned."

What would cause the West Wind's roselight to alter color? I recall Zephyrus' cry of pain as the Orchid King assaulted him. Pierus, whose limbs gorge blood.

I return the roselight to Harper. My palm stings where it touched the glass. "It's no longer my concern."

"You would turn from him in his hour of need?"

What of my needs? The West Wind didn't care for them, only his own, and shattered my trust in the process. "Yes." Firm. "I would. He doesn't deserve my help, or anyone's help, for that matter. The West Wind only acts out of self-interest."

"I'm not so sure about that."

A muscle pops in my jaw as my back molars grind together. Harper has no idea what she's talking about.

"Remember when we arrived at that village after you saved me from the lake? The matriarch wanted something in exchange for aiding us."

I remember. "What of it?"

"I overheard Zephyrus speaking to the matriarch. She wanted his eyes, Brielle. His eyes."

Shock claps through me despite my resistance to any outward reaction. "That's... gruesome." And concerning. "He didn't agree, did he?"

She gives me a knowing look, which I ignore. "No, but he did agree

to gift his blood once a month for the remainder of his life.”

I hate the relief that stirs in me. “So he made a deal. It’s what he does, Harper. He sees what he wants, and he does whatever it takes—”

“It wasn’t just that,” she cuts in. At my glare, she blows out a breath, drops her voice. “He could have let me die. I was disposable. Oh, don’t give me that look. You know I’m right. You were the stronger candidate. You would have done whatever it took to reach Meirlach. Zephyrus knew this, yet he put his life on the line to ensure my recovery. He didn’t have to do that.”

The pinch in my sternum returns. It feels uncomfortably like guilt. “It doesn’t matter. It’s done.”

Harper shakes her head. “Even to yourself, you lie.”

“Enough.”

“I know you want nothing to do with him—”

“I said enough!”

I blink, and the world comes into focus. I’m standing, fists raised, prepared to land blows.

Harper watches me calmly. “You care for Zephyrus.” A quiet admission. She sees too much, I fear.

My knees wobble, and I lower myself onto the chair. It’s pointless to pretend otherwise. “I wish I didn’t.” I drop my gaze to the floor, the scuffed wooden planks.

Harper squeezes my shoulder before reclaiming her seat. “But you do. So now you must decide what to do about it.”

I’ve already made my decision. “I’m going to finish these daggers for Mother Mabel, and once the tithe is done, I will not think of Under ever again.” In time, I hope to return to my old self. One day, that red stole will rest upon my shoulder, if I am fortuitous.

“Even if it means denying your heart?”

The heart, I've learned, can never be trusted.

"I broke my vows, Harper."

Perfect Brielle, who can do no wrong. I recall these words like a smear against my skin.

Harper frowns as though she, too, remembers. "But they were your First Vows," she says, "not your Final Vows."

It shouldn't make a difference. Obedience, purity, devotion. Here they rest in pieces. My only saving grace is that Harper didn't inform Mother Mabel of what transpired on our journey. Then again, she doesn't know I nearly gave my body to Zephyrus on the grasses of a moonlit glen. "I can't do it again. Nothing is more important than our faith. Mother Mabel says so."

"Well, what if Mother Mabel is wrong?"

My head snaps up. "You can't say things like that."

"And why not?" A haughtily arched brow, arms crossed as she surveys me. The ache in my chest intensifies.

"Because—" Oh, I haven't the slightest idea why. "Because it is written. Because it has been foretold. Because it is truth. Isn't that why you joined Thornbrook? You said so yourself you spotted the lilies outside the church that reminded you of your lost dog. The Father spoke to you then. There is no other explanation."

An uncomfortable emotion passes over her tightened features. "Brielle." She rubs a hand across her eyes, mouth pinched in reluctance. A deep sigh follows. "I made that story up."

"What?"

"I lied. I never had a dog named Lily. But the Well needed a story from my past, and I was too ashamed to tell the truth."

I'm speechless, but rather impressed the Well of Past did not sense

the deceit. “Then why did you become a novitiate? Why give yourself to the Father?”

Her fingers tense atop her thighs. They twitch, curling into stiffened shapes, then forcibly relax. “My home life was awful. Yes, my sisters and I attended a prestigious academy, but I failed to mention they were superior to me in all ways, and I flunked out after the first year.”

I stare at her in astonishment. I had no idea.

“The abuse worsened once I returned home a failure. My sisters were too busy with their studies to recognize the signs. Some days, I was whipped so severely, I fainted.” Her eyes go cold. “Difficult to chop wood when your back is in tatters.”

“Harper—”

She lifts a hand, eyes choked by shame, grief. “I need to say this. Please.”

Though I continue to stare, she does not back down. I nod. If she requests space, then I will give it to her.

After a time, she continues.

“I couldn’t stay. My home was poison. Most nights I slept little, so deeply rooted was the dread. But on the Holy Day, my family would attend church at the abbey. I witnessed the Daughters’ kindness to others. I felt safe. And I decided their life must be better than the one I was living.”

My first instinct is to reach for Harper’s hand in comfort. I’m not sure how receptive she’ll be. Does she know security? Does she recognize its face?

“I told no one where I was going,” she says. “I packed my bags, and I left. That was ten years ago. My family probably thinks I’m dead.”

It takes courage to leave what is familiar. Harper, a few years my senior, would have been no older than fifteen when she left home. Those

who embrace the devout life all seek something they lack. I sought acceptance. Harper sought belonging. We are not so different, she and I.

“Thank you for sharing that with me,” I whisper.

She sits stiffly, shying from my gaze. “Mother Mabel is more of a mother to me than the woman who birthed me. I crave her approval. I want to feel important. I want to *matter*, do you understand?” Before I can respond, she says, “I have always felt threatened by you. No matter what I did, there was always Brielle—bright, shining Brielle—who could do no wrong. No matter my efforts, I forever stood in your shadow.”

An awkward silence descends. All this time, she struggled with feeling small, just as I did. “I didn’t know you felt that way,” I murmur.

She shrugs. “You showed me there is always room for improvement. Since my appointment, I’ve learned that faith does not have to be rigid. It can change. It can be reinterpreted. If we do not remain the same, why should our beliefs?”

The idea doesn’t sit comfortably with me. Not because I disagree, but because I have pondered exactly that.

“If you are truly a Daughter of Thornbrook,” Harper says, “you will find your way back to Him.”

A hot cloud films my vision, and the forge smears into dark shapes despite the sun illuminating the floor.

I have questioned many things, but never the Father. Never my god. How can the world, so nurturing and complex, exist without the touch of a divine hand? Thornbrook saved my life and gave me purpose when I had none. Is that not a miracle?

Many believe otherwise. They believe life unfolds without divine intervention. But then I wonder, what is stronger than placing your faith in another?

I sigh. The conversation tires me. I do not know my way forward. I

am frightened and unmoored. I seek only my thoughts.

“I appreciate your honesty,” I murmur, “but I would like to be alone. I’ve a lot of work to do.”

Harper dips her chin, visibly saddened. “All right.” She pads to the doorway, yet stops at the threshold and looks back. “I misjudged you, and for that, I’m sorry, truly sorry for all the pain I have caused you. There were times I treated you no better than a dog. I was short-sighted, selfish, and cruel. It shames me to know we could have been friends, had I not behaved so horribly.”

The apology manages to worm its way inside my heart. I hold it there, warm and healing, until her footsteps recede into the bright morning.

CHAPTER 24

A day prior to the tithe, I hammer the final blow. Its ring shimmers with clarity inside the hot, stuffy forge, dawn creeping across the threshold in strips of dappled violet and gold.

My arm shakes as I lower the hammer onto the anvil. Seventeen hours from shapeless metal to sharpened blade and it is nearly done. Grasping the hilt, I drive the dagger into the bucket of salt water at my feet. A hiss of steam erupts where ice and fire collide. When it clears, I hold the blade aloft, inspecting its tapering from every angle, the flawless bevels, its lovely, flattened gleam. It will do.

I hang it on the wall to cool with the others, their jet black casings glinting dully. Twenty-six daggers, all iron-forged. A six-month task, now complete.

Before I became Thornbrook's bladesmith, Mother Mabel commissioned any required weapons from my previous swordsmithing mentor, but I'm proud to have taken over the responsibility. Each knife bears my touchmark stamp—a first. Going forward, I will stamp every blade so that all who wield my weapons know whose hands shaped them. Not a man's. Mine.

The sun continues its climb behind the mountain as I emerge into the brightness of full day. The wind does not blow. It hasn't for many weeks now. I have wondered why, and I worry.

Upon reaching the Abbess' house, my knock rings out.

"Enter."

Pushing open the door, I step inside the foyer and head down the short hallway where Mother Mabel's office is located. She sits at her desk, penning a message amidst the sunlight warming the floorboards. Beside the open window at her back, Meirlach hangs from a wall mount, a pillar of sharpened steel capped in gold.

At the interruption, she lifts her head, sets down her quill. "Brielle. What can I do for you?"

"I've finished the last of the daggers," I say, nudging the door open further. "They're ready for transport into Under."

Her smile is brief, gone within the next heartbeat, but the affection in her eyes lingers as she gestures to the vacant seat across from her desk. "That's wonderful news." Gold sheens the stole adorning her shoulders, the white alb pristine beneath. "All twenty-six are accounted for?"

"Yes, Mother Mabel." I perch on the edge of the chair, hands folded in my lap.

"Excellent. Your hard work has not gone unnoticed. Despite setbacks, you have shown extraordinary dedication to your craft. This will benefit all of Thornbrook. Pierus will appreciate your contribution as well."

The praise does not excite me as it once did. I do not care to benefit the Orchid King. I forge the daggers so we may continue to lease Thornbrook's land for another seven years. "You're welcome. I'm happy to serve Thornbrook in any way I can."

The skin around her eyes smooths, all fine lines pressed into dewy youth. "Indeed. What would we do without you?"

I've asked that question myself. In time, the Abbess on High would train another novitiate to replace me. Someone needs to light the forge.

"If that is all." I begin to rise, shoulders stiff.

She holds up a hand. "Forgive me, Brielle, but I have to ask. Are you all right?" Concern shadows her gaze. "You seem troubled."

Slowly, I take my seat. My body feels heavy in uncomfortable ways. There is much to say, but I'm not sure where to start, whether I have the strength for this conversation. I feel myself spiraling: warmth in my face and sweat on my palms. If I open my mouth, I'm afraid I'll vomit.

"When you returned to Thornbrook, it was clear the trials of your journey had changed you." Though not the gentlest woman, Mother Mabel speaks kindly, perhaps sensing my distress. "You stood taller. You walked with surety. You did not cower in the face of adversity." The corners of her mouth drag into a frown. "But there was a deadness to your gaze that concerned me."

A deadness. That sounds about right.

She shifts the quill and parchment to the corner of her desk, making room for her hands. The long, belled sleeves of her alb hiss as they pass over the naked wood. "Do you know why a novitiate must complete a task prior to taking their Final Vows?"

"To prove their worth?"

"To an extent." Fingers interlaced, she leans forward, commanding my attention with little effort. "Because many women join Thornbrook at such a young age, it is unfair to assume they seek the same life once they become adults. The task, or in your case, the quest, is a catalyst. It helps a novitiate determine what future they seek. A life in service to the Father? A life beyond that?"

The mission *did* test me. It snapped me into pieces and forced me to question if they fit together as seamlessly as they had a year prior. But she

fails to mention the agony of the experience. How out of place I feel. How confused.

“I gave you space,” she continues, “because it was clear you needed to process what had occurred. However, there has been little change since you returned.” Set beneath the palest eyebrows, her black eyes lock on to mine, apprehension swimming in their depths. “Will you tell me what plagues you, Brielle?”

Facing Mother Mabel is never easy. In the morning bright, it seems impossible. She has given me council in my darkest hours, not even a candle to warm my days. She made room for me at Thornbrook despite my questionable upbringing. I feel that I’ve failed her.

When I speak, my voice warbles, a dull, threadbare confession. “I’ve been struggling, Mother Mabel. It’s true.”

A brief nod. “There’s no shame to it. Life is full of strife, after all. Have you spoken to the Father about this?”

“I have not.” My guilt is too great.

She takes her time responding. “Remember that the Father loves you. We only need to ask for His forgiveness.”

“What if—” Shame hurtles up my airway and sticks at the back of my tongue. How could she possibly have known of my needs? Even I did not know. “What if I do not deserve it?”

At once, she rises, skirting the desk in a cloud of sweet incense, hands gentle on my shoulders. “Brielle.”

My heart thunders from the Abbess’ intense scrutiny.

“Have you broken your vows?”

I cannot bear the disappointment, nor the accusatory tone. How easily the lies manifest. I cannot tell her, yet it matters not. She knows. I have never been able to hide what I feel.

“Are you still pure? You have not given your body to another?”

I hesitate. Technically, I am still a virgin, so I nod.

The deepest, most soulful sigh leaves the Abbess. Surprisingly, she is smiling. “Please do not despair if you made a mistake. We all do. That you still wish to be a shepherd of the Father proves your loyalty despite your trials.” She cups my cheek. The display of affection is more than I could have hoped for.

“Thank you,” I whisper.

“You have a good heart, Brielle. I hate to see you suffering.” She frowns, drops her hand. “Promise me you will speak to the Father tonight.”

“I will.”

Satisfied, Mother Mabel returns to her desk, the grounds damp with morning frost beyond the picture-frame window, Carterhaugh a sprawling oasis beyond the outer wall.

“Speaking of the quest.” *Tap, tap, tap* goes her fingertip atop the desk. If it were anyone else, I would consider it a nervous tic. “Can I ask what happened in the Grotto? I admit I was certain you would obtain Meirlach first.”

Revealing these underlying truths—that I do not believe I deserve the station, that I fear my altering mind—questions my past, present, and future. I’ve yet to achieve a balance. Gifting Mother Mabel the truth, but just enough to avoid further inquiry. No wonder emotional turbulence marks my days. “Harper entered the Grotto, as did I. She is equally worthy of the spot.”

Her gaze narrows. “She slayed the Stallion?”

“The Stallion is not dead.”

Her eyebrows climb high onto her forehead in permanent fixation. “You’re telling me you and Harper managed to escape the Grotto without taking the Stallion’s life?” Before I can respond, she shakes her head, mouth tucked into her cheek with wry amusement. “You were undoubtedly

lucky. Kelpies are a conniving lot, and the flesh of a virgin is an undeniable temptation.”

Was it luck? I bested him fairly, blade to blade. He questioned my will, and I proved mine possessed no debility.

Something nags at me though. “May I ask, Mother Mabel, how you know so much about the Stallion?”

She inclines her head. “You are not the only one to have entered his Grotto and survived.”

I’ve struggled to focus since my return from Under, but I’m certain I did not misinterpret the Abbess. What was it the Stallion had said? *Only once before has a mortal entered my lair and escaped with their life.*

How did Mother Mabel acquire the necessary information to best the Stallion? I would expect the fair folk to know such details, not a woman from Carterhaugh. Then again, she was held captive in Under, long ago. Was her visit to the Stallion connected with her escape?

“Be that as it may,” the Abbess continues, unaware of my mental backflips, “the question remains of how Harper claimed Meirlach first. You and I both know she hasn’t the means to defeat a creature as shrewd as the Stallion. She barely knows the difference between a knife and a fork.”

For whatever reason, Mother Mabel’s opinion of Harper doesn’t sit well with me. It borders on disrespectful. “Harper may have her faults,” I say slowly, each word holding weight, “but she has her strengths, too.” Despite her complaints, she faced Under tenaciously, plowing forward with fierce resolve, her hunger at times overshadowing mine. It’s hard not to respect someone who defies the rules so easily.

For a time, we sit facing each other. In the end, Mother Mabel speaks first. “I had complete faith that you would return to Thornbrook victorious. The position was always supposed to be yours.”

Does she sense my dishonesty? Yes, I won Meirlach, but when the

time arrived, I insisted Harper take ownership instead. And if the position was supposed to be mine, why pit me against someone else?

“Well.” She sighs and folds her hands atop her desk. “There is always next year.”

Next year. It rings hollowly. Will I have to complete another soul-destroying quest to prove my worth? The thought tires me.

My attention shifts to Meirlach, its impressive, steel profile. The ruby-inlaid pommel winks like a fiery eye.

Mother Mabel notices the direction of my gaze and smiles. She appears more relaxed in the weapon’s presence. Reassured, even. “Beautiful, isn’t it?”

“It is.” A true work of artistry. The fuller is the straightest I have seen, the narrow, rounded groove extending the length of the blade. Many years have passed since I forged a sword, but I always struggled with the fuller, a delicate balance of impressing the groove for added strength. Too brittle, and the steel would fracture.

“Meirlach has been in the Stallion’s possession for a long time. So long, in fact, that its existence passed into myth.” Opening a drawer in her desk, she pulls out the Text. “Admittedly, I was not aware of its existence until my captivity. An unfortunate, if fortuitous, turn of events.”

My skin prickles in sudden awareness. Rarely does Mother Mabel speak of that time. In all my years as a novitiate, I have only heard her mention it once.

“Seven years,” she whispers, “and all I had was the Text. The Book of Change was my salvation. It told me of Meirlach. It reminded me all was not lost. Days after I learned of its existence, I met another prisoner, a mortal man who was an adept swordsman. He taught me how to wield a blade. He reminded me I was strong. I vowed to continue my training once I returned aboveground, and I have.”

I'm arranging pieces of information into a natural flow. Seven years may have passed in Carterhaugh, but how many lifetimes did Mother Mabel experience in Under, trapped in the strange enchantment of the realm, where time has little meaning? At some point, Mother Mabel visited the Grotto. She also escaped with her life. Whatever she stole from the Stallion, it wasn't Meirlach. I communicate my thoughts.

"Brielle." The sound is caught firmly between fondness and exasperation. "Haven't I taught you not to point out others' shortcomings? You should know better."

I am twenty-one years of age, yet in this moment, I feel like a child. *Know better.* I have weathered this chiding before. "I apologize, Mother Mabel." Soft does not mean weak. Zephyrus taught me that.

Eventually, the Abbess sighs. "No," she says, "I was not able to take Meirlach from the Stallion. That is why the acquisition is so vital. With this blade—" She sweeps an arm toward the weapon. "—we can guarantee our protection."

Something she did not have when the Orchid King stole away those three novitiates decades prior.

We, as women, must go to greater lengths to protect ourselves—an unfortunate reality of our world. To work twice as hard as any man but reap only half the rewards.

"Is that why you sought the Father?" I ask. "For protection?"

And there is this: silence. Tucked into my lap, my hands fist, sweaty skin growing warmer with every heartbeat. I've overstepped. Mother Mabel's bristling gaze is evidence enough. One's motive for following the devout life is deeply personal. It's in poor taste to ask. "I apologize—"

"To an extent," she clips out.

Her beauty is carved of marble and porcelain, white-blond hair drawn into the stiffest bun. "I grew up poor, Brielle. Very poor. We lived in

a one-room hut on the outskirts of Aberdeen. I never met my father. He left my mother days following my brother's birth."

Fatherless daughters: an unfortunate, yet not uncommon, occurrence. I, too, never knew my father.

"It was a difficult life, as you can imagine. My mother struggled to find work. As such, we never stayed in one place for long."

Her voice is eerily reminiscent of the old chants. Detached and lifeless, it drones on.

"My brother took ill following an unusual cold snap, then my mother." Though her face tightens, she maintains composure. "They were dead within the month, and I was a girl of fourteen, orphaned, with no prospects for work."

I had no idea. None. My heart aches for that child. "I'm so sorry—"

Her nostrils flare, and she whips up a hand. "Do not pity me. We all face trials in life. Those just happened to be mine."

I stare at the Abbess, a mortal woman made undying, for an indeterminate amount of time. Whatever words of comfort I might offer, she does not want them. I must respect her wishes, however rigid.

"Luckily," she goes on, "a woman noticed me wandering the market one evening and brought me to Clovenshire—Aberdeen's abbey. I began as a novitiate. Two years later, I took my Final Vows. I stayed as an acolyte for another decade, studying, deepening my relationship with the Father. Following my thirteenth year, I was elected Abbess of Thornbrook. I've been here ever since."

It makes perfect sense that Mother Mabel would climb the ranks. For those abandoned to the world, we work hard to put down roots. "Do you ever consider returning to your old life?"

Strained laughter pings with the sound of discordant bells. "By the Father, no. Who would I turn to? Where would I call home? Those who do

not have His will in their lives... I pity them.” The tips of her fingers skim the Text’s leatherbound cover with reverence. “They are lost, as I was, as you were.”

I’m not so sure. Kilmany’s residents do not seem lost. They are mothers and painters and carpenters and bakers and merchants and brothers and believers and, above all, imperfect. Dedicating one’s life to the faith is both privilege and sacrifice. Most welcome the Father in their lives, though to a lesser extent. It is enough for them.

Mother Mabel leans back in her chair, studying me. “Is that what you want, Brielle? To go out into the world and leave us?”

“N-no,” I breathe in horror. “Of course not.” My heart thuds, but I’m uncertain where the fear stems from. “It was a curiosity, nothing more.”

She nods, appeased. “Thornbrook is your place. It will always be your place.”

My place, but not my home. I do not miss the distinction. I am a bladesmith, but I did not place a hammer in my hand. Mother Mabel did. I did not choose to come to Thornbrook. My mother abandoned me. The Text tells me how to interpret the world, what is acceptable and what is not, what morals shape a woman or a man.

I love the Father, but can I not love Him without the title of novitiate? I’m not rushing to leave. I don’t *want* to leave. But I wonder what else awaits me out there, what shape my life would take if I chose differently.

“Have you given thought to my proposal?”

I refocus on Mother Mabel, who considers me with a patience I fear I don’t deserve.

My thoughts gather like small grains of sand. They create bumps, then hills, climbing into vast mountains, which scatter into nothing. The roselight throbs in my pocket, a reminder of what I could lose.

Last week, Mother Mabel asked if I was interested in participating in the tithe tomorrow evening. It would give me an excuse to return to Under and search for Zephyrus. Alternatively, I could abandon the West Wind as he abandoned me. I could stay here, in Carterhaugh. I could forget.

“If I could offer you some advice?” It is kindly, her tone. For whatever reason, my throat tightens with impending tears. “Go to the church tonight. Speak to the Father. Maybe He can help guide your path.”

I gaze out the window. A blue sky speckled with wistful clouds, the perfect day for a morning stroll. How quickly my mind returns to a green-eyed god.

She’s right. I should speak to Him, if only to shed the burdens I bear.

“It is your choice, in the end,” Mother Mabel says. “Should you choose to participate, we will gather in the quadrangle tomorrow at dusk. Take the day to think about it.”

Bowing my head, I reply, “I will.”

Pushing to my feet, I make my way to the door on wobbly legs. I require space. Solitude. Before I depart, however, I’ve one more question that needs answering. “Why did the fair folk let you live?”

Mother Mabel stares at me coldly. “They did not *let* me live, Brielle. Seven years I was trapped in Under, enduring countless horrors, without hope of ever escaping. I did what I had to do to return to Carterhaugh, and I don’t regret it.” A thin, cruel smile crawls across her mouth. “It turns out, some things not even Under can break.”

CHAPTER 25

Later that evening, I light my lamp. The wick catches, a star sheltered within the thin, curved glass, and etches fine shadows across the contents of my bedroom: an unmade cot, an untouched Text, a pile of unwashed clothes. Before me spools a lengthy exhale. My heart beats rabbit-quick. And yet, my hands are steady as I push open the shutters to hang the lamp in my window, as I had done months prior, its glow cast high atop the eastern tower, a flutter of orange light.

The bell tolls, marking the eighth hour. Carterhaugh sleeps in shades of violet and gray. Beyond the window, the air hangs static and warm from recent rain. I'm not so naive to believe Zephyrus will see the lamp. After all, I have not sensed his presence in weeks. But if not him, then perhaps someone across the strait who seeks a light in the darkness, as I do.

After gathering clean clothes, I hasten for the bathhouse, soap and washcloth in hand. At this hour, the corridors are deserted. I step quickly. My slippers skate over the chilly flagstones, a low, whispering hiss that threads a complex weave with the shadows recoiling in the dusty corners, shying from the pockets of interspersed torchlight. Though curfew isn't yet in effect, my peers have begun their evening prayers in the privacy of their

dormitories. As for me, I've closed my emotions into rooms with locked doors, but tonight, I am ready to face them.

Upon reaching the bathhouse, I step into the tiled entryway. Empty, as suspected. Wooden benches line the wall. A large, sunken tub claims the floor, three curved steps descending into the still pool.

My dress falls away. Next, my undergarments, the slow unwinding of my breastband, ribs creaking at the relieved pressure. Ankles, legs, then torso, I submerge myself in the bathwater, its chill puckering my skin. Remnants from recent washings swirl in greasy clouds. Shivering, I force my head beneath the surface.

Obedience.

The water holds peace. Cold and muted it may be, but it casts no judgment. When my lungs pinch, I surge upward, head breaking the surface, its splash cocooned inside the tiled walls and floor. Grime lines the creases of my skin. The sight shames me. Two, no, three days' worth of filth. How did I get to this point? When did I stop caring about simple hygienic practices? I drag my soapy washcloth through the folds vigorously, prying every speck free until I am pink, flushed as a newborn.

Purity.

Dressed in a clean, dry alb, I head for the church. Tucked north of the cloister, its massive doors lie open, the nave's expansive belly resting in shadow broken by wells of light—the altar candles, which burn eternal.

Devotion.

Pews, arranged in tidy rows, await warm bodies for tomorrow's Mass. The windows of brightly colored glass have extinguished. A rug unfurls, fern-like, down the center of the space before pooling at the altar's base: white marble draped in crimson cloth.

I have found myself in these walls not once, but again and again and again. I seek the church because I question if I am still welcome. I seek the

church because I am adrift and hope to find a bit of rock to cling to for a while.

Water splashes as I wash my hands in the lavabo. Once purified, I stride down the length of the nave, the rug muting my footsteps. Two raised steps lead to the chancel, the wide platform where the choir sits. A handful of strides brings me to the low railing separating the presbytery from the sanctuary. There, I kneel upon the long, embroidered cushion, heart thundering. The roselight pulses weakly in my pocket.

Bowing my head, I rest my interlaced fingers atop the wooden railing where we take Communion, the Father's blood and flesh offered in the form of wine and bread. "Hello, Father," I murmur. "It has been four weeks since my last visit." And I have borne that weight each passing day.

"First, I must say it was not my intention to ignore you. I have always been a dutiful servant, as you know, but much has happened since our last meeting." My voice, stricken with shame, hoarsens. "I have made questionable decisions. I brought a man into the abbey, but I confess that is the least of my transgressions."

The altar candles flare despite the lack of breeze. I tighten my sweaty fists until the shaking subsides. My lungs refuse to expand fully, but it must be said. I will shed all that I have carried, this fear of a slow altering within me, the awareness that I am not the same woman who stepped through these doors a month prior. I will squeeze the confession from my tightening throat. Every last drop wrung free.

"I had sexual relations with this man, Father." It sounds appalling when spoken aloud. Disreputable. "He kissed me to save my life, and I thought of it. I wondered what his hands would feel like upon my skin. I marveled at the texture of his hair. He touched me, and I touched him. It's wrong, I *know* it's wrong. A Daughter of Thornbrook must never yearn for man's flesh. But I hungered for him."

I shrink in place, tensing as a cold wind cuts across the crown of my skull, stirring the damp red curls. He is listening. He is not pleased. That is to be expected. Whatever the Father's judgment, I will accept it dutifully. To these words, I yield, its momentum too great to stop. I must go on. I can do nothing less.

"The man's name is Zephyrus," I say. "He is a god. The West Wind. I know I shouldn't have trusted him. I told myself to keep my distance. And yet, I felt my will weakening in his presence, and suffered the consequences." It still hurts. Oh, how it hurts. "He is not like you, Father. He is selfish and self-serving. He is manipulative, carefree." And sad, and desperate, and perhaps unwhole. "I confess that I care for him, despite his betrayal."

These shards inside my chest grind painfully. Their pointed edges hold nothing back. I gave all of myself only to learn I knew nothing of him, this Bringer of Spring.

"I came to you, Father, because I fear something terrible has befallen Zephyrus." As my throat cinches, my voice pitches high, ridding itself of the confession. "I feel it is my responsibility to look after him. I don't know why. He is a man grown, far older and more experienced than I, but something bids I go to him. I don't know what to do," I whisper, hunching farther over the railing, nearer to the altar and its trio of candles. "Tell me what to do, *please*."

I am not certain. I am not strong. I am neither obedient, nor pure, nor devoted. There was a time when I had committed to those morals. They were, in all ways, my anchor.

Obedience: to abide by my duties as a novitiate.

Purity: the simplest vow, yet quickest to degrade.

Lastly, devotion. I'd planted this seed most readily. A devout life gave me purpose. It shed my loneliness—for a time.

It was never my intention to break my vows. I had truly believed I would live out my life on these grounds, and die here, my days spent on my knees before the church altar, my purpose one of singularity. But I have exhumed new facets of the world, and I wonder: is Thornbrook still home for me?

My breath shortens as my pulse climbs. “Here.” I fumble in my pocket for the roselight, lifting it toward the marble slab. The corrupted pink glow flickers dully. “Do you see how the light wanes? I think Zephyrus is in trouble.”

It would be reckless to return, and I’d risk more than my life. A mortal’s place is not in Under. But I must know. I must understand *why*. “If my duty is to spread goodwill, then I ask you, Father, how I can turn away from someone in need, even if that person has betrayed me? Even if he is a man? A god? Will you not guide me through?”

The church seems to hollow out. My ears ring from the change in pressure, and after a moment, I shove the glass into my pocket. Nothing. I receive no answer, no reassurance, no forgiveness. I’d come here for clarity, but I only feel more confused, a woman kneeling in an empty room, all the world’s warmth deserted.

It is the greatest effort to stand. Greater still to look upon the altar and understand what the silence means. I have erred. I have strayed. Repentance or not, I made a choice, and the Father made His, for there is no response as I depart the church, the altar candles swallowed by darkness. I fear there never will be again.

I do not return to my room. My feet carry me through the southern cloister, across the moonlit courtyard. I bypass the walled herbarium and continue downhill toward the overgrown outer wall, the forge tucked at its base. Cooling temperatures blanket the deep greenery, but it lasts only as far

as the forge's threshold. Shadows lurk in the farthest corners of the still-warm workshop. The fire has gone cold.

There the daggers hang, twenty-six blades, rows upon rows of glinting black teeth. I gather them woodenly, deposit them into the cart sitting outside the doorway. The clatter of metal shatters the still eve.

Tomorrow, I'll distribute the weapons at dusk. Once the Daughters of Thornbrook gather, Mother Mabel will look to me in question: stay or go? Under or Carterhaugh? Zephyrus or the Father? My gut churns, and I retreat to the workshop, tidying the space to keep busy when a shard of metal catches my attention in the back corner.

I kick aside a pile of old, rotten beams and lift what is most definitely a broken sword. Another segment peeks from underneath a pallet of wood. I drag it out, lift the pieces so they fit together.

I remember this blade. At the time, it had been my most ambitious work, but I'd hammered the metal too thinly. I still recall the sound of its fracture, clean and sudden and cold. Sixteen hours of work made null.

My chest tightens at the memory. There had been tears, a furious sweep of them, as I'd knelt at my cot that evening for prayer. I'd wanted to be great. *Known*. For three years I'd apprenticed, toiling in that sweltering forge until my blisters burst and calluses collected in layers of toughened skin. I was a bladesmith, but I wasn't good enough. Not then. Not yet.

For whatever reason, I hadn't tossed the sword. I'd discarded it in a corner, and over the years, tools and material had piled atop it, burying the evidence of my failure.

Moving toward a worktable, I lay out the two segments. The medial ridge is decent, a little crooked, but at least the bevels hadn't crossed. The blade's profile is quite good. My error occurred in the distal taper, or the reduction of the blade's thickness from hilt to tip. Ideally, one wants a

smooth transition, a gradual thinning of the steel. I'd hammered it with too much enthusiasm.

My hand tightens around the unfinished tang. At the moment, it lacks a hilt. I didn't mark this blade with my stamp. I was too young then, not yet a master. Now? I see the faults clearly. I understand the steps needed to repair this break. The sword lies in pieces, but if they fit together once, can they not do so again?

I GET TO WORK.

Gone is my exhaustion, the weight dragging at my bones. I begin with slow-burning kindling piled inside the forge's stony mouth, insulating the heat with a layer of coal. Thick white smoke drifts through the cracks. Once the kindling catches, I layer it with additional coal, smothering the flame.

Sweat pricks at my hairline, the stifling heat drawing redness to my face and chest. Tonight, I am awake. *Hungry*. How could I have forgotten? The air feels charged. It changes shape around me. My muscles lengthen and contract in a rhythm that is both grief and exaltation.

The heat climbs as I work the bellows, putting all my strength behind the motion. Air whooshes out with a sound of frothing water. The fire speaks. It demands more, though sometimes less. When it cries *enough*, I know to step away, let it settle, before building it higher and brighter than before. To become one blade, everything must be melted and reshaped.

It takes the night. I heat the metal to a burning orange. I hammer it out before allowing it to cool, the metal strengthening. Again and again, I follow this process as the fire licks at the brick walls of its charred mouth, exhaling mouthfuls of blistering heat.

I shape the point, then the blade's profile. The distal taper, then the bevels. I drive the blade into the fire, heat soaking into the searing metal, before setting it atop my anvil. The steel cools, white to orange to deep umber. Lifting the hammer above my head, I drive it down, the impact tossing sparks into the dark, to forge what was once broken into something whole and new.

CHAPTER 26

Twenty-one Daughters of Thornbrook gather as the sky blackens and the evening bell tolls its final lament. Cloaked, hooded, devout, each carries an iron blade. They are my peers, but tonight, as I instruct each woman how to grasp the hilt, how to draw it safely from its sheath, they are my pupils. Most bow their heads with a word of thanks. A few, like capricious Isobel, say nothing at all. Their eyes exist as slots of darkness, watchful beneath their hoods.

Carterhaugh rattles and seethes beyond the outer wall. The air sits like a layer of oil against my skin. I can sense it—the hunger. The tithe calls for blood, and tonight, the price will be paid.

At the corner of the grassy quadrangle, Mother Mabel ties a scabbard at her waist. Hours earlier, I'd watched her sharpen Meirlach from my bedroom window. A high whine cut the atmosphere as she dragged the whetting stone down the blade's edge with utter surety. A powerful blade for a powerful woman.

“You skipped me.”

Turning, I take in Harper, that haughtily lifted chin. Her long ebony

braid shines like a coat of fresh lacquer, its tail snaking from her raised hood.

When I do not immediately respond, she takes it upon herself to point out my misstep. “You showed every person how to draw their dagger but me.” A scouring glance from toe to crown. “Why is that?”

I lift an eyebrow. She thinks she knows so much. “I thought you already knew what to do.” At her blank expression, I elaborate, “You stick the pointed side into flesh?”

Harper blinks in surprise, then snorts. “Not my brightest moment, admittedly.”

Indeed. It’s comical how she thought to best a god with nothing but a paltry blade. “Give me your hand.”

As I did with the others, I lead her step-by-step through the motions of drawing the dagger from its sheath. In the background, the women stir nervously, a few choosing to walk the cloister while we wait. It takes her four attempts before I’m satisfied.

“If you must,” I say, angling closer so my voice doesn’t carry, “hold the dagger like this.” I rearrange her fingers so they curl around the hilt, her thumb brushing the top of her index finger. Harper’s eyes meet mine, wide with uncertainty. “Just in case.”

Dropping her gaze, she studies the tight clasp of her fingers. The iron blade appears to absorb the darkened eye.

“Brielle.” Mother Mabel glides toward me, hands linked at her front. Meirlach’s ruby pommel emanates a pristine scarlet hue. “I’m glad you’re here. I take it you spoke with the Father?”

Harper dutifully retreats to give us privacy, and I force myself to meet the Abbess’ depthless gaze. Tonight, the Father guides us. He guides us all. “He helped set me on the right path.” With some effort, the tension eases from my face. My mouth curves slightly. “My place is here.”

She smiles in return. In all my years, I've never seen one reach her eyes. Tonight is no different. "As it should be."

Moving off, Mother Mabel directs everyone into position. We stand in two parallel columns, our white albs peeking beneath the hems of our heavy wool cloaks. The novitiates wear white, the acolytes, red. We wear our trinity necklaces, our gloves. Harper and I stand shoulder to shoulder near the back.

A cold wind drags across the spiked blades of grass, and the mountain's chill settles. I've done all I could to protect my belongings. I placed milk and barley on my windowsill, at the threshold of my bedroom door. I've armored myself in iron.

"If I can have your attention, ladies." Mother Mabel lifts a hand to address the group. She appears eclipsed, a shadow stamped against the arcade, its succession of contiguous arches. Not even the bone-white pallor of her skin penetrates the cowl of her hood.

"You all know why you're here. Tonight, the barrier between realms is at its thinnest, and another seven-year cycle draws to a close."

Trepidation squats in the small, intermittent sounds: the scuff of a boot; the sharp crack of a twig underfoot; fabric's subtle whisper as the novitiates try catching the attention of the more experienced acolytes, seeking reassurance.

"Once we depart Thornbrook," our Abbess continues, "we will arrive at Under within the hour. Our journey will take us to Miles Cross, where the tithe will occur. Please understand the importance of your commitment. Participation will allow us to retain ownership of Thornbrook and its surrounding lands for another seven years. The price is blood."

Head bowed, Harper mutters a string of colorful profanities.

"For those of you who have never participated, please listen carefully. Do not speak. Touch nothing but your daggers. If someone offers

you food or drink, you decline.” Down the line she goes, looking each woman in the eye. “Do not step off the grassy path. When the time comes, you offer one drop of blood for the tithe, nothing more.” At the back of the line, she stops, voice ringing against the old stone pillars. “Lastly, do not take off your necklaces. Keep them safe.”

Their names, I think. Why would she not mention their names?

“Remember.” Mother Mabel strides back to the head of the columns. “Although we have protections in place, we venture into unfamiliar territory. The rules are not ours to control.” She scans the group. “Any questions?”

I should speak up. This simple oversight could lead to disaster. But the women keep their silence, as do I.

With a wave of her hand, we fall into step behind our Abbess on High. Through the southern cloister, the expansive grounds, beneath the gatehouse archway, black iron points cutting as cleanly as knives through the dark.

Carefully, we pick our way down the crooked forest path. West, toward the River Twee. Mother Mabel flicks holy water ahead of where she steps, further deepening our protections. I’ve traversed this trail so often it has become imprinted with my boot tread. I know every serpentine root, every rolled stone, every flowering bush. Shielded by the length of my cloak, my pack sits discreetly against my lower back. Storm clouds gather over the distant highlands.

Under thrums beneath our boots, hungry for mortal flesh. The moist, springy soil expels wisps of sweet rot from the earth’s deepest recesses, a few trees twisted beyond recognition where the ground sags and splits into cavities.

A dull roar announces the river, foamy rapids cutting white scars

across the writhing murk. Harper leans into my side, shaking. I'm not certain she's aware of it.

I slip my hand into hers. She snaps her head toward me, pupils blown.

"Deep breath," I whisper.

The moment hangs with breathless disquiet. "Are you afraid?"

I've always looked to the Father, but the West Wind draws me to this realm's edge, on the night when the fabric between worlds fades. I must know of his well-being. I must face that I have changed.

"Yes," I whisper, but not for the reason she thinks. "It will be all right."

Slowly, I drag air into my lungs, watching her chest rise in time with mine. On the exhale, I squeeze her hand and release it.

Clumped together on the sloping bank, we stare at the lashing current galloping downstream. More than one novice mutters a prayer. I sincerely hope we aren't crossing the waterway at its roughest point. Luckily, Mother Mabel calls out, "Look to where the river divides."

Not far from where we congregate, the water splits. Floating a foot above the rapids, slender wisps of water spiral upward, merging into the pinnacle of an ornate archway, beneath which rests a set of translucent doors fashioned from sheets of falling water. Like panes of wavering glass, they cast reflections in the low light: wan skin, the whites of our eyes, knobbed trees at our backs.

Those nearest to the river congregate even tighter together. "By the Father," someone whispers. They have never witnessed an enchantment such as this.

Two gilded handles materialize, and my heart begins to pound with increasing urgency. As the rushing current tapers off, the river recedes to reveal a handful of flat stones leading to the strange doorway.

“We will enter in pairs,” Mother Mabel informs us.

Something brushes my hand. I glance down to see Harper’s gloved fingers twined lightly around mine.

Lifting my head, I meet her wide-eyed gaze. As the doors crack open, the sweet reek of decay rolls forth to coat my tongue in a thick, mossy hide. How could I have forgotten this scent? Growing things trapped beneath the earth.

Harper’s pale, sweaty face flashes beneath her cowl. She remembers what it feels like inside the beast’s belly. She remembers, as I do, the hair-trigger awareness of having become prey. My fingers tighten around hers. We may not have entered Under as a team months ago, but even the prickliest rose still blooms. Tonight, we stand together.

Mother Mabel enters first with one of the acolytes, their forms swallowed by the sheets fluttering beneath the archway. With their absence, the women stir uncomfortably, reluctant to brave the enchantment.

“You’re next.” Isobel shoves a pair forward. They stumble, recoiling from the strange, ethereal phenomenon of water falling without a source.

The older woman reaches outward, and her hand passes through with nary a splash. She startles. “It’s dry!”

The two loiter with indecision, then forge ahead, grasping the gilded handles and vanishing inside. Pair by pair, the Daughters of Thornbrook enter Under. Then, it is our turn.

I am a blade.

Harper and I pass beneath the archway, entering a lush grove carpeted in ferns, their crenated edges slightly curled, just shy of fully opening. The grassy path curves right, a paler stripe through the rich forest undergrowth. Mother Mabel counts heads and, once satisfied we are all accounted for, gestures us to follow, her cloak sweeping across the dense understory.

We hurry down an unfamiliar trail, crossing quaint wooden bridges with ornate railings, and climbing hills, and blackberries thickets. Always, the tightness in my chest intensifies. I keep thinking we'll pass an area I recognize, but that is not the case. We navigate glens and the widest, deepest rivers. Still, the grass goes on. The sky marks a trail of twinkling light, pale edged in strips of violet so dark they appear black.

Every so often, something scuttles through the underbrush, tearing screams from the novitiates, the acolytes whipping their knives free with a complete lack of finesse. At one point, one of the women nearly gets her fingers sliced off.

"Stupid fools." Harper slaps the wrist of a younger girl. "Put that away," she snarls, and the novitiate is so terrified she returns the dagger to its sheath without question.

"Can't believe I'm back in this wretched place," she mutters, attention darting high and low, near and far, never still.

I push aside a low-hanging bough, waiting until Harper passes by before asking, "Then why did you volunteer to participate?"

"I wasn't going to." She sniffs, brushes specks of pollen from her cloak. "But Mother Mabel said you would be participating, and I thought it important for me to be here, too."

Unbelievably, it sounds like an admission. "Are you saying you're here for moral support?"

"So what if I am?" Arms crossed, she forges down the path, jostling the younger novitiates with far more aggression than is necessary. "Someone has to watch after you."

The world has officially gone mad.

I bite the inside of my cheek, though the smile tries its hardest to break free. "Are you forgetting who defeated those darkwalkers?"

"Are you forgetting who convinced Zephyrus to save your life?"

Fresh nerves stir in my chest at the mention of his name. Harper notices my plummeting mood, and sobers. “I’m sorry. I know this isn’t easy for you, returning here.”

There must be something wrong with me, to feel this softness in my heart for the prickliest woman I know. “It will be over soon,” I say. I *hope*.

By the time we reach a broad plain, muck coats my boots and the hem of my cloak. In the distance, a bridge arches over a wide, glassy river. The River Mur, I assume.

“Nearly there,” Mother Mabel calls over her shoulder. We hurry in single file, crossing the bridge and delving into a vast network of underground tunnels. Enflamed light stains the walls. It is nearly the same color as the roselight in my pocket.

The deeper we journey into the bitter warren, the slower we shuffle, the women dragging their feet as the moist odor intensifies. Someone gags, a strained, wet sound, and gooseflesh pimples my arms.

Then—light. The tightness in my chest loosens as we enter a soaring stone chamber, its heart claimed by a pond nestled in fresh grass. Lily pads float upon the crystal pool, and turtles gather on the banks where moonlight pours through the opening above. The grass expands, it unfolds, rising into gently rolling hills marked by flowers of every color.

Miles Cross.

It’s beautiful. The most perfect, picturesque painting edged in the softest pastels: sea-foam green, dawn pink, the yellow of freshly churned butter.

And yet, all light must end. Beyond the circle of illumination, the fair folk lie in wait, cloaked in shadow. I glimpse a long-fingered hand, the curve of a ram’s horn. One of the novitiates flinches, knocking into my side. I brace a hand against her back. A peal of laughter erupts beyond sight, and the group shudders.

Mother Mabel grips Meirlach's hilt and scans the area, catching sight of something lurking in the gloom.

A long, milky root slithers from its depths.

Fiona gasps at my front. Harper stiffens at my side. I shrink as the Orchid King drags his bulk forward. Sweat gleams on his pale, brawny torso, every muscle chiseled taut. The Daughters' eyes widen, jaws slack upon witnessing the indecency of a half-naked man. We remember his visit to Thornbrook. We have not forgotten.

"Mother Mabel." Pierus spreads his arms, flashing a set of straight white teeth. "Welcome."

The gloom retreats momentarily, revealing a great, three-tiered structure surrounding the field where the audience sits, similar to an inverted cake. It appears as though the entirety of Under is present, every manner of creature and beast, naiads and fauns and the rich, oily coats of kelpies that have emerged from a nearby water source. No sign of Zephyrus.

"Pierus." Our Abbess glides forward with regal authority, her hood pushed back to reveal the pale strands of her hair. They speak in low tones for a time, and I glance over my shoulder to the tunnel we emerged from, sweat pooling beneath my arms, behind my knees. Once the tithe begins, I will be unable to leave. It must be now.

Ensnared by the vicious beauty of Miles Cross, my peers barely stir as I shuffle toward the back of the group. From there, it's a stone's throw to the tunnel, the darkness cloaking me from sight.

I walk with haste. I do not run, for the sound will draw attention. Back straight, chin high. I'm nearly to the end.

"Brielle."

My hand spasms around my knife. The mental image of what awaits

beyond the cave slams shut as I gird my stomach for a difficult conversation. Tucked inside my pocket, the roselight pulses an erratic beat.

Reluctantly, I turn. Harper steps forward, hood pushed back, bright blue gaze searching mine. The pale cut of her cheekbones pinkens beneath the roselights lining the tunnel walls. “What did I tell you about speaking names aloud?” I whisper.

She stops, clearly taken aback by my admonishment. Then her eyes thin. She peers left, right, ahead, behind. Slowly, so as to make a point. The tunnel is deserted. We are alone.

“No one is around to hear us,” she states.

“That we can see.”

Harper’s attention shifts to my knife. Her mouth pinches, then: “What are you doing?”

She knows. And I know. There is little point in voicing it aloud.

“There’s not much time,” I murmur. We alone stand in the darkness of these halls, but who is to say someone did not follow? “As it is, I’m afraid I’m already too late.”

“You’re going to find Zephyrus.”

I swallow, fighting the urge to deflect, and nod. I’m not sure how long I’ll be gone. Optimism says a few hours at most. Once I leave the safety of Miles Cross, however, the rules will no longer be mine to alter.

All I know is this: I cannot go on living a lie. Ten years I have dedicated my life to Thornbrook, but lately, my heart has diverged. I have grown to care for a man. He lied and he deceived and he betrayed, yet something compels me to find him. Closure? Or a reason yet to be discovered?

Harper glances over her shoulder before striding closer. “I understand you want to help him, but if you leave, we won’t have enough women to complete the tithe. You would leave us vulnerable?”

I bristle at the implication, yet hold my tongue. If our positions were switched, I would demand the same. “The Orchid King said twenty-one Daughters of Thornbrook, right?” She nods. “Mother Mabel is a Daughter, too.” Granted, the highest station one can attain, but still a Daughter of Thornbrook.

Harper examines this detail with pursed lips, then rubs her forehead hard enough to leave a mark. “She will notice you gone. She’s too keen.”

“Not right away.” The Abbess has Pierus to contend with, and I’m certain she will track his every motion with her hawk-like gaze. Mother Mabel trusts me. My word is the most valuable currency. She would not notice my disappearance because she would not expect it.

“What about the grassy path?” Harper gestures to the ground—bare, shadowed rock. “How will you get back? How will you know where to go?”

I’ve navigated Under alone before. I can do it again. Yes, it’s foolish, but I can’t concern myself with what *might* happen. At the moment, Zephyrus’ well-being is my priority.

“I don’t know.” Hoarse laughter punches out of me. It’s not funny. It’s the farthest thing from funny. I don’t know how I’ll get back, and I don’t care. But I do have an idea of where he is.

As usual, Harper cannot accept one’s word without scrutinizing it from every angle. Her wariness deepens. Groomed black eyebrows furrow atop her straight nose. “You’re certain? You do not seem like yourself—”

“You were right,” I cut in. “Is that what you want to hear? You were right. Zephyrus is a wretched, manipulative ass. He cannot be trusted.”

“But you care for him. Maybe even more than care for him.”

I will not consider the depth of my feelings, how deeply this hole plummets until I hit the ground. I’ve questioned too much. “I know it’s wrong,” I whisper hoarsely, a palm pressed to my twinging heart, “but

something about him calls to me.” It’s time I accepted that. “I’m tired of fighting its pull.”

At once, her expression softens. How young she looks, and how comfortable in her own skin. “What do any of us want in life? Love, security, acceptance.” They are gentle, these words. “There is no shame in desiring such things.”

Except Zephyrus does not offer me these yearnings. He offers me only the promise of the unexpected and broken-hearted. I must be absolutely out of my mind to help him.

Harper sucks on a tooth, arms crossed as she looks me up and down. “Give me your cloak.”

Following her instruction, I pass her the white fabric. She passes me the red. The cloak, warm from Harper’s body, settles across my shoulders. I draw up the hood, and she does the same. Harper is much smaller than I, but Mother Mabel is so preoccupied with the tithe I doubt she’ll notice a difference. “Thank you,” I say.

“I should have done this a long time ago.” She fiddles with the trio of knots at her waist. “Been your friend, I mean.”

We are human, and as such, we make mistakes, we seek repentance. I’ve seen a change in Harper, and I know it to be true. I’m ready to let go. I’m ready to heal this wound.

“I forgive you,” I tell her. “For all the hurt you have caused me, I forgive you.”

The loveliest sheen coats her eyes. A stray tear clings to her eyelashes like evening dew on grass. “Will you return?”

I bite my lip to stop its trembling. Leaving the comfort of all you know is no easy task. Some might consider me mad. I prefer the term *committed*. “I don’t know.” I have every intention of returning, but who can say what trials Under will present? “Only time will tell.”

“Then I wish you luck,” Harper murmurs. “Say hello to Zephyrus for me.”

CHAPTER 27

Black sky, blacker woods. The deepest, lightless pockets of the forest understory quiver ominously as I race along the twisting path, following the river beyond the bridge. Clamped in my hand, the roselight pulses weakly. Feeble, to be certain, but bright enough to avoid tripping over any lurking creatures. I have traveled far, yet I still have miles more to go. It is not the Father's hand that guides this journey, however. It is my own.

The roselight steers my route. Depending on which direction I hold it, the light either flares or dims. I've spent enough time in dark places to know one should head toward the light, always. I'm not sure how many miles I cross. Forests, plains, foothills beneath the earth, I traverse them all. Eventually, a cave comes into view. My legs twinge with fatigue, yet I increase my pace, diving into the dark mouth blindly. With the Orchid King preoccupied at Miles Cross, I've time yet.

First, the tunnel. Then, the moonlit cavern—Pierus' lair. The mound of soil where he normally holds council is vacant. For whatever reason, the field of pink flowers appears wilted and gray, as though it sags beneath a coating of ash.

Across the way, a motionless lump draws my attention to the floor.

“Zephyrus?” My mouth shapes his name, but no sound emerges. The sight before me has killed it, wholly and completely.

He’s dead. He must be dead, for his limbs, skewed at unnatural angles, resemble a broken corpse. And he is pale. So, so pale, that resplendent, sun-kissed skin having bled of color. Limp lashes droop against wan cheekbones, curls of hair plastered to his clammy skull. A measly beard darkens his jaw. Naked as the day he was born.

My stomach churns. A multitude of carnivorous blossoms have fastened their small, searching mouths to his body: arms, neck, stomach, even the insides of his muscled thighs. They drink in prolonged swallows, the attached vines undulating with each mouthful, dragging the blood to the main roots attached to the mound of soil against the far wall.

The skin where the tiny spines have rooted bulges sore-like with irritation. I stumble forward, dazed. It’s subtle, but his chest stirs. Relief rushes through me. Breath in the lungs? I’ll take it.

My hands hover near his body, but I don’t dare touch him. If I listen closely, I can hear the sound of draining fluid. A ring of white cakes his mouth from how tightly his lips press together, and I watch, repulsed, as a collection of rust-colored petals pries free of his ribs with a wet gurgle, revealing the small tattoo I’d spotted months ago—a trio of hyacinth blossoms: white, blush, violet.

My concern surrounding the vines deepens, for I wonder, yet again, why Zephyrus is subject to this horrid anguish. I fear he has been here all this time, hours, days, weeks. I’ll need to safely remove the parasitic flora. Then distance. Shelter. A place to rest until I figure out the next steps.

The flowers, however, are deeply imbedded. Blood seeps from their gorging mouths. When I grasp the base of a bud, attempting to pry it free, the needles slide deeper into his flesh, sucking eagerly. Decaying veins distend his parchment skin.

I sit back on my heels, drop my head into my hands. Another obstacle to surmount. There will be more. There always are. I brace for the despairing wave, but it never comes. My mind is clear.

I'm mulling over possible solutions when a scuff echoes through the tunnel. Someone approaches.

I spring toward a niche in the far wall and crouch there, peering into the moonlit chamber. A tall, willowy woman glides into the space on slippered feet. She wears a white dress that flows around her knees and carries a pack across one shoulder. Mortal, she is not. A luminescent glow brightens her deep brown skin. Her eyes are singularly black.

Five cloaked creatures trail the woman. Their raised hoods shimmer like the purest jewels—ruby and citrine, emerald and sapphire and amethyst. Flat, stony eyes sit within heavy folds of copper skin. Large, ornamental rings hang from their noses—tarnished silver, polished gold. Their faces bear eerie resemblance to goats.

The dark-skinned woman crouches at Zephyrus' side before retrieving something from her leather satchel. With her back to me, I cannot see what object she removes. The cloaked individuals observe her from the mouth of the cave.

I've half a mind to fling my blade into the woman's spine, but I don't want to draw attention to myself. Luckily, she departs the cavern as quickly as she arrived, along with her colorful companions. When her footsteps fade, I return to Zephyrus. Sallow, crumpled, immobile. Nothing appears to have changed.

Gently, I tug on the vine attached to his right shoulder. The West Wind twitches and falls still.

It's no use. This plant is a living organism. Even if I were to sever the vines, the mouths would likely remain fixed to his body, no better than ticks. The creatures of Under require feeding, and Zephyrus is a feast. If I

disentangle him, will Pierus sense it? He is connected to this horrible plant, after all. But I suppose it matters not.

Sliding the pack from my shoulder, I rummage through my supplies until I find the flint and steel, a piece of cloth, and a small vial of oil. All combine to create a torch in miniature, which I set alight.

Orange ignites the space as I hold the torch beneath one of the vines. Flames lick hungrily, the white skin beginning to char.

A scream shatters through the cave. Its blood-curdling pitch sends me to my feet, the nightshade roots lashing toward me.

I sidestep, driving my knife in a vicious downward swipe. Sharpened iron peels through the vine's flesh. Blood—Zephyrus' blood—spews from the incision. The root recoils with a desperate keen, crumbling.

Screams compound as the blaze leaps from vine to vine. Smoke, dense and roiling, coats my throat and eyes with a stinging burn. Blossoms detach themselves from Zephyrus' body in an attempt to escape the heat, but it proves futile. Within a handful of moments, the nightshade plant disintegrates. What remains? Red-bitten skin and a half-dead god.

I shrug off my cloak and maneuver Zephyrus' arms through the sleeves so it conceals his nakedness. My ears strain. No footsteps, but who is to say Pierus can't sense something has gone wrong in his absence? A low crouch and a heave, and I heft the West Wind's body over one shoulder. Bladesmithing has its benefits. Tonight, I'm able to carry both our weights.

We reach the mouth of the cave without incident. Village lights shiver in the distance, but I continue onward, plunging through the impermeable forest with blind fear. There is no grassy path to guide me safely. The road is pocked with holes. Moonlight, its frail, wispy fingertips emanating from the enchanted orb overhead, fails to penetrate the interlocking canopy.

It continues, one foot planted in front of the other, until the soil

fissures and the trees transition to the exposed clay deposits of an eroded cliffside. By the time I stumble upon adequate shelter, my back aches fiercely and sweat soaks my underarms.

Carefully, I set Zephyrus beneath an overhang shielded by boulders. He should be safe until I return. Then I race back the way I came, my sights set on the distant village.

A RAPID *rat-a-tat-tat* against the door, knuckles on wood. Three heartbeats later, the door eases open. A round, black eye peers through the crack.

Lissi's pale skin drains to a bloodless hue. "What are you doing here?"

I expected this response. "I need your help."

"No." The word spikes with fear. "You must leave. Immediately." The door snicks shut.

"Please." I lay my gloved palm against the wood, its rough grooves catching the leather. My heart limps from the long, arduous run. Lissi is my last hope. Perhaps my only hope.

"The tithe has begun." The door muffles her voice, though not its bite. "The rules are plain. We cannot interfere."

I jiggle the handle. Locked. "I would not come to you unless I had need."

"You are mortal, sweet. I will not stretch out my neck for you."

A cool wind stirs at my back, coaxing me to turn. The village steepens in a fog of desertion, windows shuttered, the river an oily pool in the distance. Trails lead from door to door, grooves worn into the rock. There is a scent I cannot place. Copper?

I sense Lissi on the other side of the door. Fear keeps it shut.

Curiosity holds her in place. “I know I’m endangering you by returning,” I say lowly, tightening my hand around the knob, “but I swear, this is the only time I will ask for your help.” She cannot know what it means that I am here at all, placing my trust in the fair folk.

“Unfortunately, the answer is no.”

The hollow moan of a woodwind instrument carries from a great distance, sliding through the warren, this atrium of cavernous rooms. A roll of cold sweeps through me, pebbling my skin. It sounds like a dirge.

My voice croaks out. “What if I were to offer you a trade?”

The silence alters shape, and softens its unbreakable barrier. “A trade?” Lissi’s girlish voice brightens with excitement.

I slide open my pack, pull out the old, worn pages of the Text. “My most prized possession,” I say. “It’s yours if you help me.” Perhaps she will find value in its lessons, too.

The door swings open. Lissi’s eyes dart over my shoulder, side to side. She has exchanged her usual waistcoat for a cherry scarf and lumpy wool hat. “Come inside.” Grasping the front of my alb, she hauls me over the threshold.

A hiss of pain escapes as my head knocks the top of the ceiling of the single-roomed structure. Blankets piled in the corner identify Lissi’s sleeping area. It smells of herbs, a bright, clean scent.

Lissi tugs my arm impatiently. “Let me see it.” The pinch of her mouth narrows the lower half of her face, enlarging the stony eyes, dusted gold in the wavering candlelight.

As I hand over the Text, I understand this is the last I will ever see of it. I’ve no room in my heart to grieve. The decision has been made. A steadfast comfort, now passed on to another.

Lissi stares at the heavily bound manuscript, unimpressed. “Your prized possession is a book?”

I try not to take offense. “Don’t you like to read?”

“Read?” She giggles. “How boring. I prefer the more salacious activities, if you know what I mean.” Paired with an impish wink, I can’t help but smile in response.

“I suppose it’s not that salacious,” I admit, although the Book of Night contains a few hair-raising tales.

“What of that?” She points to my chest.

My necklace? I catch the pendant between two fingers, the pad of my thumb pressed into the trinity knot. Mother Mabel said to never take it off. “It’s not for trade, I’m afraid.”

She pouts, yet glances between the necklace and the Text. “I do not care for a book, sweet. Keep it.” She returns the Text, much to my surprise. “Now, what need do you have of me?”

I sag beneath the most profound relief. “Zephyrus is injured,” I say, shoving the tome back into my rucksack. “Will you tend to him?” Our first meeting, she mentioned her mother had schooled her in the healing arts.

Her mouth curls, stretching around those dull, slime-coated teeth. A black stain marks one in the front. It appears to be a dead fly. “You are a good girl, sweet. Why risk your life for the West Wind? I’ve warned you he cannot be trusted.”

“I’m not here to have my decisions questioned,” I state flatly. “Will you help me or not?”

Lissi considers me beneath lowered eyelids. The sprite is tiny, but no pushover, if the fire in her gaze is any indication. “Very well. Let me grab my supplies.” She brushes off her hands, selects a nondescript bag by the door. Pulling back the heavy drapery, she peeks through the window. “How far away is he?”

“A few miles.”

“Then we will move quickly.”

Lissi wastes no time herding me back into the forest. I lead her to the overhang, beneath which lies an unconscious West Wind. She halts in place, a childlike hand covering her mouth. “Oh, dear.”

The red cloak gapes at his chest, revealing livid teeth marks where the flowers had attached, sooty veins creeping nearer to his heart. Filth clumps his head of curls. He has not moved since I left. I do not know why I anticipated differently. Under is more real to me now—a taste, a stench, the crawling sensation of a thousand insects across my scalp, and the knowledge that no matter what my mortal eyes spot, there is always something yet to be unearthed.

The sprite kneels next to Zephyrus while I hover in the background. She passes a hand over one of the wounds, traces a black vein running up his inner forearm. “These are from the nightshade plant.” The words emerge as a hush. “In Under, nightshade is found in only one location.” She lifts her gaze to mine, wary, questioning.

I hesitate, unsure of what information to divulge. I do not wish to endanger Zephyrus further, or Lissi, but I fear the consequences of withholding vital information, so I nod. “I took him from the Orchid King’s lair.”

She exhales sharply, a sound of frustration, exasperation, and removes her hand from Zephyrus’ body. “Foolish of you, but there’s nothing we can do about it at the moment. Do you know how long the flowers were attached?”

Though the guilt ebbs, inevitably, it returns. I’m not one to abandon a person in need. If I had known of his torment sooner, would I have come? “I fear it has been many weeks.”

I explain the roselight’s change in color, why I believe it’s connected to Zephyrus’ declining health. Lissi takes the glass orb in hand, her expression grave. “That is a keen observation, sweet. You may be correct.”

I swallow thickly. “He cannot die, right? He is immortal.”

After returning the roselight to me, Lissi begins unpacking her supplies. “You forget Zephyrus is not from this realm. His body will react differently to Under’s influences. He will not die, but he can be harmed.” A variety of tools, jars, and bandages stuff the many leather pockets. She selects a small flask, pulls away the stopper. A viscous substance clings to the container. Oil, maybe. “How were the flowers detached from Zephyrus? Was the ritual complete?”

Ritual? A frisson of nerves wends itself through the confusion. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

Lissi frowns, mouth tiny and pinched beneath the overwhelming vastness of her great stony eyes. “You are not aware of Zephyrus’ circumstances? Why the tithe is necessary for Under?”

I shake my head. Thornbrook, yes. Our participation is required for the continued ownership of the grounds. But Mother Mabel never mentioned the importance to Under, if she even knows why.

“In order for Under to survive,” the sprite explains, “a pool of energy must feed the realm. Long before the fair folk were driven belowground, ostracized from society, we drew energy from the land. But since the Orchid King’s arrival, Carterhaugh’s power has weakened. He has absorbed that power into himself, leaving little for the realm. Thus, we require a donor.”

As her gaze catches mine, a sense of foreboding trickles through me. “Zephyrus,” I whisper.

“Yes.” Perched on her heels, the hem of her grimy dress lies in shreds against her twiggy legs. “His blood provides the necessary power for the realm’s existence. But mortal blood is powerful, too, in its own way. Long ago, the Orchid King manipulated the previous Abbess into contributing to the tithe. The practice has not been challenged in centuries.”

Since Lissi cannot lie, then she knows of Zephyrus’ suffering. They

all know, all choose to shy from it, and reap the rewards at the cost of another. Disgraceful. Absolutely disgraceful.

“You do nothing,” I grind out.

She shrugs her thin shoulders and says, “What can we do? The Orchid King is formidable. No one in their right mind would challenge him. As for your concerns, the West Wind’s declining health likely explains the roselight’s corruption. If he is unwell, or if he gives more than his body can provide, the power Under receives is impure. The Orchid King drains him prior to the tithe so any impurities are removed before the transfer.”

So Zephyrus is essentially a sacrifice. This must be his debt owed to the Orchid King, his power used to perpetuate the realm. Centuries of enslavement, no better than a stuck pig.

I had no idea. None.

“What happens during the tithe if he’s too weak to give his power? How does that work?”

“I don’t know,” Lissi says pityingly. After soaking the cloth in oil, she begins to dab at his wounds. “Based on these markings—” She gestures to the thin, sickle-shaped discolorations on his neck and chest. “—it appears the ritual finished prematurely.” Her eyes shift to mine with disconcerting gravity, and thickness gathers, stone-like, to clot my airway. This I know: whatever I have done, I will likely live to regret it.

“What is it?” I whisper. “Tell me. I can handle it.”

“I am not certain of that, sweet.”

She removes a second bottle from her supplies. Colorless sludge sloshes inside the curved glass. “During the cleansing ritual, a small dose of venom is injected from the flowers’ spines into the host. This ensures he or she remains unconscious, thus mitigating any pain. However, if the flowers are removed prior to the ritual’s completion, the nightshade plant injects a high dose of venom into the bloodstream meant to kill.”

Panic clamors for a foothold, for that which has been done cannot be made undone. “I thought you said he couldn’t die!”

“He will not die,” she repeats calmly, delicate features tightening, “but for some, death is a welcome relief. Once the venom reaches his heart, it will paralyze him indefinitely.”

This cannot be. How was I to know the consequences of my actions? The West Wind, confined, afflicted, overwhelmed. I could not let him weather that gruesome state a moment longer. “How long until the paralysis is total?”

Lissi untwists the cap from the second bottle before setting it aside. The snowy strands of her short hair sway with the motion. “Difficult to say. I have a tincture that will bring him to a conscious state, but over time, his body will break down, and he will eventually succumb to the venom.” She places a third bottle full of green liquid on the ground, a clink of glass on stone. “I estimate a handful of days.”

What, exactly, defines a handful? Three days? Four? Do we measure the time aboveground, or below? All is obscured, and I cannot bear it. “There’s nothing you can do?” I urge. “No cure?”

“None that I’m aware of. The venom can only be flushed from his system if Zephyrus returns to the Orchid King. Only nightshade can reverse the effects.”

“He can’t go back.” The cry snaps out. That is not a life. That is not even existence.

Lissi peers at me as one would a particularly petulant child. “You would risk your life, your livelihood, for a disgraced god?” When I fail to respond, she continues, “I would not have you regret this decision. You have your entire life ahead of you. It is dangerous, meddling with gods. Once the Orchid King realizes Zephyrus is gone, he will do everything in

his power to find him. The tithe remains incomplete without the West Wind.”

A difficult decision? Not particularly. A foolish one? Absolutely. My mind, however, will not change.

Reclaiming the second bottle, Lissi squeezes a drop of sludge onto each of his wounds, and there are many. The red, inflamed skin begins to scab with hardened blood. Afterward, the sprite tips the green liquid down his throat, clamping his jaw shut so he’s forced to swallow.

“He should wake within a few hours,” she assures, returning the empty bottles to her satchel. “I cannot stay.”

As I expected. Nevertheless, I am sad to see Lissi go. “Thank you,” I say. “You have done more than I have a right to ask for. I will not forget it.” As she pushes to her feet, I catch her hand, waiting until her eyes meet mine, curious, amused. “If ever there’s a need, you will always have a friend in me.”

A smile ghosts across her wide, lipless mouth. “A mortal and a sprite, friends?” The chime of her laughter shivers through me as she takes her leave. “These are strange times indeed.”

CHAPTER 28

I'm busy tending the fire when Zephyrus wakes.

Awareness stems from touch: a lick of air stirring warmly against my back. My heart limps along, quickening, lifting free of its prior weight. *Breathe, Brielle.* My hand tightens imperceptibly around the stick I hold. A knife is preferable.

Turning, I find his eyes resting on me. The slash of his eyebrows forms a bridge above his nose, which I swear appears smaller, less crooked, though the wavering light may be to blame.

I'm not ready. That is immediately apparent. I assumed I'd have more time to decide what, exactly, I would say to Zephyrus in his conscious state. I'd gathered my thoughts, harvesting them one by one: thorny anger, the bruised trappings of hurt, heartache's shredded tufts. I would lay out every fault, every wrongdoing, piling them high, before prying him apart. The West Wind would learn the game had changed. I, Brielle of Thornbrook, was a lamb no longer.

Fury gathers with violent velocity, clotting my throat. *Now, I think.* Now is the time to strike—when the man is down. It would be nothing less than Zephyrus deserves.

But looking into his face, I see the weariness of a man who has built cities, only to watch them crumble.

The fire in my heart banks to a simmer. He and I are alone in Under, without friends or allies, only each other in this wretched place. Unfortunately, navigating its underbelly will require trust in the West Wind—and in myself.

“How are you feeling?” I ask quietly.

Zephyrus pushes upward with a wince and rests his back against the overhang. Harper’s cloak gapes at his chest, revealing the many puncture wounds, livid against his paler skin. “Tired.”

What does it mean that I have missed his voice?

He peers outward, beyond where I’m crouched at the small fire, scanning the shadowed hillside at my back, the dark of isolation. His fingers shape a fist, and the air pops in my ears.

“I’ve created a sound barrier around the camp,” he explains. “We may talk freely.” His gaze pins mine. “What happened?”

He can probably guess due to his lack of clothes, but I fill in the larger holes.

Eventually, those bright green eyes return to mine, and oh, how I drink in the color. “Pierus didn’t see you?”

I poke the fire to keep my hands occupied. They tremble. “He was already at Miles Cross. There was a woman in a white dress. Dark hair, dark skin. She was accompanied by five individuals wearing jewel-toned cloaks.”

The corners of his mouth droop in unhappiness. “Her name is Oly. She assists Pierus when he is elsewhere. The others you saw are akin to Pierus’ council, though they’re more of his lackeys than anything else.”

“What did she do to you?” I ask.

“What do you mean?”

Sparks crack against the granite. “I think she dispensed something into your mouth, but I didn’t see what it was. A tincture, maybe.”

“Ah.” He nods in understanding. “Usually I’m given something to numb the pain. Well, most of it, anyway.” The cloak hem disappears inside his fist. He holds it there, like an anchor. “I would not have wished you to see me this way.”

He thinks me too prude. “I have seen nakedness before.” Granted, always a babe, never a man, though he doesn’t need to know that.

“I meant the wounds.” He pokes the underside of one wrist. A clear substance oozes from the opening. “I don’t understand how I’m awake. I should be unconscious.”

“You know this from experience?”

The West Wind stares into the fire, tugging on his beard in a preoccupied manner. It has been weeks since he shaved. “Twice before,” he says, “I attempted to escape the cleansing ritual prior to its completion. I did not get far before I blacked out.” He frowns and turns to me. “There remains the question of how I’m here, conscious, and if I’m not mistaken, quite far from Pierus’ lair. You weren’t spotted, were you?”

“I had help from a friend.” Better to keep Lissi’s identity a secret. The less Zephyrus knows, the less Pierus can use against me, if he were to find out. Lissi surprised me a few hours ago by dropping off clean clothes for my charge, in addition to a pair of boots in his size. Then she’d left. *For good this time*, the sprite had said. “I don’t think anyone spotted me.”

His hand twitches atop his thigh. I recognize the motion for what it is: the need to grasp a weapon. “I thought better of you, Brielle.”

My stomach drops. “Excuse me?”

A low growl of frustration darkens his response. “You have everything you could ever want. A home. A purpose and a place. You obtained Meirlach,” he says. “You’re an acolyte—”

“I’m not an acolyte,” I mumble.

He stares, green eyes blank beneath his mess of curls. “Yes, you are.” He gestures to the scarlet cloak concealing his nakedness.

“It’s not mine.” The admission softens further. “It’s Harper’s.”

Slowly, Zephyrus shakes his head. “I’m not following. You bested the Stallion. You acquired Meirlach. The title was yours to claim.”

Drawing my knees to my chest, I say, “Harper delivered Meirlach to Mother Mabel, not I.”

There are words, and then there are the spaces between words—that which has not been said. The only way Harper could have delivered Meirlach to the Abbess was if I gave up the sword. Zephyrus knows this. “Why?”

“I have my reasons.” I jab the stick into the logs. The tip catches, and I shove it into the ground, cool, moist clay extinguishing the flame in a curl of acrid smoke.

“That’s not good enough.” Vicious and cutting, his response lands as a slap. “You’ve worked toward the position for ten years, yet when the time came to claim it, you gave the opportunity to someone else. Tell me why.”

Leather creaks as my gloved fingers curl into fists. Rancorous, spiteful, cold-blooded, my ire possesses many faces, not just one. “I did what I thought was right at the time. I would have rather given the opportunity to Harper, who held no uncertainty in claiming the position, instead of myself, who had begun to question my faith.” Even though it broke me to do so.

A muscle pulses in his jaw, its slow tic mirroring my heartbeat’s brittle agitation. “You were free, Brielle. *Free*. Yet you returned to Under, placing yourself in unnecessary danger, and for what? To save the skin of a disgraced god?” The words prod, a knife to the spine. “It was foolish.”

I’m so tense I fear my bones might snap were I to make any sudden

movement. Oh, how the fury burns. “Saving your life was foolish?” Of all the bone-headed things to say. “A *thank you* would be more appreciative.”

His expression shutters, closed and cold. “You are wasting your time.”

I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again. “You’re an ass.” I chuck the stick into the fire, and sparks flare like dying stars against the overhang. “Do you know what I went through to get here tonight? The emotional turmoil I’ve experienced?” If he did not look so pathetic lying there, I daresay I would leap over the fire and bash his head into the rock. “But maybe you’re right and this has been a complete waste of time. Should I have left you to Pierus’ cruel ministrations?” I grit my teeth. “Perhaps you wouldn’t be in this situation had you not deceived me.”

A sense of purpose bolsters me. *Live truthfully*, Mother Mabel would say. *The Father decides one’s punishment and reward*. And yet—

“I thought you cared for me,” I whisper. It hurts knowing Zephyrus maintains power over me. Strong in conviction I have been, but not strong enough.

“Brielle.” A single exhalation coated in weariness, the inevitable guilt. “I do care. I promise you, I do.”

“Not enough to put someone else’s needs before your own.” He has no idea what that entails.

He clenches his jaw, fights to neutralize his features. “All right,” he says, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Maybe I deserved that.”

“That is the least of what you deserve.” My voice roughens with rising emotion, the desire, like a frenzy, to tip back my head and howl, sound shattering up my throat. “You—” I must say it. “You are the cause of my misfortune.”

His hand drops. “*I’m* the cause of your misfortune?”

“Spring, ten years earlier. You do not remember?” How easily my

fingers curl, driving deep into the flesh of my thighs. “Think back, Zephyrus. Remember the story I told you. Remember the storm that destroyed Veraness, my home.”

Fire—chaos and light—is our separation. New emotions settle as bruising beneath Zephyrus’ eyes, a clarifying change, an earth-shattering realization as his gaze clears and all is known.

“Veraness.” He frowns at the hands clenched in his lap. “I have not heard that name in a long time.” He looks up. “Veraness was your home?”

I’m shaking. “Do you deny responsibility of its demise?”

He appears dazed, flagging steps behind where I stand. “I tried to sever the bond that day.” His recollection rolls forth with slow contemplation. “I used all my strength. There was... much destruction.”

His attempt at escape left thousands dead, my home unsalvageable. Three days later, my mother was gone. It was then I learned love was temporary.

“Your mother died?” he whispers, searching my gaze.

I look away, let the void overhead soak my vision black. Despite the spike in my pulse, the darkness is not permanent. There is a fire nearby. “She isn’t dead,” I mutter, and oh, why does his presence compel me to reveal these hurts? “Or she wasn’t. I don’t know where she is now.”

“I’m sorry.”

I scoff. “You have no idea what it means to be sorry. To you, *sorry* is a scapegoat so you don’t have to take accountability for your actions. It’s no wonder you are alone, no wonder people neither like nor trust you.”

His shoulders roll inward, and I vow not to display a shred of pity for him. He may be a beaten dog on this night, but weeks prior, he held the leash.

The fault is yours, I nearly cry. It will be the club I wield, brought down with shattering force.

But that is simply not true.

I try to swallow, yet the despair lodges there, a snag, a snarled old knot. The West Wind was the perfect scapegoat. If he is the disease spreading decay through my sad tale, then I do not have to accept what I have feared all along: I was not an important enough reason for my mother to stay.

“My mother had been ill for a long time,” I begin. “Her mind lacked the clarity necessary to make sound decisions.” And when Veraness—tenuous home, fallible stability—had been ripped from beneath our feet, who can say how severely her mind altered?

Zephyrus drags a thumb along his lower lip, studying me as he did our very first meeting, when he had yet to decide who I was, who I might become. “The story you told at the Well of Past. Was she of stable mind then?”

It pains me to remember. “Mentally, I think she was beginning to degrade, but I did not know it at the time.” I was only a child, without the answers to life’s problems. My mother was beloved by the town, if slightly odd. She washed daily, groomed her mahogany hair, ate balanced meals. Back then, she did not mumble nonsense about the end of the world. Neither did she hoard tinctures, convinced of her premature death.

“She hit you.”

The air hangs aloft, too deadly, too still. “She did.” I do not excuse my mother’s behavior, but she was troubled. Do I wish things had turned out differently? Yes. No child deserves abuse, physical or otherwise. But if she could not help herself, I could not help her either.

“She abandoned you.” He searches my gaze. His eyes remind me of candleflame. “That’s why you’ve been at Thornbrook for so long.”

Numbness spreads through me as I nod. His upper lip curls into a sneer, but he holds his tongue.

I bite the inside of my cheek, teeth sinking into flesh until copper coats my teeth. A trembling manifests in my core, rippling outward, and tears well before I'm aware of them, salted tracks sliding down my face.

"My mother was sick," I choke. "She was sick for a long time, and I could not help her, could only watch as she eroded, and changed."

"Brielle." The West Wind's tone gentles. "You were a child. It was not your responsibility to care for your mother."

The dam has broken. Its rush cannot cease. "No matter how many times I asked, she wouldn't seek help. I tried. Every day, I tried. But over the years, it grew worse. She claimed she never had a daughter. Said I was a liar, that I was only pretending to love her to steal her money, though we had none to spare." My mother could not differentiate between reality and illusion. Her mind was too far gone.

My chest caves, and my head drops into my palms. The gates. I remember the gates, their glinting iron points, Thornbrook's massive front doors, the church bell ringing so sweetly. Finally, my mother's retreating back as I stood upon the rain-slickened stoop, a child of eleven.

"I try not to think about that day," I sob into my hands, "but I can't stop. How can a mother treat her daughter so cruelly? How could she leave me?"

I was defective. I wasn't enough. Not for my own mother to choose love over fear. Her desertion has eaten me down to the bone.

I'm tired. I am, a decade later, still mourning.

Rising to his feet, Zephyrus circles the fire to crouch at my side, placing a hand upon my back, sweeping it down my spine. The solidarity of the gesture wrenches open the wound, my heart in pieces.

Sound fractures in my throat, and the sobs pour forth. "I loved her." By the Father, how I loved her. "And yet, some days I loathe her. I *hate* her." Spite licks at my skin, seeking an outlet, even as my shoulders curl

forward, attempting to repress that foul emotion. “But as much as I loved her, she didn’t love me.” Not enough to stay.

“I do not believe that.”

He is wrong, I know it in my soul, yet I can’t help but ask, “How can you know?”

“Because—” He catches my chin, draws it upward so I’m forced to look into his eyes. How kind they appear. “If anyone is deserving of love, Brielle, it’s you.”

Deserving of love. What does that even mean? Love should be inherent, like community, health. It is no highly sought prize. The Father loves everyone, regardless of deeds or upbringing.

“How can I feel this way about the woman who birthed me?” My chest heaves. “She gave me life. Is that not the greatest gift?”

Zephyrus takes my hand in his. Our fingers lock, an effortless slide. “We do not have the privilege of choosing our parents, unfortunately. Not everyone is adept at the job. As such, we must sometimes carry this pain throughout our lives.”

His face loses focus behind my swimming vision. At times, the West Wind is unbearable. Now he is knowing, sage.

“I understand why you hold to faith so tightly,” he says, voice hoarse with shame. “In your darkest hours, your god did not abandon you. He offered you light when you had none.”

Yes. It is exactly how he describes. It is everything.

“I understand why my actions hurt you. How poorly I treated you. Why your trust in me was broken.”

My throat squeezes, and I choke out, “I did trust you. I didn’t want to, but I did.”

“I know,” he whispers. “I’m sorry.” He releases a slow exhale.

“Selfishness is a flaw in me, one I have long recognized. It is difficult for me to nurture honest relationships.”

Difficult, or impossible? But there are more important matters to discuss. “Why are you bound to the Orchid King? And I would like the truth.” If ever there was a time to be honest, let it be now.

Zephyrus holds my stare. I’m satisfied when he shies away first. “The truth has never come easy to me.”

“Sounds like a coward’s life.”

He snorts, yet the sound holds no humor. “I suppose you’re right.”

Pulling away, he returns to the opposite side of the fire, settling the cloak around his physique. The flames have burned low, and I appreciate the whole of his face, every ridge and tuft of facial hair and curved bone, the collective angles possessing more harmony than I have seen previously. As he tucks his lean, muscled legs out of sight, I swallow, my face heating.

“Will you tell me why you run?” I ask the West Wind.

Emotion tautens his features. I recognize it instantly, am painfully familiar with the reluctance of having to claw away something rooted deep. “All right, then. I will start from the beginning.”

Easing back against the stone, Zephyrus stares into the fire and begins.

“I was born in a realm far from here called the City of Gods. My brothers and I mastered the changing seasons. Boreas, the eldest, is the North Wind, and controls the north’s brute chill. Notus, the South Wind, reigns over the hot summer winds. Lastly, there is Eurus, the East Wind. The storms do love him.”

Boreas, Zephyrus, Notus, Eurus. The Anemoi.

“For centuries, life was easy. We were adored, the four of us.” His entire demeanor softens, and for a moment I can imagine the man he used to be, prior to his banishment. “There’s not much I can complain about in

those early years. Wine flowed and our great city blossomed. I was, above all else, beloved.” A small, quiet smile crimps the edges of his mouth. “And then I met Hyacinth.”

I’m appalled by the spike of jealousy as a rosy tinge colors Zephyrus’ cheeks. Clearly, he is affected by this person.

“Our first meeting, he mistook me for someone else. I must inform you how rare a thing this was. I was known, as were my brothers. And yet, Hyacinth intrigued me.” The smile grows, edged in delight, a burgeoning joy.

In all the time I’ve spent in Zephyrus’ company, I’ve never heard this quality to his voice, something so precious it must be cherished, shielded from the world’s harsh winds.

“Those first few months, we spent every second we could together. I was completely smitten. The smell of his skin, the sound of his laughter. It was overwhelming.”

My stomach twists uncomfortably, for the yearning in his gaze is plain. Yearning for someone else.

Stupid fool.

“I loved him,” Zephyrus says. “I did. Hyacinth.”

What was once fire is naught but coals. The mountain’s chill sweeps in, and the embers flame. All the facets of Zephyrus’ mien catch light—forehead, nose, cheeks, chin—while the hollows become subsumed by shadow.

Though it pains me, I ask, “What did you love about him?”

Another moment passes before he responds. “Hyacinth was pure of heart. I had never met someone so good. At times, his brightness rivaled the sun.” Then he sighs. “Unfortunately, our time together was too brief. You see, I was not the only one entranced by the youth.”

Strain folds the corners of his eyes, that capricious mouth. “His name

is Apollo. God of music, truth, and light. Quite vain, if you ask me. It should not have surprised me that Hyacinth caught Apollo's eye. Admittedly, I had grown used to Hyacinth's affections. I thought I was able to meet his needs."

And what, exactly, did Hyacinth need? But I keep quiet, wanting to hear the end of the story.

"One afternoon, I discovered Hyacinth and Apollo tossing a discus in the park." He drops his gaze, takes a long breath, dredging up strength for the tale's end. "Watching them interact, I questioned everything. The way Hyacinth laughed... I'd never heard a sound so free."

I feel the sadness in him, which in turn draws me in, petals unfurling, naked heart exposed.

"It hurt," he says, "to think that what we had was a lie. It pained me to realize he would leave me for Apollo—bright, shining Apollo—and that, ultimately, I was not enough."

How deeply the sentiment stings. If ever there was a time when I felt connected to Zephyrus, it is now, all walls tumbling down.

"It was my gravest mistake," he whispers, no louder than a puff of air. "The moment in time I wish I could reverse, but even gods are not all-powerful." A beat of silence passes, and I lean closer, wanting to hear the truth.

"As Apollo released the discus, I sent a strong wind through the park." He shakes his head, stricken. "It was not my intention. I was aiming for Apollo. But when the wind caught the discus, I lost control. It slammed into Hyacinth's skull instead."

Wet and torn, the breath catches in his chest. I don't move. I can't.

"Hyacinth fell," Zephyrus whispers, "and did not rise."

I am waiting. In the story, I imagine Hyacinth will stand, a hand to

his head, a well-timed barb lashing his tongue, furious and bewildered. Yet only silence greets me. “You killed him.” Horrified.

Zephyrus swallows, and his eyes swim with tears, droplets clinging to the curve of his lashes. “It was not my intention—”

“Then what was your intention? You claim you loved this man, yet putting him in harm’s way is not love.” To give up everything you are, *that* is love. To choose another’s life over your own? That is love, too.

“You are correct,” he says dully. Shadows slither nearer to our depleting circle of light, but I’ve run out of fuel to feed the flames. “It was not love. It was possession.”

Against my better judgment, the indignation softens in me. No use beating a man already down. At least he’s aware of his wrongdoing. “There was nothing to be done? Wasn’t he immortal?”

He jerks his head. “No. He was a prince, too innocent for the world’s cruelties.” Parting the top of the cloak, he points to the marking near his ribs. “When Hyacinth’s blood fell to the earth, flowers bloomed in its wake. This tattoo is in memory of him.”

I stare at the tattoo. Beneath lies his skin, dusted gold, and flexing muscle. I drag my focus away, though it takes effort. “And Apollo?”

The West Wind blows out a breath. More of the fight goes out of him. “Apollo was inconsolable. I had not considered how deeply his feelings for Hyacinth ran.”

As I shift these details into their proper places, the image grows clearer. What was it Pierus once said? *It will never be enough. I had hoped you would realize that by now.* “Does Pierus have any relation to Hyacinth?”

He sends a gentle stream from his fingertips to wake the dying fire. It flares, painfully bright, then gutters. Nothing remains to catch and burn. “Hyacinth was Pierus’ son.”

At last, I see the whole of this tangled web. The motive for Zephyrus' enslavement. A father's vengeance stretched eternal.

"What happened afterward?" For we have not reached the end of this tragic tale. Hyacinth's death is the dawn, but the day is long.

Zephyrus studies the glowing coals. The quiet presses down, sweeping through the cracks, filling all the vacant and the void.

"At first, nothing. I expected Pierus to demand a trial, but months passed, and the council did not send for me. Over time, Hyacinth's death weakened my resolve. I lost sleep. I was not eating properly. The grief was too fresh."

He drags at his lower lip in thought, then says, "To keep my mind occupied, I joined Boreas' efforts in organizing a coup with my brothers. Once the dust settled, we were banished from our realm, cast off to the four corners of this new world, never to return to our shining home."

"And how long ago was that?"

He shrugs. "Centuries? Millennia? Time passes strangely in Under, as you know. Who can say?"

A thousand years and a thousand more. I did not realize Zephyrus was so old, considering his youthful visage.

"Although I was exiled to Carterhaugh, Pierus did not believe my punishment was just." His voice darkens with subtle intent. "After seeking council, he was granted permission to cross over and oversee my sentence. Using his power, he essentially stole Under from the fair folk, proclaimed himself its king."

This is news to me. Does Mother Mabel know of this? It's certainly something to think about. Did the tithe exist prior to Pierus' arrival, or did he implement that on his own? For what reason?

"For killing his son," Zephyrus croaks, "I am forever in Pierus' debt. The power in my blood feeds Under so the realm may continue to persist."

Nightshade collects my blood, distributes it to the field of roses in Pierus' lair. The petals are then harvested into a substance of pure light."

I remember our conversation in the boat discussing his roselight. Essentially, Zephyrus' blood lights the realm, though I imagine it is used for other purposes, too.

As his throat dips, he stares ahead, gaze distant. "At the close of every seventh year, I am sacrificed. I do not die, not in the sense that mortals do, but I am emptied. I become a shell, a god made vacant of power, until the dawn of a new cycle, when I am revived."

I do not understand. Does the heart stop in his chest? Does his skin dry and wither, a husk? "There's nothing you can do? No way to sever the ties binding you?"

Leaning forward, Zephyrus drags the pile of clothes Lissi provided onto his lap. "No methods worth pursuing. Once the tithe is complete, I will be bound for another seven years."

I can't accept that. If he's bound, why in seven-year cycles? What else must I know to get to the bottom of this mess? Fumbling in my pocket for the roselight, I pull it free. "Look." Its feeble pink glow is but a ghost of color on glass. "Do you see what Pierus is doing to you? What this horrible ritual perpetuates?" My grip tightens around the sphere. "There has to be another way."

Yet the West Wind stares at the roselight, dazed. "You threw it away," he says, quietly but not weakly. "Weeks ago."

When his attention shifts to me, I shove it back into my pocket. I've carried the roselight since Harper's visit to the forge. Oh, I've considered throwing it down a well. Twice, I nearly did, but I couldn't follow through. My fingers refused to let go. "Harper retrieved it," I say, and leave it at that.

Still he watches me, expression guarded. "Why did you come for me?"

There is no singular answer. The West Wind is made of layers, and so, too, is my reasoning. Because of the way he is in this moment, all defenses brought low. Because he is more than his legacy. Beneath that shining immortal skin, Zephyrus is just a man. Despite all that he's done, I believe, as the Father believes, people can change. They can begin again.

“Everyone leaves me,” he murmurs, “but you...”

It is so rare a thing to witness, that child-like confusion, and I wonder if the West Wind believes he does not deserve to be saved. My heart squeezes in response. “I came back.”

His throat dips, and I watch the tension ease into a deeply profound peace. “You came back.”

CHAPTER 29

“Tell me everything you know,” I say, stirring the fire to life. “Leave nothing out.”

The West Wind, dressed in clean, dry clothes, watches the flames gorge the dry wood. While he rested, I went to collect firewood and scout the area. I’d observed no signs of intrusion, but I didn’t linger, returning to our shelter in fear of something catching my scent. A block of cheese settled my gnawing stomach.

Tossing a branch onto the fire, he says flatly, “Without my blood, the tithe will remain incomplete. I’m sure Pierus has already learned I’m gone, though he will stall for as long as he can. He hates to appear foolish.”

It’s been hours already. Mother Mabel would know something was amiss.

“Wouldn’t he call for you?” As far as I know, Zephyrus cannot deny the compulsion, not for long.

“He would, but he hasn’t.” Crossing his arms over his chest, he slumps lower against the outcropping. Where the rock falls away, the sky sweeps black, pale stars dusting the horizon, too numerous to be real. “That can only mean he’s sent for the Hounds.”

I do not understand. “The Hounds?”

“Unfortunately, you are now marked by the Orchid King.”

A chill licks at my flesh, puckering its surface beneath the heavy wool of Harper’s cloak, which he has returned to me. “What does that mean?” Always, the fire flames, eating the wood until it is dust.

Zephyrus pinches the bridge of his nose in a rare sign of distress. Fatigue bruises his eyes where the lines carve deep. “Pierus will do everything in his power to hunt you. Your only chance at survival is to leave Under and never return.”

“I’m not leaving without you.”

“You’re not listening.” Low and hoarse, his words sit like an abrasion upon my skin. “You cannot outrun the Hounds. No one can. They are bred for one thing only: to catch their prey. The tallest peaks, the widest rivers, the deepest chasms. No matter where you run, they will find you.” His hands fist, long fingers enclosed within the strong, callused palms. “I would not see you torn apart by darkness.”

It begins subtly: a prickle in my throat, dampness beneath my arms. Nerves fray, and I struggle to catch my breath. “They’re just dogs, right?” I gasp. “They wouldn’t kill me. Mother Mabel would never allow it.”

“Brielle.”

My name drifts like a fog, and the fire spins into threads of color and light, the ground sliding out beneath me.

“Look at me.”

I turn, and there is the West Wind, his complexion stretched to the edges of my vision, the heat of his breath thawing the chill tightening my cheeks. Grasping my braid in one hand, he pulls the tresses free, allowing his fingers to slide through, cupping the back of my skull.

My chest pinches with sharpening pain. I can’t breathe. “My heart —”

“Is beating steadily,” he says, pressing his palm to the rise of my breast. “All will be well. You are safe.”

Knotting my fingers with his, I crush his hand harder against my sternum, as if it might punch through skin and bone, take the place of this failing organ. We are aligned: eyes, hearts, mouths. Beneath his gaze, my pulse slows, descending from its treacherous high. Then the blackness retreats, giving way to fire and light.

I pull away, shaking. “Sorry.”

“You have nothing to be sorry for.” Watchful and troubled, he tucks a russet curl behind my ear. “My darling novitiate, will you sit with me?”

The endearment stirs a flutter behind my ribs. “I’m already sitting with you.”

“I’m afraid I must disagree,” he says, that old charisma having returned. “You sit next to me, but I wish you to sit *with* me.”

Now I understand. The difference lies in the choice.

I nod, and he tucks me against his side, an arm wrapped around my shoulders, warm palm curved over my hip. Seated beside him, it is apparent how much larger I am. My curves strain against the fabric of my robe. Zephyrus appears not to care.

Quietly, he asks, “Do you want to talk about it?”

I am no stranger to my body’s reactions, however ill-informed they are. My thoughts sever, and I forget myself. Turmoil sucks me down into a captivity of my own creation.

Do I want to talk about it? Not especially.

“I can’t remember a time when I did not feel this way.” I rub the back of my hand across my eyes. Unsurprisingly, it comes away wet. “Sometimes I feel... overwhelmed.” Though really, it feels like I’m dying. “It’s hard to describe.”

“You write a lot in your journal.” A pointed gaze, nonjudgmental,

merely curious, this desire to know.

“Yes.” I remember the humiliation of Harper reading my private musings. Likely Zephyrus does, too. “Putting my thoughts to paper helps when I feel myself spiraling.”

“Does this happen a lot?”

How often is a lot? Daily? If so, then yes, but I am used to it. At this point in my life, it is woven into the fabric of my core self. It colors my interpretation of the world. I am not Brielle of Thornbrook without it. “It’s not always this bad. I started experiencing these episodes when my mother’s mental health began to degrade. I didn’t feel in control. Gradually, it bled into other parts of my life.” Confrontations, looming decisions, things vast and complex and beyond my grasp.

His expression turns inward for a time. “That makes a lot of sense. I, too, struggle with lack of control in my life.”

This isn’t about me. I will survive, as I have always done. If the Orchid King has sent his Hounds, I will face them. But I worry for those I love.

“What about Mother Mabel, the Daughters of Thornbrook? Are they in danger?”

Zephyrus tugs on his lower lip. Even in the presence of my fraying mind, he is at ease. “I doubt it. Pierus wouldn’t risk tainting his relationship with your Abbess. The power in my blood is paramount to Under’s survival, but the blood from virgin flesh is equally necessary. Your faith strengthens this realm. It is something the fair folk lack.”

The reassurance settles me. Their safety means more to me than my own. I can endure so long as my peers remain secure. “Then we have the advantage. We have time to plan.”

I expect enthusiastic agreement. I receive lukewarm resolve. “Maybe we should reconsider.”

“What?” By the Father, he’s serious. “Why would you say that?”
And after everything?

He gazes out, trees blanketing the ground from sight. “Although your friends will be safe in Mother Mabel’s company, I cannot say the same for you. Pierus could do any manner of harm to you and blame it on an unfortunate accident. I would not put it past him. If we return to Miles Cross, Pierus will probably let you go, provided that you’re in the Abbess’ company.”

I appreciate his concern, but I’m capable of looking after myself. “What about you?”

“Unlike you, I cannot walk free so easily.” His attempt to lighten the mood soon deflates, and my stomach falls with it. “I will face the consequences of my actions.”

“You would still be bound to Pierus,” I argue. “That is no life.”

“I am aware of what awaits me.” The words seethe, too cold for comfort, and I stiffen against him. “If I do not return, I will waste away to nothing. What is a mind without a body to do its bidding? I would rather not subject myself to that torment.”

I take a fortifying breath. *Patience*. If our positions were switched, I would hope Zephyrus could extend the same compassion. “You are the Messenger,” I state. “Are you telling me there’s not a single person who could help you cure the paralysis?”

Zephyrus lifts a hand. Together, we watch short bursts of air weave around his fingertips, silver thread against the granite face at our backs. “Two people come to mind, but I have seen neither in centuries.”

Two prospects. It’s a start. “How are we to find them?”

With a sigh, he drops his hand. “The first is my brother, Notus. There’s no guarantee he will help though.” He tips back his head, stares at

the lip of the overhang. “Unfortunately, I’ll succumb to the venom before we reach his realm.”

The pinch in my gut fists tighter with increasing dread. A handful of days if we are lucky. We’ve already wasted the night. “What of the second contact?”

“His name is Yakim.” Neither frowning nor smiling, his mouth twitches, caught somewhere in between. “He’s a poison dealer in the wilds of Under, his aptitude for botany unsurpassed. It’s possible he’ll have an antidote, something to slow the venom until we reach my brother’s realm.”

The tips of his fingers drift up my side, a slow, indulgent touch that draws warmth to my cheeks. I clear my throat, peeking at Zephyrus from the corner of my eye. The beard gives him an air of distinction, and he continues to stare off into the distance. I wonder if he’s even aware of his touch.

“Then how do we find him?” I ask, a bit breathlessly.

“Oh, I know where to find him. The problem is whether he would agree to meet with me.”

I wait until he meets my gaze. His attention is heady in a way I’ve never experienced before. I don’t shy from it. I welcome its touch, let it wash over me, sunlight in a cold wind. “Let me guess. You wronged this person in some way.”

He lifts a hand to his eyes, trying to hide his wince. “He and I had a falling out long ago. I’m not sure if he would remember.” Then he tilts his head, considering his words. “Actually, there’s a good chance he will.”

Why am I not surprised? I’m not going to question the why and how of his predicament. Difficulties have never stopped the West Wind before. He’ll find a way. If nothing else, I have confidence in his ability to manipulate a situation, place his pawns where they are most beneficial.

“If Yakim is our only means of reaching your brother’s realm in

time,” I say, “I think we should find him. What have we got to lose?”

“For you? Everything.”

And here marks the struggle, the desire to remain tight-lipped, invulnerable, which clashes with the compulsion to bare all. “Zephyrus,” I say, with all the compassion I possess. “I have lost more in my life than I care to admit. I will not lose you, too.”

He turns to me, one hand cupping my cheek. He does not speak, but what need have I for words when all is clear in his eyes? It means something that I care for him. It means more than he lets on, I believe.

Catching his hand in mine, I lower it onto my lap. “Where can we find Yakim?”

He hesitates. “It’s not safe, Brielle, not for a mortal. It’s best if I go alone. I will return with the antidote. You would not need to place yourself in unnecessary danger.”

The moment I reforged that broken sword, I decided. No matter how the wind blows, the mountain cannot kneel. “I’m going with you,” I say. “And whatever awaits, we’ll face it together.” Just as the Father shadows me in life, so too will I walk this path with the West Wind.

FOUR ROTTING WALLS choked in vines and a sagging, grass-woven roof construct the dilapidated, two-story house. It squats in a heavily wooded lot, built precariously atop the massive spreading bog, its foundation submerged in murky water. A boardwalk connects the few parcels of muddy islands, nothing more than a clutter of waterlogged boards and rusted nails.

A wide, wrap-around porch skirts the front of the structure. White paint has chipped into the skeletal shape of eaten wood. The front door hangs off its hinges, no better than a broken limb.

“Yakim lives here?” My voice emerges pinched and breathless, for the reek of this place forces me to breathe through my mouth. One whiff of the putrid, yellow-gray water, and I’d nearly tossed up my meager dinner.

Standing beside me on the drooping boardwalk, Zephyrus responds, “The Estate acts as a crossroads. For some, it is a gambling den. For others, it is a tavern, a place to order a hot meal and unwind. For the select few, it is the most exclusive of societies, only the wealthy given access. Yakim is one of their premiere clients.”

It had taken half the night to reach the bog, endless miles crossing difficult terrain, the trees clumped like shadowed specters, hunched with age and rot. Zephyrus stopped briefly to send a message to Notus, blasting a stream of air through the forest. Apparently, an effective method of communication between the Anemoi. Despite all odds, we made it, sunrise still hours off. I only hope it’ll be worth the effort.

Someone pushes aside a curtain from one of the second-story windows, revealing the silhouetted curves of a woman’s body: her large, soft rear, the thick waist and rounded chest.

“Right on time,” Zephyrus murmurs.

“Who is that?” I ask, more suspiciously than I intend to.

He lifts a hand in acknowledgement, smiling at the woman as she pushes open the window and calls out, “You were never fond of knocking, old friend.”

“How did you know it was me?” he hollers back.

“Roses. Nothing smells that good around here.”

He laughs.

I wrap my arms across my stomach, glaring at Zephyrus from the corner of my eye as my mood darkens. Who is this woman, that she is able to pull a shred of unspoiled joy from the West Wind? I’m disappointed I cannot do the same.

“I hope my arrival isn’t an inconvenience,” he says.

The woman grins, a white crescent against her shadowed face. “None at all. At the very least, this will be entertaining. Come on up. And bring your friend.” The window slams shut.

Zephyrus is still chuckling when I demand, “Are you going to answer me?” I mean, really. After saving his skin, the least he could do is acknowledge me.

His eyebrows wing upward in surprise, likely due to my waspish tone. “You have to ask a question in order to receive an answer.”

It’s not intended as a blow, but I endure it as such. “I did,” I choke out, “or were you sleeping when I said, *Who is that?*”

His eyes clear. For a time, he regards me with grating deliberation, peeling back layers of skin to reveal what lies beneath. “You’re jealous.”

“I am not.”

“You are.” He sidles closer, eyes dancing.

Sweat springs to my palms inside my gloves. The nerves manifest so suddenly I forget to breathe through my mouth, and the stench hits with immediacy, turning my stomach. “If you want to stare at a naked woman, that is your prerogative, but after the trouble I went through tonight, I would expect you to be more concerned with your deteriorating health.”

He sobers then. The journey here was not the easiest. After the second hour, Zephyrus began to feel numbness in his legs, which slowed our pace further. Twice, I was forced to lend support, an arm curved around his waist. I’ve risked everything to be here. I’d hoped he’d realized that.

Pushing past him, I tromp down the boardwalk, avoiding the sagging planks dropping into the bubbling water. Zephyrus captures my hand, tugging me around to face him.

He draws me close, pressing my palm flat over his heart. It taps an eager pace. “I *am* concerned,” he says lowly. The pad of his thumb brushes

the back of my hand in soothing strokes. “Her name is Ailith. You will have to trust me when I say there has only ever been friendship between us. Anyway, her wife would castrate me if I ever behaved inappropriately.”

My face burns brightest red. That’s what I get jumping to conclusions. “I didn’t realize. I assumed you two...” I retreat, cross and uncross my arms awkwardly.

Zephyrus laughs. “Never. She loves women. Always has. Can’t really blame her, can you?” He winks, and against my better judgment, I’m charmed. “To be honest, I’m partial to redheads.”

“Stop.” My voice drops, and I lick my lips. “You’re trying to distract me.”

His thumb returns to my palm, pressing into the callused flesh beneath my glove. “Is it working?”

“No.”

He grins. “Liar.”

The lies surface more readily, it is true. I’m not sure how I feel about it.

“Shall we?” Though not quite a gentleman, the West Wind offers me his arm, which I accept, allowing him to steer me along the boardwalk.

The woman, Ailith, awaits us on the front porch. She isn’t naked as I first assumed, but she might as well be, folds of dewy olive skin exposed but for scraps of sapphire cloth covering her chest and backside. The curve of her stomach reveals a brutal scar, which she wears with pride. Small white horns protrude from the top of her skull, cutting through her inky tresses.

She frowns as we climb the steps onto the porch. “That’s certainly your unruly hair and flouncing gait,” she says, clearly bewildered by Zephyrus’ appearance, “but what happened to your face?”

“It’s not permanent.” He rubs the tip of his globular nose, then drops

his hand with a grimace. “At least, I hope not.”

“I see.” She glances over his shoulder, and her frown deepens. “What are you doing here? Shouldn’t you be at the tithes?”

I startle. Does everyone know the role Zephyrus plays in the ritual?

He smiles. I’m impressed by his ease. “Nothing to worry about, my dear.”

“I will have to take your word for it.” Though she addresses the West Wind, her dark, upturned eyes rest on me, small, slender stones nestled in olive skin. I’m so fixated by her presence—dominant, overwhelming—I don’t think too deeply on the exchange she and Zephyrus shared. “I see you’ve brought company. A mortal woman? This pleases me.”

“Calm yourself, Ailith.” The words thrum with suppressed amusement, yet warning, too. “We’re not here for your services.”

She leans forward, every curve of dimpled skin on display. “You bring your pet to my place of business, dangle her before me like a succulent piece of meat, and claim no interest in my services?” Her stony gaze slinks eagerly over my ample chest. My white alb and scarlet cloak may as well be nonexistent. “What a waste of beauty.”

“She is no pet.” A blink, and the kindness has frozen into a far more dangerous expression. “Not this one.”

Low conversation drifts through the open door. Someone pulls aside the curtain, peeks through the wide bay window—a woman with feline whiskers and gently tapered ears poking through her silver hair—then vanishes.

“I see.” Ailith retreats a step with a muffled clack. The dilapidated porch groans as she cocks a hip. “If she is not your pet, then what is she?” Two of her fingers skim up my arm, across my shoulder, where they alight like small birds. I’m not sure whether I should be offended or flattered she

thinks me so beautiful, and so empty-headed. “Because as far as I’m concerned, she is too good for the likes of you.”

A thin line pinches his mouth. “You would not be wrong. She is a Daughter of Thornbrook,” he responds, and the woman’s smile reveals a pronounced gap between her two front teeth.

“One of the faith? Even better.”

Zephyrus snorts, though remains close to me, a hand on my lower back. “Do you have a minute for a pair of weary travelers?”

Ailith winks. “For you, my dear? I will give you seven.”

The front porch, hobbled together by damp, buckling boards, creaks as we cross the threshold, the yellowing door stripped of paint. A bell chimes upon our entrance.

Despite the neglected exterior, the Estate’s interior is well-maintained and tastefully decorated, with white satin curtains draping the tall windows, the space cloaked in the haze of candlelight. A rose-petal fragrance offers relief from the putrid reek outside. Unlike the front porch, the wooden floor gleams with fresh polish beneath the rugs, and the bar tucked against the far wall shines impressively.

The fair folk gather around low tables, either smoking, gambling, drinking, or conversing. A blaze blackens the central fireplace, having attracted a group of sprites relaxing in upholstered armchairs, passing cards from hand to hand.

“Back in a moment,” Ailith says. “Make yourselves at home. Drinks on me at the bar, if you wish.”

As I press nearer to Zephyrus, the hand on my back slips lower, grazing the curve of my backside, and I momentarily cease to breathe. “Has Pierus called for you yet?” I murmur.

“No.” He continues to scan the area, patrons observing with open

curiosity. They see the West Wind, and something changes in them. Their spines straighten. Their meals go cold. “I think I know why.”

He crosses the room, and I follow, my attention drawn to the charcoal sketch he rips from the wall, which shares a startling likeness to his face.

A bounty for the West Wind.

Too many eyes on my back. What was it Zephyrus said about this place? *It's not safe.* “Should we leave?”

“No.” A few patrons return to their gambling. “It is merely a scare tactic. The Hounds are my greater concern.”

“How long do we have, do you think?”

“Hours.” He does not sound particularly enthused. “The quicker we meet with Yakim, the quicker we can leave.” Turning, he meets the eyes of those still staring, smiles charmingly, and saunters down the hallway where Ailith disappeared.

I stick close to his heels. “I thought Ailith said to wait.” We climb a set of curved stairs overlooking the great room, the air warming the higher we go.

“Ailith says a lot of things.”

Once we reach the second level, we turn right down a hallway plastered in yellow silk paper, a shabby rug running the length of the narrow corridor. “Did you spot Yakim?”

“Not yet.” Nudging my lower back, Zephyrus directs me to a door with a brass knocker. “He’s been coming to Ailith’s for the last two hundred years. I would be disappointed if he changed his habits.” Lifting his hand, he knocks.

The door swings wide, and Ailith stands on the other side, hands on hips, the curve of her leg peeking through a slit in the tiny skirt covering her

ample backside. I blink in shock. The woman's slender ankles end in hooves.

"Why do you always fail to follow instructions?" Her smile hardens. "That was a rhetorical question, by the way." Nonetheless, she waves us inside with a murmured, "The Blue Room."

The space is aptly named. Silken blue walls. A floor patched with square rugs, round rugs, triangular rugs—all blue. A large window overlooks the smoking marsh, and a collection of turquoise armchairs shapes a half-moon around the fireplace.

"Please," Ailith says, locking the door behind us. "Take a seat."

Zephyrus and I select two neighboring armchairs. The fireplace is a mouth of cold stone. Ailith pours herself into the sofa across from us, limbs artfully arranged. Her soft thighs fill the cushions like water in a glass. She stares at us in the unbroken quiet until I begin to feel sweat prickle my hairline. In the wilds of Under, I am mortal, and I am weak.

"What can I do for you, Zephyrus?" the buxom woman purrs.

He leans back, swings an ankle atop his thigh, where it perches. "Does Yakim still conduct business here?"

"He does." The click of her long, curved nail against the wooden sofa back prevents the silence from ever truly settling. "I thought you parted ways long ago." Her gaze flicks to me, then back to Zephyrus.

"We did, but I have need of his services again."

She goes still. "Why?" The tapping has ceased.

He offers his most inviting smile, no points to his teeth. "Ailith. You know the importance of confidentiality."

She doesn't return the smile. "You two did not part on good terms. Who is to say he will not seek vengeance in some way?"

"Two centuries is a long time to hold a grudge." Zephyrus shrugs. "I'm sure it will be fine."

“Zephyrus.” A small, pitying sound rushes forth. “The fair folk never forget.”

I shift uncomfortably in my seat. Ailith crosses her legs, and my attention snags on her feet. Or hooves, rather, polished and smooth.

“I’m a faun, dear.” She winks at me. “No need to fret.”

I want to ask what it is Zephyrus did. I *should* demand it. After all, I am risking my life for a disgraced god. The moment I bite my tongue is the moment I understand I am no longer willing to keep silent or let others dictate my life. If I am to make the most informed decision, I require information.

“What did you do?”

My low, guarded question draws Ailith’s and Zephyrus’ attention. There was a time when the West Wind would evade the subject, refusing to step fully into the light, but I’d like to think we have become better versions of ourselves since our first meeting.

“I may have—” He lifts a hand, lips pursed with casual disregard. “—swindled Yakim out of money once or twice.”

Ailith and I share a look of wordless exasperation.

Errant conversation drifts from the level below, slipping like steam through the floor’s cracks. Every so often, clinking glass breaks the monotony of the muddled hum. “You ask for my cooperation,” Ailith says, “but offer me no information. How am I to know what danger you invite into my home? I gave up that life long ago. People depend on me for protection.”

“You have my word,” Zephyrus promises with rare solemnity. “Whatever it might be worth. I will not bring danger to those you shelter. I simply seek a meeting with Yakim, and a safe place to do so.”

“Safe? My dear, you are a fugitive.” A cool voice floats from the open doorway, and I catch sight of an equally stunning buxom woman

dressed in flowing white trousers and a frilly pink blouse. Red bumps distort the complexion of her heart-shaped face.

Zephyrus nods to the newcomer stiffly. “Soria.”

Padding to the back of the sofa, the woman wraps her long arms around Ailith’s neck, propping her chin atop the faun’s head. Ailith’s wife, I presume. “All of Under is aware of your escape from the Orchid King. Wherever you go, danger will follow. Pierus has placed a bounty upon your head.”

“Be that as it may, Yakim would be foolish to capture me here. Anyone would.” Reclining into the plush blue cushions, he grins lazily, no better than a cat in the sun. “A lifelong ban from the Estate is a steep price to pay. Everyone knows your drinks are the best in Under.”

Ailith preens at the compliment. Her wife, on the other hand, remains unimpressed.

“You always do this.” Skirting the front of the sofa, Soria—I am not sure what manner of creature she is—plants herself in front of Zephyrus, fury shimmering in that depthless gaze. “You waltz in here acting like the sun shines from your ass, toss out a request, and expect our cooperation.” Her voice drops to a roughened pitch. “Let me remind you, Bringer of Spring, that you are a god fallen from grace. This is Under. Your privilege extends no farther than your fingernails.”

Eyes narrowed, Zephyrus studies Soria, then Ailith. When he finds no support, he turns to me. I gaze at him calmly. “She’s not wrong,” I murmur. The West Wind possesses an unflinching streak of self-importance.

“Let’s try something different.” Soria paces toward the window and returns. “Why don’t you ask for help as you would a friend, instead of using us as a means to an end. Strengthening relationships instead of breaking them. A difficult concept for you, I know, but it’s never too late, or in your

case, too early, to better yourself. The fact is, you're a fugitive. You don't have many options. Why mistreat those who can help you?"

Pride gleams in Ailith's eyes as she takes in her wife. Zephyrus, however, bows his head.

"You're right." Never have I witnessed this level of humility from Zephyrus. It's a good look for him. "I think of you both as my friends, and I should have treated you as such. For that, I apologize." A wayward curl falls into his eyes, which he brushes away with a shaking hand—a side effect of the venom, perhaps. "If you can help, I will respect your parameters. If not, I will leave you in peace."

He looks to me, and I nod in encouragement. I know this is difficult for him, but I'm proud he is taking these steps. As much as I want to offer my support, Zephyrus must climb this hurdle on his own.

Once more, Ailith taps her nails on the sofa back. A drop of sweat slithers down Zephyrus' temple as she considers him, then clucks her tongue. "I'll make an exception. But if anyone comes to harm under my roof, you will suffer the consequences. I like you, Zephyrus, and I would hate to lose a friend, but those are my ramifications."

He sags in relief. "Thank you, Ailith. I won't forget this."

"A likely story," Soria mutters.

Ailith lays a hand on her wife's arm. "Normally, we place Yakim in the Red Room, but we will inform him it requires cleaning. He will wait in the great room until it is done. That should give you the opportunity to approach him."

"Excellent."

"And what of your companion?" Soria questions.

Ailith's whetted gaze takes me in. Indeed, she did not overlook my presence. Merely tucked me aside until needed. "It is true he cannot resist mortal flesh." The woman gnaws on her lower lip. "If you're willing to take

the risk, the payoff could be in your benefit. But your pet will need to participate.”

The West Wind’s eyes darken as he takes in the faun. “I already stated she is no pet,” he warns.

Ailith shoots him a conspiratorial grin. “Why does he need to know that?”

CHAPTER 30

“Are you certain this is necessary?” I whisper.

Ailith meets my gaze in the mirror, her hands filled with my springing curls, a few already pinned in place against my scalp. Maneuvering my hair into sections, she piles the red tresses so they frame my round face. “Quite. When I’m through with you, Yakim will look nowhere else.”

I blanch as she feathers the ends of my curls with a comb. Do I regret agreeing to this outlandish scheme? Maybe a little. I’d tossed myself into the sea without first checking its depth.

Tonight, I am to play the part of Zephyrus’ pet.

According to Ailith, this required a complete overhaul of my appearance. My alb held no shape. The cincture was stiff, awkwardly placed. She discarded my uniform despite my protests with the promise that I would feel the way I was always meant to: like a woman.

Once my hair is properly styled, Ailith bustles to a small table littered with cosmetics. The vanity mirror is so large I’m granted an unencumbered view of Ailith and Soria’s bedroom. Pale pink silk patterned with white flowers plasters the walls. Aside from the enormous, four-poster

bed piled high with pillows, there is a small sitting area to my right backed by a tall bookshelf.

Cozy, romantic, intimate. I've no personal touches at Thornbrook. I never wanted them. This bedroom, however, reflects the couple's nature. It must be nice, I think, making a space your own.

"You are quiet," Ailith states, plucking a shade of lip cream from the pile, holding it up for scrutiny, and discarding it amongst the impressive collection with a shake of her head. "Do you not want the West Wind's attention?"

"His attention?" They are sharp, these words. Too late to temper them. "Why would I want that?" I grasp the roselight in my pocket. For strength.

Her gaze angles toward my left hand, which claws the arm of my chair. I loosen my grip, sink back into the cushions with a soundless exhale.

"Why indeed?" she drawls, before refocusing on the task at hand.

I neither want nor need Zephyrus' attention, or any man's attention, for that matter. Zephyrus is a distraction. Always has been. If he happens to stir certain yearnings in me, well, such is life.

"What did you mean when you asked Zephyrus what had happened to his face?"

Cosmetics in hand, Ailith crosses the room with a sway of generous hips. Tubes, pots, brushes—all clatter onto the table.

"He did not always appear so unsightly," she replies, opening a tube and smoothing a pale cream over my cheeks. "I'm not sure what trouble he got himself into. Knowing him, he probably deserved it." Blush blends into the foundation, smoothing away imperfections.

"What did he used to look like?" Truthfully, I find Zephyrus handsome, warts and all.

She spends an absurd amount of time lengthening my eyelashes.

Only when they are curled to her satisfaction does she reply, “Too pretty to be real.”

Interesting. Then why the change?

“What do you think so far?” Ailith regards me with a canted head. “We’re nearly there.”

Dark brown eyes hazed in kohl regard me in the mirror. This woman appears arrogantly unaffected. Hair teased, freckled skin spritzed with perfume, small pearls sheened at her ears. The soft mouth parts, though whether in wonderment or fear, who can say? An emerald gown, cut scandalously low, accentuates the length of her neck, softens the shape of her shoulders and upper arms.

Her name is Brielle.

“You don’t think this is a little much?” I hedge to Ailith, who applies a gold-tinted cosmetic to the outer corners of my eyes.

“My dear,” she says through her laughter, “I could do so much more. With your hair, your skin, your curves...” She trails off, mouth quirked. “But it will serve your purpose for this evening.”

More like Zephyrus’ purpose.

“But your gloves.” She gestures to the slim, form-fitting leather encasing my fingers. “They clash with your outfit.”

I clench my hands in my lap. The brown coloring does not particularly match the green, it is true. “I must keep them on. Please.”

The faun purses her lips, displeased, but eventually relents. “I’m guessing this has something to do with your faith?”

“I must abide by my vows.”

“And those are?”

“Obedience, purity, devotion.”

I’m greeted by a look of pure skepticism. Ailith is not the first, nor

will she be the last. I do not expect others to understand, and I made peace with it long ago.

“Well,” she goes on, substituting one powder for another, “as long as it makes you happy.”

It does make me happy, or it did, rather.

“So there’s really nothing between you and Zephyrus?” the faun hedges.

My eyes cut to hers. Ailith, too curious. Me, too defensive. Pink colors my neck and climbs into my face.

“He’s a friend,” I croak.

“A friend. How quaint.” She’s smiling as she rubs rouge onto my lips.

He is. That’s what I would say, were my tongue not tied into knots.

“The way Zephyrus looks at you,” Ailith says, “I’m not so sure your relationship is as chaste as you think.”

I vow not to question her further, but it has been a long, toiling road. Today, I am weak. “How does he look at me?”

Wiping an errant smudge from the corner of my mouth, she leans back to study her handiwork, darkly amused. “You’ll find out soon enough.”

MY GUT FEELS like it has adhered to my spine.

From the top of the stairs, the great room spreads below in shades of gray pocked by small islands of candlelight. Countless patrons have since arrived in the time Ailith spent *embellishing* me. Her words, not mine. They occupy the tables, slurping stew or sipping wine from finger-smudged glassware as the front door opens and closes with increasing frequency.

A bark of laughter disrupts the conversational drone, each a separate thread knit within the fabric of the room. I do not see Zephyrus. He left me in Ailith's capable hands, claiming he would nurse a drink in the meantime. Is it possible Yakim already arrived? Difficult to say, considering I have no idea what he looks like.

I am a blade.

I force myself down the stairs, one hand fused to the railing, the other lifting the heavy skirt of my gown. By some miracle, Ailith and I are the same size in the bust and waist. Her dress fits me like a dream. Since she has no need of shoes, being a faun, I continue to wear my boots. At least the long hem shields their filthy appearance.

The stairs creak with my descent. My attention flits from darkened corner to shaded nook, the excess window drapes partitioned off to create recesses in the larger space. I smell him—nectar and sunlight. The perfume of his skin is never far, twining through hair and fabric, pale as mist.

Down and down and down I go, nearer toward this evening's purpose. I've slipped my dagger against the small of my back, just in case. I also carry the roselight in my gown's pocket, a reminder of what there is to lose.

There on the bottom step, my world goes still.

Across the room, the West Wind lounges near the fireplace, body arranged in an artful recline, one hand curled around a tumbler of amber liquor. Lifting the glass to his mouth, he watches me lazily over the rim. In the time we were apart, he was able to shave. That green-eyed gaze holds candlelight, and darkens subtly in the passing moments.

His mouth shapes a faint upward curve. The arrogance in that smile stirs things in me. It pries open my ribs and takes root despite my attempts to defend myself against it. The West Wind: devious, clever, undying. A god.

Tipping back his head, he drains his drink to the dregs. A rush of heat tightens my skin as he unfurls from his sprawl with grace. He circles the tables, slipping through space with complete mastery, no evidence of the numbness eating at his legs. Then again, I am not the only one playing a part tonight.

Closer he comes. A bead of sweat slithers down my spine, icy with nerves as Zephyrus halts at the bottom stair, drinking me in. "You," he murmurs, "are a wonder."

My ears tingle with heat. "It was Ailith," I stutter. "She did all the work." I gesture to my face and hair. Coated in sweat and grime, my hair laden with the humidity of the forge, I am a bladesmith, not a woman, though I wonder why I cannot be both.

The West Wind leans forward, and I suddenly forget to breathe. "Darling," he murmurs into my ear, "I have always thought you beautiful. I did not think it was a secret."

His voice holds the most delicious timbre. My nipples pebble beneath my corset, pained and chafing, and I quickly cross my arms to conceal the evidence. "You never mentioned it," I manage with breathless nerves. "You never once made it known."

"Didn't I?" His eyebrows hike upward, and the mossy rings encircling his welling pupils clarify. "Think carefully. What is it you remember?"

A tremor manifests, beginning in my calves, thighs, up to my stomach. He is too close, but I do not demand space, even when his exhale brushes my mouth. "You teased me," I murmur. "You toyed with my emotions, always seeking a laugh, with me at the center of it all."

Head canted, his attention slides across my waist, up to my chest, where it lingers, before returning to my face a heartbeat later. "I spoke truth

in those times. You decided they were false, as if you were not worthy of a man's attention."

"How could I believe you," I quaver, "when every other word from your mouth was made in jest?"

He falls into contemplative disquiet. Beyond his shoulder, one of the patrons, an old, bent crone, returns to the bar with an empty glass.

Zephyrus steps closer then, his sternum pressing into my upper arm. "I apologize if I made you feel unwanted or undesired. It could not have been further from the truth."

I swallow so hard I'm certain he hears my throat click. I'm absolutely going to Hell for this, but I must know. "Then what is the truth?"

His eyes shine like fresh lacquer. If I were not staring so intently at his face, I would have missed the flare of heat there. "Do you remember your first visit to Under?" With hypnotic sensation, the tips of his fingers skim the flowing silk of my skirt. "The couple beneath the willow tree?"

Naked limbs and sweat-slickened skin. The forked end of a man's tongue. My insides curl from the recollection, and I bite the flesh of my cheek, give a fitful nod.

"Do you remember what I said?"

That moment is forever sealed into memory. "You told me closing my eyes would make no difference," I whisper as his fingers sink deeper into the folds of fabric. "That I have already seen."

"Yes." His pink tongue drifts across his full lower lip. Though his hand does not touch my skin, its heat leaves a mark. "Once I tell you, the truth will be known. Are you sure you want that burden?"

I used to regard truth as a burden. I chose blindness. I shied from the sun. I accepted what I had always been told, what I had read, what I had heard with limited conviction.

We are attracted to things that lie outside of our experience, things

that are not the same as ourselves. We crave something deeper.

I considered Zephyrus' words during our time apart. The truth is no burden. It is necessity.

"Tell me," I demand. "Please."

I startle as his fingertips alight on my outer thigh and begin to trace tentative circles there. "Very well." His voice vibrates with new resonance, ringing like the lowest church bells. "Shall I inform you of the nights when camp was quiet," he says for my ears only, "you and Harper asleep in your bedrolls?" The touch skims upward, across my hip bone, where it rests, a scalding permanence.

My hands tremble. I clamp them together at my front, stumbling, falling, drowning. His allure unfolds with dizzying calculation. Bringer of Spring.

"Hours I spent in your company, watching the sway of your body as we hiked." His lips brush the side of my neck. "What a temptation you were."

Heat feeds into my bloodstream. I fight for air, or sanity, or both. I am Brielle. I have not forgotten. What manner of enchantment has taken hold?

"It was the most delicious torture," he goes on, grasping my thigh with a firm hand. "In the evenings, I retreated to a quiet place to attend my needs. I worked myself over slowly, wishing it was your hand, pale and pure, around my cock."

My stomach plunges straight through the floor. *Cock*. What a filthy word. Why, then, does it flow so elegantly from his tongue?

Zephyrus turns his head, and his breath coasts across my naked collarbones, bare skin prickling in the wash of heat. "It was your face in my mind's eye."

Hunger pries me apart from the inside. It's taking those uncertainties

and widening the faults. It's dissolving doubts I held about myself, the West Wind's perception of me.

"You—" My voice cracks, all that I might say mere dust.

Up his hand drifts, across my abdomen, skirting the soft swell of my chest. For a moment, I'm overcome by the urge to angle my breast into his open palm. I question what he might do next. Squeeze the nipple, perhaps, or circle the nub until it aches.

I'm going mad. It's the only logical explanation.

"Someone will see you," I whisper.

"That's the beauty of the fair folk. The only ones they care about are themselves. Look around." He sweeps out a hand. "No one is paying any attention to us."

My face burns, but I peek beneath my eyelashes, searching the room. He's right. Everyone is too focused on gambling or drinking to notice.

"Shall I go on?" Zephyrus asks, a knowing gleam in his eye.

Yes, the devil croons.

He must sense my yearning. He must smell it on my skin, taste it on my breath, feel the shudder running waves of longing through me, a zing amidst my heart, down to the pit of my stomach, the soles of my feet.

I want.

"Shall I describe to you what it felt like," he goes on, "imagining the expression on your face, the sounds you'd make, how sweet your touch would be—"

I slap a hand over his mouth, breathing hard. Our eyes lock and hold: green to brown, god to mortal, captive to the free.

My throat is so dry it takes multiple attempts to peel my tongue from the roof of my mouth. I don't know what to say. How does one properly respond to indecency of the mind? I'm afraid to admit my cravings, to learn of those things, too.

Zephyrus' eyes widen, and I move before I'm aware of it, catching him around the waist as his knees buckle. My legs engage as the full weight of his body sinks against mine.

Panting, he stares at the threadbare rug, shock having frozen his features.

"The venom?" I ask.

He nods, just once, and grits out, "Help me to a chair."

After tossing his arm over my shoulder, we shuffle toward the armchair he vacated earlier. The fireplace emits a wall of stinging heat behind the metal grate. It isn't iron. It gleams like volcanic rock.

I deposit him onto the cushions, and he emits a low oath as he runs his hands up and down his legs, massaging the stiff muscles. Perching on an adjacent chair, I consider how best to manage the kink in our plan. "How bad is it?" The venom must be moving quickly.

"It's already passing." He lifts his head, manages a small smile. A worthy attempt, to be certain, but bleakness stamps shadows beneath his expression.

It was the same during our trek. Every few hours, numbness claimed his legs, dragging him to the earth. He told me the waves would hit with increasing frequency over time. Eventually, the numbness would remain, a paralysis of unfeeling permanence.

"Let us not think of this," he says. "Yakim should be arriving within the hour. Until then, let us enjoy ourselves."

Nodding in agreement, I settle back, fully assuming Zephyrus will do the same. Instead, he perches on the arm of *my* chair, body angled toward me. My skin buzzes in awareness of his proximity.

"Don't you want your own chair?" I suggest with a strained smile. "It's probably more comfortable."

"Am I making you nervous?" His mouth curves fiendishly. The

shadows from a moment ago have vanished, as though he has beaten them into submission.

I will not give him the satisfaction of affirmation. “Isn’t this inappropriate?”

“To you, maybe. To the fair folk, this is positively chaste.” His hand slips beneath my hair to curl around my nape. The touch is a shock. “Imagine we are meeting for the first time.”

His knee bumps my outer thigh, and I startle, clambering for my bearings. *Imagine*. What a treacherous word. For however long, experience a life that is not mine, but that perhaps I yearn for, in some darkened corner of my heart.

“I’m here on business.” Easing back into the chair’s edge, Zephyrus gestures with his free hand. “I’m familiar with the clientele: the wash-ups, the occasional leech.” Against my nape, his thumb skims upward, tracing the sensitive tendon. “But tonight, I spot a woman I’ve never seen before. I wonder who she is and where she comes from. I ask myself why she is here.”

The silence expands in deepening folds. Space—an allowance for my response.

“I am here to visit my sister,” I say quietly, though I have no siblings. He nods in encouragement. “Go on.”

I swallow with difficulty. Thornbrook is all I know, all I’ve ever wanted to know, but the West Wind is a force, and helplessly, I’m swept downstream.

“While I wait, I decide to eat dinner. It was a long journey.” Zephyrus leans closer, his sternum pressed against my shoulder. My heart leaps. His remains steady as ever. “During my meal, I notice a man staring at me from across the room. Our eyes meet, and I feel...”

What I’d feel then is how I feel now. Namely this: overcome.

“Tell me,” he coaxes in a tone I know well. It is deep-rooted, old. It demands I listen.

“Seen,” I relent. “I feel seen.”

Catching my chin, he angles my head so I’m forced to meet his eyes. They brighten the gloom with emerald warmth, a faceted understanding. Though it is a story, it’s too similar to reality for me to pretend otherwise.

“You are,” he whispers. “Seen.”

My tongue slips out to wet my lips, and Zephyrus eases forward a fraction.

A bell chimes, and he drops his hand, turning toward the front door. “Right on time.”

I follow his gaze to a tall, lanky man wearing a maroon vest over a crisp white tunic tucked into the waistband of his trousers. In one hand, he carries a leather briefcase. The other, a scarf, despite the balmy temperature.

“Don’t let his manicured appearance fool you,” Zephyrus whispers. “Yakim is ruthless. Remember that.”

Admittedly, I was expecting someone a bit more bloodthirsty. He possesses a full head of long, sable hair tied in a low tail, only a few shades darker than his stippled skin. Yakim could be forty or seventy. It is difficult to say. His nose is so straight it could substitute as a ruler.

As he crosses toward the bar, my attention snags on the long, thin tail trailing his heels. Some fair folk hunch lower over their tables in an attempt to shield themselves. Once Yakim reaches the bar, he folds himself onto one of the three vacant stools.

“Ailith sells the best spirits in Under,” Zephyrus murmurs into my ear. “Many are very rare, and *very* expensive.”

“He likes to drink?”

“Blood, not wine.”

I grimace.

“Yakim is a demon. Blood is necessary for his survival.” He watches the newest arrival carefully, along with every other patron. “Normally, he would acquire blood through a pet, but when he is unable to procure one, he must purchase it.”

Yakim does not ask for a drink. One simply appears. Wrapping his fingers around the glass, he lifts it to his mouth as Zephyrus says, “He must drink every four hours to keep the madness at bay.”

The tumbler returns to the countertop with a dull thunk. Eventually, patrons return to their conversations, their dinner, their gambling, though the tension, an anticipatory climb, does not break. I, however, keep my focus on the demon as he examines the room. “What do you mean *madness*?”

Yakim’s gaze passes over Zephyrus, and he does a double-take, frowning. I recall what Ailith said to Zephyrus on the porch. *What happened to your face?*

“Switch places with me,” he whispers.

I blink at Zephyrus. “What?”

He’s already drawing me upright. “Here. Sit on my lap.”

I’m standing without knowing how it happened. He tugs me onto his lap, and my legs sprawl across his thighs, the emerald fabric tumbling like falling water, his face unnervingly close. I shove against his chest to put space between us when Yakim rises from the bar, eyes locked on the West Wind.

“He’s coming over,” I hiss.

“Calm, darling.” He squeezes my hip in comfort, though continues to survey the approaching demon. “Keep your eyes on me.”

I try, I really do, but my apprehension morphs into an ugly, deep-seeded fear. Why did I agree to this? Why did I leave Miles Cross, abandon my peers, and sacrifice certain for the uncertain?

As I shift into a more comfortable position, Zephyrus emits a strained oath. My mind blanks out. Firm thighs, the cradle of a man's hips, a solid chest at my back, and this: a long, hard ridge pressing into my backside.

My muscles lock. The air feathers against my skin like a tremor.

I may be a virgin, but I know what happens when a woman lies with a man.

"Give me a moment." His breathless exhalation stirs the curls of my updo.

"Sh-should I move?"

"No." His hand spasms around my hip. "That will only exacerbate the issue."

"Right." The word squeaks out.

He blows out a breath, then laughs, his forehead resting between my shoulder blades. "This is not going to plan."

We had a plan? I'm wound too tightly to remember. "I don't know if I can do this," I whisper. Those loitering in the demon's path make room, scuttling out of range. "What if I say the wrong thing? What if he kills you?"

Hooking his thumb at the edge of my jaw, Zephyrus turns my head to face him.

My breath catches. Our surroundings fade, and I imagine fabric enveloping our private corner, muting sight and sound but for the West Wind, a vision of bright clarity. The bones of his face appear more defined, whetted by shadow and light. His hand gentles on my nape.

"Whatever happens, remember this: it is not real. Understand?" The pads of his fingers slip beneath the collar of my dress with frightening ease. "These are the parts we must play until the deal is done."

I nod in understanding. We discussed this, Zephyrus, Ailith, and I.

The West Wind is my master, and I am his pet.

He studies me a moment longer. “Try to stay in character. If you feel yourself becoming overwhelmed, settle back and I’ll take over. All right?” He tucks a lock of hair behind my ear.

A wave of longing sweeps through me so fiercely I do not even consider how many times he’s touched me without barriers in the last hour. The West Wind is cunning, playful, charismatic, but also lonely, vulnerable, disarmingly sweet.

Sitting sideways on his lap, I watch the demon close the remaining distance, the curled end of his tail having wrapped around his left leg. Zephyrus’ hand slides to my thigh, settling there. My mouth goes dry.

Yakim halts a few paces away, peering down his nose at the West Wind. Flecks of silver glitter within his full-black eyes. “Zephyrus.” The coarseness of his voice reminds me of crushed rock.

Zephyrus inclines his head in response. “Yakim.” The demon’s gaze skips to me and draws a leisurely path from my bared ankles to my chest. My skin stings red with humiliation, but I do not shrink.

Prior to my *embellishment*, Ailith explained to me the ways of a pet.

A pet signals status, she said. It is an object representing ownership and power. A pet, she added, eyes alight, is possession.

When Yakim’s gaze lifts to my face, a small, sated smile curls his mouth. “Is this your pet? She is lovely.”

“She is.” Tightening his hand around my thigh, Zephyrus drags it higher so his fingers catch the fabric, displaying his most recent acquisition. “Poor thing was being traumatized by a horde of nymphs before I found her. Not sure how she got here.” He grins, two rows of white, pointed teeth. “Lucky me.”

“Indeed.” Yakim settles into a vacant armchair and places his briefcase at his feet. “Have you claimed her?”

“I have.” If I’m not mistaken, his canines elongate further. “It was almost too easy.”

Remember this: it is not real.

“You always did love a pretty face.” The demon drums a rhythm on the side table with his skeletal fingers. “It has been some time. I almost didn’t recognize you across the room. The look suits you.” He gestures to Zephyrus’ bulbous nose, though it is smaller than it was weeks ago. “A better reflection of your personality, to be certain.”

Zephyrus inclines his head. “I appreciate that.” He flags the bartender, who delivers him a glass of wine, as well as a glass of blood for Yakim. The demon smacks his lips heartily, deep burgundy coating his tongue, and sets the drink on the table.

With my hands folded atop my lap, I do my best to remain unobtrusive, but every so often I lift my hand to the West Wind’s chest, presenting the image of one enamored by her captor. His arousal still pokes my rear. My mind never strays from it for long.

Swirling the wine, Zephyrus takes a swallow, then deposits his glass on the table. “Thank you for not killing me at the first opportunity.”

“Well.” A brief smile, and to my surprise, the demon’s teeth are white, like small, dazzling pearls tucked among pink gums. “I’d like to believe I’ve mellowed over the last decade. What’s done is done. After all,” he adds, a bit of malice hardening his tone, “it’s just business, right?”

Zephyrus tugs me nearer, his chest warming my spine, almost like a shield against the obvious threat Yakim poses. When I agreed to this charade, I’d hoped to play my part as the simple, vacant mortal woman, clueless as to what is occurring. The longer I spend in the demon’s company, however, the more I understand why Zephyrus wanted me to remain behind.

“No hard feelings I hope,” the West Wind purrs. “You of all people

understand the tenuous nature of a gamble.”

“It was no gamble,” Yakim snarls, blood outlining his shining white teeth. “You double-crossed me.”

“And you’re saying you weren’t planning on doing the same?” He snorts. “Face it. You’re just angry I fooled you first.”

Before Yakim can respond, the West Wind plants both hands on my legs and pulls, spreading them wide. My instinct is to stiffen, pry myself free, but beneath his touch, I soften, my head falling back against his shoulder. Yakim’s attention drops to where the fabric hangs between my spread thighs.

“As much as I appreciate menial small talk,” the demon drawls, eventually shifting his attention to Zephyrus, “why don’t you tell me why you’ve sought me out. It is no coincidence you’re here, Bringer of Spring. Let’s not pretend this meeting wasn’t premeditated.”

“Now that you mention it,” Zephyrus says, “I am here to make a deal.” Gently, he nudges my legs closed. It apparently served his purpose.

The demon laughs, and the conversation at the adjacent table cuts out, for it is a chilling sound, thin and cruel. “How utterly unsurprising you are.” He steeple his fingers together, peering over the point. “Very well. Seeing as you went through all this trouble, I will hear your case.”

Zephyrus dips his chin in a brief display of gratitude. I, too, experience relief. “I’m in the market for a powerful antidote, something able to reverse the effects of nightshade.” Yakim’s dark eyebrows quirk. “Do you have something in your collection?”

“An antidote for nightshade.” He speaks slowly, a jagged fingernail scraping the arm of his chair. His eyelids sink lower, and I’m caught between fascination and revulsion at the way the thin skin stretches over the bulging orbs. “Interesting.”

“Yes, yes, it’s all quite interesting.” Zephyrus waves a hand. “What is

the cost of the antidote? Assuming you have one at your disposal.”

The demon brushes a speck of dust from his maroon vest. “To start, twenty thousand gold coins. Ten thousand for the antidote itself, ten thousand for the trouble of an unscheduled meeting.”

“Twenty thousand.” Zephyrus frowns. My heart begins to thunder, because I have never seen a single coin on his person. Debts and unfulfilled promises are the West Wind’s currency of choice. “It seems a steep price to pay.”

“The antidote contains the grounds of a bezoar stone. Now, it can only be taken at sunrise,” he says, studying me with a wolfish smirk, “however, you will find nothing more potent, no other guarantee to stop the venom.”

My attention snaps to the window as the fingers at my hip flex. It’s still dark. We’ve hours before Under’s enchanted sun rises, if it decides to rise at all.

“I see,” Zephyrus responds, teeth gritted.

A cold smile blooms, lips thinning beneath Yakim’s sharp nose. “If you do not have the payment, well, that *is* a shame.”

What a horrid creature. But in the wilds of Under, only the truly conniving thrive.

In the corner of my eye, Zephyrus appears troubled. Against my better judgment, I slide my fingers through his curls, watching in fascination as they lengthen before springing back into place. Their texture eludes me. My gloves mute all touch.

“I only have twelve thousand coin at the moment,” he says to Yakim. The demon cannot know how near to paralysis Zephyrus is. Even now, another wave of numbness recedes beneath his skin, a faint tremble the only indication. “Will you accept a trade instead?”

Yakim leans back in his armchair, viciously pleased. “Throw in your

pet, and you've got a deal."

That slaps me awake. "Excuse me?"

Pets can be bought, Ailith told me. They can be sold. They can be traded and set free. Only one's master has the power to decide.

Yakim considers me. "So you do have a voice." He appears pleased. "I must say it is as lovely as the rest of you."

It takes two attempts before I'm able to speak without retching. "Zephyrus will pay you whatever amount for the antidote, but I am not part of the deal."

"You are, my dear." How calmly he responds. "I determined it."

I feel faint. It is then I realize Zephyrus no longer touches me. His hands clamp the arms of the chair. "There must be another way—"

"While I appreciate a woman who speaks her mind—" That low, silken cadence makes my stomach turn with dread. "—the decision is not yours to make. I question how well behaved you are, speaking out of turn like this." There is a pause. "We will have to break you of that habit."

My throat aches, and panic morphs beyond my control. It bears a mouth ringed by jagged teeth.

"How desperate are you for this antidote," Yakim murmurs, "old friend?"

Zephyrus wouldn't turn me over. I'm here for *him*. To barter me, no better than a sack of grain, would destroy our newly mended trust. He would not handle my life so carelessly.

"That is your price?" Zephyrus demands. I reach for his hand, but he nudges me away. My stomach plummets.

"It is." The demon glances between us. "The only question is whether you are willing to pay it."

Was this the plan all along? Use me, trade me, dispose of me when I

no longer served his purpose? To think I'd abandoned my peers back in Miles Cross for him.

“And if I am?” Zephyrus holds the demon's gaze.

Yakim cants his head, considering the West Wind. The skin of his neck is so thin I can see the pulse of blood beneath—black veins scuttling to a blacker heart.

Picking up his briefcase, he props it on his lap, opens it toward himself so we are unable to view the inside contents. He selects a vial with a cork stopper, holding it out. Small particles rest at the bottom of the glass.

I dig my fingernails into Zephyrus' arm. “Stop,” I whisper. “Not this.”

He won't meet my eye. “It's the only way.”

What is he going on about? “It's *not*.” It is a choice. There must be another solution we have yet to think of.

Yakim offers the vial between his long, jointed fingers, leaden skin softly wrinkled, akin to bloated flesh. “It can be yours,” he murmurs. “All I need is your pet's name.”

“Give me the antidote, and you will have it.”

The drum of my pulse echoes—body, mind, heart. I was wrong about Zephyrus. Again.

The vial disappears into the demon's fist. He grins. “You are the last person I would ever trust, Bringer of Spring. Who is to say you will not flee once the antidote is in your possession?” He clucks his tongue in disappointment. “We do the exchange my way, or not at all.”

“My way,” Zephyrus counters, “or you can forget about my pet.”

Yakim laughs his cold, brittle caw. “I have no need for a human companion. Yours is lovely, but there are others I can obtain by easier means.”

Zephyrus holds himself stiffly. The air reeks with my sweat, which

pours down my chest and spine. *He wouldn't. He can't.* But I have forgotten who Zephyrus is: a once-beloved god. He is used to getting his way.

Nudging me into a standing position, he directs me toward the tall, spindly demon. Panic spikes as the hand against my back lowers. When that, too, is removed, I go cold. The trap, I finally understand, was never for Yakim. It was for me.

“Brielle,” the West Wind states. “Her name is Brielle.”

CHAPTER 31

The demon's eyes brighten. "Brielle," he croons, flashing those bone-white teeth. "How lovely."

I am still, caught within a perpetuating echo. *Brielle*. The most carefully safe-guarded secret, bargained away, no more significant than a bit of dented coin.

The trade is made, the antidote passed into the West Wind's hand, and twelve thousand coin given to Yakim, plucked from the air itself. Zephyrus also relinquishes a glass bottle, similar to the ones I witnessed being sold at the sea-nymphs' celebration. Its shimmering contents contain my name. The great room drifts out of focus, naught but a melancholy blur tinged in sweet smoke. After a time, Yakim collects his briefcase, downs the remainder of his drink, and turns to me.

"I can understand why Zephyrus wanted you for himself." He peers down the blade of his nose, a spot of blood clotted at the corner of his mouth. His long, spindly hand catches a lock of my hair, and I recoil, knocking into Zephyrus. Whereas the West Wind's presence had offered reassurance only moments ago, it currently hangs as a reek in the air.

"Your old master did not recognize what a treasure you are," he

murmurs, “but what can you expect from a god? They are arrogant, self-serving, interested only in their own gain.” That sharp smile makes a reappearance. “His loss.”

What horrible truth he speaks. I cannot mourn this loss of trust because it was never mine to begin with. A lesson I learned too late.

Tears sting my eyes. I refuse to let them fall. Fear has dogged my heels for the last ten years, but I have learned to live with it. I *will* get through this. Once Mother Mabel learns I’m missing, she will come for me.

Yakim’s expression softens. “Don’t be frightened, my dear.” His gaze, bright with greed, cuts to Zephyrus. “I care for what’s mine.”

Stepping away, briefcase in hand, the demon says to me, “A moment, Brielle, if you will. You are not to leave without my permission.” He dodges a nearby table and vanishes down a side corridor. A few patrons observe his departure, and only when he’s out of sight do they visibly relax.

“Brielle.” The West Wind catches my hand. “Look at me.”

I lurch from his hold, collapsing into the opposite chair. The silk skirt billows in green clouds before sagging around my trembling legs. “How could you?” My gut churns with the horror of a plan gone wrong. I should have known better. Why do I not learn?

“I need you to look at me—”

His voice bleeds into the hum of background noise: clinking dishware, thudding boots, the roar of the fireplace. Zephyrus is but a shadow standing over me, faceless, nameless. At this point, I’m uncertain of my way forward. How is Mother Mabel to know where to find me? Would she risk her life, the lives of my peers, to bring me back to Carterhaugh safely?

Slowly, I lift my head. What matters? Only this: the root from which the bud sprouts. “Why?” I thought I’d seen a change in Zephyrus. How deep does my naivete truly run?

“Come.” He glances over his shoulder, gestures me to follow him. “We don’t have much time.”

“Did you not hear what he said?” I spit. “I can’t leave. You gave my name away!”

You must never speak your name aloud, Brielle. Ever. Should any of the fair folk hear your name, they will have power over you. More power than you can ever imagine. Keep it safe.

My fingers curl into the chair arms. If I could exchange nails for claws, I’d gouge those green eyes without a second thought. “I trusted you.”

The West Wind studies me, completely unaffected by my hurt. “Can you move your limbs?”

He really is heartless. And I am Carterhaugh’s biggest fool. “What does that have to do with anything?”

Deeper and deeper I spiral, down into a lightless pit. Where will the demon take me? What will he make me do now that he has control over me? I am afraid. But more so, I am sick with rage.

Spearing his fingers through his curls, Zephyrus glances down the hall where Yakim disappeared. He holds himself tensely, shoulders straining the seams of his tunic. “Will you just try? Please?” A few patrons look on. I’ve not forgotten the bounty on Zephyrus’ head. Neither have they.

Curiously, I circle my ankles. “What are you not telling me?”

“Walk to the door.”

“But—”

“Please.” Another furtive peek to the hallway.

I stay put. “Tell me why.” I’m tired of his secrets.

Zephyrus pivots, gaze stony, and strides to my chair. He leans over me, his shadow eclipsing my form, and slips a finger beneath my collar, pulling the trinity knot pendant free. “The Father shields you.”

The gold piece shines against his tanned hand. A tentative wash of

gratitude moves through me, for I was never in any danger. I was always cared for, looked after. *It's not real.*

Lifting my eyes, I peer into the West Wind's gold-flecked gaze. The soft curve of his mouth lies less than a handspan away. He is near enough to taste.

"Was I ever in any danger?" I whisper.

A small furrow crimps his brow. "Had you lost your necklace, or had someone snatched it, you would have been vulnerable. I did not tell you because it was better to precede with caution."

"What about the glass bottle you gave him? What was inside?"

"I'd like to think my powers are strong enough to create a bit of shimmering air." He is somber as he says, "I would not betray you, not again." He stares at me a moment longer before pushing away. "We must go. Hold this for me. Keep it safe."

He passes the vial into my hands. Right. It cannot be activated until sunrise. I slide it into my pocket, yet hesitate, a hand fisted in my dress. "I can't run in this."

He yanks me from the chair and slings my pack onto his shoulder, having stowed it near the wall. "You don't have a choice."

We run—across the great room, out the door, down the stairs, navigating the wet, buckling boardwalk spanning the steaming bog. We leap onto a strip of high ground, which leads to a dirt lane cutting through the marshland.

We're halfway down the road when a shriek of rage erupts at our backs.

Wood splinters, followed by a massive splash. Zephyrus jerks me along, aided by the weak propulsion of air at our heels. A few steps later, the wind fails, and he begins to pant, sweat sliding down his face. I try to keep pace, but his long legs propel him faster, farther.

Zephyrus cuts right, plunging off the road into the swamp. We sink knee-deep into the putrid water, and slime sucks at my boots as I trudge forward, the drag of my dress catching on whatever lurks in its depths. Something scuttles across my ankle and is gone. Bubbles erupt atop the murky surface, expelling the stench of rotting meat.

Steps ahead, Zephyrus leaps into a tree, swings from branch to branch until he is nearly out of sight. I struggle to catch up, but panic begins to cloud my senses. No matter how hard I fight the bog, its cold, muddy clasp is far stronger. The water deepens. It laps at my chest, collarbones, neck, my arms lifted free of the surface.

I look to the canopy. There is neither movement nor sound in this dead, waterlogged place. I spin in a slow circle, scanning the moss-laden branches. The sky lies vague and shadowed above.

On the next turn, Zephyrus appears as a dark shape above, plunging toward the water. He hits the bog with a splash. "Grab hold," he pants. Sweat and muck plaster the hair to his scalp.

I climb onto his back, and we take a flying leap into the sweeping boughs of a nearby tree. From there, Zephyrus springs to a higher branch. I cling to his back like a stubborn bur until we arrive at the upper reaches of the canopy. There, we settle down to wait.

A beast thrice the size of a horse enters the clearing. Four limbs, a dripping maw, its spine pushed so severely against its back I swear I see bone.

"Is that Yakim?" I whisper.

Zephyrus nods, a finger pressed to his lips. *Watch*, he mouths.

The demon lurches below, winding through trees, scenting out our trail. The putrid fog overlaying the swamp must help mask our scents, because after a time, it moves off.

"What now?" I ask. As soon as we climb down, the splash will alert

Yakim to our presence. But we can't hide forever.

"The way I see it, we have one option." Crouched amongst the branches, Zephyrus rubs his palms against his trousers, his cheeks pale despite the hard run. "We'll have to kill Yakim."

I hesitate, a bit uncomfortable with the implication, but if Yakim's death makes room for Zephyrus' life, surely the Father would make an exception. Yakim is a demon. Zephyrus is a god. It's the only way forward.

I pull my dagger from the small of my back. The blade glints dully. "Tell me how."

"No." The word thrums with command as Zephyrus catches my wrist, forcing me to lower the weapon against the folds of green fabric veiling the branch I sit on. "I'll go alone. It's safer that way."

"What about the venom? The numbness?" I see it in his eyes, the apprehension of another wave hitting him when he's vulnerable. The enchanted sky has begun to lighten, but only just. Until the sun appears, Zephyrus can't risk taking the antidote. "We should stick together."

He falls quiet then, eyes downcast.

"What is it?" I shift closer, grabbing onto a higher branch for support.

"I suppose..." He takes a breath, winces, but pushes on. "I do not want to place that burden on you—the responsibility of my life." Beneath the sopping tunic, his chest pulses erratically, each heartbeat tripping into the next. "You thought I had given you to Yakim. You thought I'd broken your trust."

I wince. "I apologize."

"No." He lifts a hand. "The fault is mine. I have given you reason to doubt my word, my intentions. Maybe that's why I fear placing the burden on you. I do not want to believe you care out of fear that you do not."

"Zephyrus." I take his hand in mine. "Of course I care. Why do you

think I'm here?"

"Who is to say you will not abandon me?"

Oh, how wrong he is. How like a child in this moment.

A shudder runs through him despite the muggy atmosphere. "You should never have come. You should have stayed in Carterhaugh where it is safe."

My heart aches for the man he'd been, the man he still carries with him despite the passing centuries. "Look at me." Reluctantly, he lifts his eyes. "If you think I would abandon you to a demon," I murmur, "then you don't know me at all."

He sags against the trunk, legs hanging, clothes mud-spattered, in complete disarray. "It would be nothing less than I deserve."

He's wrong, but as long as Zephyrus believes himself right, my protest will fall on deaf ears. For now, I attempt to redirect his attention, hone his focus. "Do you feel your power weakening?"

"Yes." Quiet, internal. "But Yakim must be dealt with." After removing my pack from his shoulders, he tucks it between the branches and drops neatly into the water. "I'll be back."

As I watch him go, I understand life is a collection of choices, and here is one more I must make. I should listen to Zephyrus. The trees shield me. Enveloped in their branches, I am safe. And yet, he has no weapon. His power flags. My iron blade might be all that can defeat this demon. Only I can decide what path my life will take.

I hold the power, I realize. I have always held the power.

After tying back my hair, I grab my rucksack and climb down the tree, following the direction Zephyrus went, Yakim's path littered with broken branches, mud plastered to old stumps, and massive, clawed footprints. I push forward, but the dress is so heavy, the corset so tight, that it's impossible to catch my breath. I continue onward, slower than I would

like, until the rumbling growl of a beast rattles my chest. Something large and menacing shifts between the trees ahead.

Zephyrus faces the demon, his back to me. The beast slinks forward, ears flattened against its skull. Crouched at the edge of the clearing, I palm my dagger, thumb pressed against the frayed leather wrapping, a small notch having worn away. Zephyrus stands alone, unharmed, yet weaponless. He does not move. He waits to die.

The demon hurtles forward with a roar, and I am running, knife in hand, toward the West Wind's back. I am not afraid. The Father guides me over pressed grass, drowned muck. The demon is within lunging distance when I knock Zephyrus aside, leap forward, and bury the knife into the beast's chest.

It recoils, falling back with an ear-shattering shriek. The motion wrenches me forward, my blade firmly imbedded into muscle. A short twist of my arm frees the dagger. I stumble back as the demon lurches upright in a mass of swelling muscle. Its skin sizzles, melting away from the touch of lethal iron. It sways before managing to right itself.

“Brielle!” Zephyrus' scream falls to pieces.

That sharp-toothed maw drives toward me. I dodge, fighting the drag of my soaked dress, and slash the dagger toward its throat. It rears back, uprooting trees, stirring the bog into agitation. Again, I lunge for its throat, but a mountain of air slams the creature back.

It tumbles head over tail, colliding with an ancient cypress. Branches splinter and leaves scatter. Then it's up, charging, steam curling from its slitted nostrils. A slither of silver air coils around a hind leg, binding tight. The demon strains in a fit of gnashing teeth. How long will it hold? If I am to end this, I must not falter.

Darting around Zephyrus, I plunge the dagger into its torso a second

time, then slash the blade across its throat. Ichor pours forth, and the bog shudders from the demon's collapse.

My chest heaves. My hand shakes. Sweat and musk drench me from head to toe, but I refuse to turn my eye from the beast. It might not be dead. It could rise again.

“Brielle.”

“What if it heals itself?” I demand. “We can't take any chances.”

“Yakim is dead.”

I whirl, and there Zephyrus stands, a single scratch marring the otherwise smooth skin of his cheek. He is handsome. Beautiful, even. What manner of sorcery is this?

“Your face.” I'm still staring. It hovers on the threshold of perfection, indescribable splendor, sharp enough to cut. “How—”

He collapses with a cry.

As his head vanishes beneath the surface, I lunge, catching him around the collar and hauling him upright. He sags into me, dragged down by his weakened legs. By the Father, I wish the sun would reveal itself.

“The tree,” he grits. “Bring me to that tree.”

I don't appreciate his tone, but I drag him to the tract of dirt, where an old cypress oversees the sprawling wetland. He grabs a low branch, hanging there, glaring at me like an irate kitten. “That was the stupidest thing you've ever done,” he growls.

Steady is my gaze. I've spent enough time in the West Wind's company to expect these outbursts, though I am not partial to the misdirected ire. “It was going to kill you. You just stood there—”

“I was going to end it with my power,” he retorts, teeth pointed and agleam. “It had to be at the last possible second. A single strike to the heart.”

“How was I supposed to know?”

“I told you not to interfere.”

My blood hums dangerously, and my fingers twitch around the knife, drawing his eye. “I likely saved your life,” I hiss. We have been here before. I’m beginning to wonder if he prefers death. “A simple thank you would suffice.”

“Thank you?” He laughs, yet the sound fractures, becomes something else, a vast, emotional upwelling as his face crumples. A tear slides down one cheek, shocking me to the core.

I step forward, suddenly uncertain of my place.

“Brielle.” He speaks with unusual humility, a muted plea. “I can’t watch someone I care for die again.” Silver streaks his green gaze. “I don’t think I could bear it.”

His admission softens me and saddens me. He has experienced much strife in his immortal life, but haven’t we all? The difference is, I’ve had support—Thornbrook, my peers, Mother Mabel. Zephyrus is alone.

At our backs, the demon lies askew in a pool of reeking decay. It serves as a reminder: not everyone makes it out of Under alive.

Lifting my hand to his cheek, I say, “We will get through this together. I have faith.” My thumb catches a tear, where it trembles, dewdrop clear.

His gaze holds mine, and time spins out. “I lost faith long ago,” he says.

“That’s all right. I have enough faith for us both.”

Zephyrus abruptly releases the branch, his nostrils flaring. The numbness must have passed, for he’s able to stand without aid.

I am still. “What is it?”

A mournful cry, low and eerie, winds through the bowed, moss-draped trees.

“The Hounds,” he murmurs.

A chill overtakes me—body, mind, heart.

Snagging my wrist, the West Wind hauls me deeper into the marshland at a run. Sodden brush snags at my gown, lacerates my face and legs. Blood wells to points. A tree blinks into existence an arm's length away. I lurch sideways, veering around its gnarled trunk as he leaps with my arm in tow. My shoulder joint wrenches, then sears, forcing my back to curve to alleviate the pain. "Zephyrus!"

"Run, Brielle, lest you want to die."

I'm tossed forward, the wind momentarily bearing my weight. My feet hit the squelching earth, and I stumble, my boots catching in one of the twisting roots. Another push against my back. Arms pumping, thighs trembling, each sawing breath a white diamond in my sternum.

"Faster," he pants.

"I can't." The words collapse beneath the next expulsion of air. My pack slams my lower back incessantly. My calves cramp from strain, and my sopping clothes drag me toward the mucky earth. I cannot die in this place. I refuse. The world awaits me. There is so much left to see.

We dive through dense bramble pricked by thorns. They tear into my dress, hair, skin. Zephyrus swears and blasts a pathway through the treachery, uprooting flora, the tallest, most ancient trees.

A massive crack echoes through the bog. Somewhere in the distance, a tree drops its leaves.

The twisting route leads us to higher ground. We leap from island to decaying log, always seeking to avoid the deepest waters, the nameless creatures lurking beneath.

Zephyrus cuts toward a copse of trees in the distance. "This way."

My foot slips. Down I go, crashing through the water. It burns my eyes and nose, but I manage to flounder into a seated position. I'm dizzy,

weakening, but I'm up, I'm limping along for seven, eight, ten steps. The weight of my body, however, is too much.

"Zephyrus." My knees fold, and I drop into the mud, fighting tears.

He bounds over, gold-kissed skin marred by the dark eruptions of scabs beginning to form. The Hounds yelp with heightening frenzy, likely sensing their waning prey.

"I can't go on," I whisper hoarsely. "I'm done." My body is spent. I barely have the breath to speak. Zephyrus is immortal. I am not.

Leaning down, he grips my arm, panting, "You can't give up. The bog will end. It's only a bit farther." He tries to haul me onto my feet, but my legs refuse to cooperate.

"You're not listening to me." My voice climbs, and cracks from compounding exhaustion. "It's not that I won't go on. I *can't*. I am physically incapable of outrunning those Hounds." Tears cut hot pathways through the cooling mud on my face.

With staunch calm, he kneels beside me. In this moment, his eyes are old. They have seen things I likely never will: life and death and the heartbreaking reality of a changing world when one stands still. "I do not want to die in this place."

"You think I do?" I swipe the dampness from my cheeks, only to smear more filth across my freckled skin.

Zephyrus takes in our surroundings. A few muddy islands interrupt the span of gray water. The scent of rot drifts steadily nearer, and a dog bellows nearby, though I can't pinpoint its direction.

"It could work." He regards one of the small islands. "There's a burrow over there, see it? We'll hide until the Hounds pass."

Who is to say we will not be rabbits flushed into a trap? "You're forgetting their sense of smell."

He tosses me a wry smile. "I assure you, I haven't."

He's gathering up mud in fistfuls, he's smearing it across his face, he's slopping it atop his thighs and dragging the mess beneath his tunic to coat his skin.

His gaze meets mine. "Now you."

I'm too drained to lift my arms. Neck, breasts, then thighs, Zephyrus smears the sludge over every curve and into every crevasse until I'm covered from head to toe in the sludge, save my eyes and mouth. The chilled grit encases me in its foul reek.

On hands and knees, I slink into the wide, flattened opening. Using Zephyrus' hand as a guide, I manage to squeeze into the hollow, losing sight of the bog in the process. The tunnel's damp, ridged walls lead to a much larger chamber where the West Wind crouches. Roots dangle from the ceiling, eerily similar to strands of hair.

Mud collects around my boots as I awkwardly try to turn in the cramped space and find my face level with Zephyrus' groin.

I recoil, slamming my skull into the ceiling. A hiss of pain slides out of me.

"All right?" He watches me in concern.

"Yes." Leaning against the soggy walls, I collapse into a breathless heap, arms and legs askew, supplies crushed beneath my body, skin pulsing from the fear firing my blood. As my vision adjusts to the burrow's darkness, Zephyrus settles beside me, his shoulder brushing mine.

Huddled together, we wait. Small vibrations in the earth announce the Hounds' approach. A horrid stench heralds their arrival.

They sniff and snort and growl above, water splashing as their limbs disturb the stagnant pool. Their odor infiltrates the burrow, and I squeeze my eyes shut, retreating to the placid green garden tucked inside my heart. *Please, Father. Help us.* If we are caught, my soul would never know peace.

After a time, the Hounds move off, yipping and howling their

frustration. When the sound dies, I release a fraught breath. “Now what?”

“Now,” he says, “we wait. If they don’t return within the next ten minutes, it’s probably safe for us to continue. We’re near the edge of the bog. I can smell fresh greenery in the distance.”

My head jerks awkwardly, not quite a nod. It is both relief and sustained agony. Under offers no guarantees. We might never reach the end of the wetland.

“I want to thank you, Brielle.” Zephyrus draws his knees to his chest as a child might in need of comfort. “No one has ever risked their life for me before. If not for you, I would have had to face yet another tithe alone.”

I’ve never heard words so bitter, rent to shreds by heartache. I ask, “Even after what happened with Hyacinth, you didn’t seek to love another?”

He turns his head. In this position, our noses align, mouths separated by a small span of dusk-colored air. “I have been alone for a long time. It is safer for me, for everyone.”

My heart pumps dizzily. “You don’t desire companionship?”

“The problem with living forever,” he responds quietly, “is the people you grow to care for will eventually leave you.” Face pinched, he angles away from me. “A body ages. Bones fall brittle and organs fail. Do I desire companionship?” A forced smile takes shape upon his mouth. “Yes. But I am well aware of its trappings.”

I had not considered companionship from the perspective of one who lives forever. What a sad thing to experience. “I’m sorry.”

“Do not pity me. I accepted my fate long ago.” His attention returns to mine. “Is that what you want? To walk through life with another?”

It’s silly to even consider the possibility. I am a Daughter of Thornbrook. Once I take my Final Vows, there can be no man in my life save the Father.

But I have thought of it, briefly. A passing notion that will never come true.

“I do wish that,” I admit, “sometimes.”

His chest deflates with a slow expulsion of air, which smells of the earth in warming. His eyes are very dark. They remind me these woods are not safe. “Have you thought of the qualities this companion would possess?”

There is a silence. I’m ashamed to imagine the possibility at all, but cowering in this burrow, far from civilization, no one from Thornbrook ever has to know.

“This man would be kind,” I murmur, because what is love without kindness? “He would act selflessly. He would treat those around him with compassion and respect. He would always seek to better himself.”

What else? “This man would give his life to the Father. He would face conflict readily and speak honestly. His intentions would be nothing less than pure.”

This man is ideal. Unfortunately, he does not exist. When I think of the person whose presence makes my heart skip, the qualities do not necessarily align. They exist in shades of gray.

Zephyrus appears saddened by what I said. “And you would deserve nothing less.”

I bite my lip shyly. It means more than I can say. “What about you?”

“I’m a simple man, Brielle. All I want is for someone to know my heart is theirs. That is all.”

I’m still considering this when he draws away. “It’s time,” he says.

I force myself to nod. Ready or not, we must act.

“We’ll split up, and I’ll draw them off. The Hounds never miss a scent twice.” He slides out into the open, then sticks his arm back into the

burrow. I'm remembering what it feels like to become prey. The permeating sweat-stench. The shredding of one's lungs from a long, deafening run.

A wave of nausea rolls through me, but I grasp his hand, allowing him to pull me from our shelter. The wet heat of the bog adheres to my skin in a fresh coat of perspiration. Mist drifts atop the water.

"I'll draw them north," Zephyrus says. "Go south. Once the bog ends, find whatever shelter you can. I'll return for you."

The moment he pulls away, the air sweeps in with a disconcerting chill. His gaze catches mine, and holds.

I lick my lips nervously. "Stay safe."

His attention drops to my mouth, and lingers. "And you, Brielle of Thornbrook." Then the West Wind vanishes through the low-hanging fog.

It feels as though the wind gives aid to my feet, nudging them onward with increasing speed as I splash through the marsh, clouds of insects descending, then scattering at my arrival. The baying dogs my heels, yet my legs spring forward with seamless togetherness. I move like the Bringer of Spring, a god whose motions aid the wind.

A break in the trees ahead reveals a well-trodden forest path. I follow its trampled curve as the terrain ascends, climbing free of the soft earth for however brief a time. The yelps are much closer than I realized, growing louder by the minute. My stomach drops.

It is not Zephyrus' scent the Hounds have caught.

It is mine.

CHAPTER 32

In the black, lightless womb of the bog, I run.

Leaping over collapsed vegetation, I plow through the murk, doing my best to avoid the deepest waters, the areas of marshland devoid of risen earth. My stomach cramps, snarling into a knot beneath my right hip bone. It is beyond pain, beyond the most excruciating agony. *Rest*, my body demands. I cannot.

I've pushed myself to the very edge of what I can sustain, yet my weighted legs continue to move. I crash through stagnant pools, rotten debris, climbing over carcasses strewn on the sloped banks, their skin shiny with bloat. There is a reason I hate running. My breastband begins to slacken, causing the large appendages to bounce painfully. My dress hangs in tatters around my body. The air lies dead against my skin.

Ahead—a break in the trees. Light punctures through every gap and hollow, sweeping wide across a long plain of short yellow grass floating above the waterlogged grave. The baying reaches new heights, a frenzied discord. I glance over my shoulder. Shapes crowd the undergrowth, too many to count.

I careen forward with a choked sob. Death awaits. I'm not ready. I

cannot die here, so far from the sun.

Halfway across the clearing, my boot catches on a depression in the soil. I hit the ground hard, rolling twice before slamming onto my back. The Hounds close in. They are not dogs. They are beasts wrought by the realm's insidious darkness.

My dagger appears between one breath and the next. Pushing to my feet, I face the pack, iron blade steady despite my heaving lungs and coarse, ragged gasps. Its hilt bites into my palm, and the pain grounds me. I am not dead. Not yet, anyway.

Saliva pools in their fleshy jowls. White, glistening strings soak the matted fur tufting their chests. Closer they prowl, heads swinging low. Knobbed, crooked tails protrude from their lower spines. Nothing remains of their snouts except small cavities. Their rib bones gleam white, devoid of muscle or skin, revealing the scooped-out hollows of their stomachs. By the Father, I've never seen anything so unholy.

Two dogs slink forward. Tattered skin encases their limber hind legs. I glance between them in rising panic, for the circle closes at my back, cutting off my escape. I am a woman with a knife. No less, no more.

The first Hound lunges with a snarl. I pivot, slashing across its dulled eyes. It yelps and falls back, riling the pack into a great, howling mass that snaps at my legs. I kick out, catching one in the snout, then punch my blade through another's back. The circle tightens. There must be thirty surrounding me in total. They take turns nipping and retreating, stirring me into blackened terror, where there is neither thought nor clarity, where the blade is all that matters.

Another Hound strikes my leg. I spin away from its attack and kick out. As my foot connects with the ribcage, its teeth sink into my thigh, and I scream, driving the blade into the back of its skull. The creature drops, twitching.

I whirl, sweat rolling in fat droplets down my face, to catch another Hound mid-leap. It slams into my chest, and I go sprawling, the knife knocked from my grasp.

Two massive paws dig into my sternum. The pack descends, clamoring atop each other, but my focus remains on the Hound's facial cavity, the wretched stench of its breath, drool splattering my cheeks in fat, gooey wads. I am pinned. Too weak to move.

Thunder erupts through the clearing, and the pack scatters.

Something slides beneath my arms. "It's me," Zephyrus whispers. "Hold on."

Up we go, the wind hauling us into the trees. I'm too exhausted to protest and allow Zephyrus to maneuver my feet upon a high branch, my back to the wide, sturdy trunk. He's a mess. Mud spatters his ripped trousers, and his tunic, once white, hangs limp and dingy around his frame. A cut on his chin, newly opened, weeps blood.

"Thank you," I whisper. At the base of the tree, the Hounds plant their paws onto the trunk, yelping their protest.

Crouching at my side, the West Wind relieves me of my weighted rucksack, setting it aside. He then adjusts the fabric of my dress so it covers my bare legs. "It seems I'm not the only one who is lured by your scent," he whispers. At my flat stare, he shrugs. "Bad joke."

"I'm tired, Zephyrus." My voice strains. I could sleep for a thousand years if given the opportunity.

"I know." He tucks a damp red curl behind my ear, the tips of his fingers brushing the heated skin there. "I'll take care of it."

I catch his hand in mine. "There are too many." Wan is his face, and drawn. Hour by hour, the West Wind fades.

"You worry too much, darling." He offers me a smile, however

forced. “Am I not the West Wind? Do I not call upon spring in all forms?” Yet the lines around his mouth deepen. Those mossy eyes have dulled.

Quietly, I say, “I don’t want you to die.”

“Brielle.” Equally quiet and aggrieved. “At this point, I would welcome death.”

He is gone within the next heartbeat, dropping onto the grass below. Out punches four spheres of air in rapid succession. Three hit their marks. The fourth veers wide as Zephyrus sidesteps, evading a rogue beast.

I’ve never seen anything like it. He is a painting, music, a dance. He lifts a hand, and another Hound dies. The wind is his to forge, and he hammers it effortlessly, noosing another two beasts, decapitating a third with a sword hewn from the air itself.

Zephyrus pivots then, yet accidentally overbalances. He barely avoids a bite to the arm. Again, he stumbles, trying to right himself.

Immortal or not, the West Wind is unwell. I cannot allow him to face this alone.

As I drop into the meadow, the long stalks stir around my legs. Two more Hounds fall, their bodies shattered.

The air, fashioned into two massive, circular blades, careens forward, slicing the grass to bits. Blood sprays as the dogs scatter. When the aftermath settles, four are dead, spliced into ribbons. Their white bones dissolve into dust.

The baying spikes with newfound hunger. As the drove regroups, Zephyrus retreats until his back hits a tree, legs sinking into a half-crouch, hands raised. Air erupts, then dies to a mere breeze, a limp stirring that goes no farther than his reach. His eyes widen as the Hounds surge toward him and he disappears from view.

Terror like I’ve never known surges through me. “Zephyrus!” Snatching my knife from the ground, I race toward him.

Under shudders in warning. I manage two more steps before the air tightens. Somehow, it is *pulled* from my lungs, a hand reaching down my throat to rip free the life-giving substance. My ears pop, and out sweeps a roar that buckles my knees, body collapsing atop the quaking earth. There is a scream.

Gale-force winds pound upon me. I lift my head, pushing against the force as entire trees are uprooted, tossed far and wide. Through my slitted vision, I seek that which does not belong: green in the gray-brown rot of Under.

He unfurls then, clothes in shreds, and hums an eerie tune set in a darkly minor key, the wind tearing at his air, snaking around his arms in protective bands. The West Wind's eyes glow liquid silver. He is something I cannot comprehend.

Raising his hands, the air grows charged, smelling of sweetest honey and warmest sunlight. Flowers sprout at his feet, a blooming field infusing color throughout the land.

Zephyrus flings out his arms, a gust snatching up the Hounds one by one and tossing them skyward. Then he brings his hands together with a world-shattering crack.

A massive stem erupts from the clearing's center. I stumble back, losing my balance as another tremor rocks the ground. Long, vicious thorns rupture through the stalk to pierce the Hounds straight through.

The melody eases into a collection of haunted chords, the gentle rise and fall of modulation. As it changes key, new shoots penetrate the beasts' shadowy skin, gouging into flesh as worms gouge the earth. The yelps grow fainter, and the twitching falls still. With another crack, what remains of the Hounds dissipates.

When the air clears, Zephyrus stumbles, a hand to his head. I cross

the remaining distance at once. “Are you hurt?” I do not recognize my voice, its shrill cry. Blood stains his clothes black.

He lifts his head, face taut with pain, and stares at me with those odd, silver eyes. He is strange and he is a stranger.

“It’s me,” I whisper. “Brielle.”

Silver dims, and gives way to sweeping green. *There you are.* The West Wind, returned to me. “Brielle.” Hands braced on his knees, he scans my body, the lines of grit and blood, the scabbed sores. “Are you hurt?”

“My thigh.” I gesture to the teeth marks. Blood clots the wound’s edges.

He studies it for a moment, then says, “It will need to be cleaned. My brother might have something for it.” As if sensing my distress, he adds, “The Hounds are not venomous. I’m more concerned with infection.”

I nod, drop my dress, though the ground feels unstable. A small miracle, really, that we both escaped the Hounds alive.

“The antidote?”

My eyes snap skyward. There, to the east—a thin line of gold. “Here.” I pull it from my pocket and pass it over. Had I dropped it in the bog, it would have been lost, and any hope along with it.

The West Wind studies the clear liquid, twisting the vial this way and that. “This isn’t the antidote I gave you.”

Grave is his expression. Grave and frightening. “Yes,” I reply cautiously, “it is.”

Those long, tanned fingers twitch, knuckles stripped white. “It’s not.”

“That *is* the antidote you gave me. I promise you.” What is he going on about?

Crushing the vial in his fist, he turns away, head bowed. “Then we have been deceived.”

“What do you mean?” When he does not reply, I grab his shoulder. “Zephyrus.”

His muscles lock beneath my fingers, wooden and inflexible. “I mean it’s a fake!” he roars, hurling the vial into the brush. Glass shatters against the hard corners of the forest.

“Are you sure?” How, exactly, can he know? “Maybe there’s an explanation—”

He shrugs off my touch. “I’m certain, Brielle. We need bezoar grounds. This is water, nothing more. I’m not sure if he changed the contents somehow or…” What follows is the low, tortured sound of the helpless and the broken. It colors the air, a black anguish. “I was so focused on deceiving Yakim I didn’t stop to consider whether he would do the same.” He’s shaking, a fist pressed to his forehead. “*Fuck!*”

Numbness begins to branch through my body, heavy and cold. The journey, the deceit, the charade, and this: hunger, shock, fear. Our actions have made no difference. We are only miles nearer to total paralysis.

As the West Wind stares off, the forest burgeons in his eyes. Snagging thorns and soil inundated with the freshly decomposed. Wetness sheens his pupils, and he limps off a few steps before one knee folds and he’s forced to use a tree for support. Seconds later, the second knee buckles. He collapses with a cry of pain.

Rushing to his side, I take his hand in mine. We had time, he and I. Days. In another life, perhaps years. But the venom permeates his body with increasing rapidity. I do not know what life remains.

“Can we talk about this?” I ask.

Zephyrus pinches the bridge of his nose. “What is there to discuss? The entire mission was pointless.”

Whatever grief I feel, it cannot compare to that of a god. Those

bright, shining deities, infallible in the face of calamity. How easily disappointment can twist the mind.

When I have exhausted all options, I turn to the Father. He is my compass, my comfort. Thus, I extend this grace to Zephyrus in his hour of need.

Gently, I draw his hand to my heart. His palm splays to absorb the throbbing beat.

“Do not give in to despair,” I whisper, pressing my cheek to his. “You are alive. We both are. The day is not yet done.”

His swallow clicks near my ear. “I appreciate the sentiment, but this is the end for me.”

“It is not the end.” I am certain. “Not yet.”

“I can’t escape this fate.” A hard breath shudders out of him, and he pulls away, rubbing at the wetness trickling down his cheeks. “I might as well wait for the paralysis to set in. It’s what Pierus expected anyway.”

“As long as you are free,” I tell him, “no time is wasted.” Curling my arms around his waist, I draw him deeper into my embrace. He is stiffer than a plank of wood, but our warmth blends, and he eventually sags into me with a small sound of relief.

“Every moment spent in my company is a risk to your life,” he argues. “Forget this, Brielle. Let us return to Carterhaugh in the time we have left.”

“No.” How could I sleep knowing he used his waning strength to ensure my safety at the detriment of his own life? “I’m not giving up.” I came all this way. If he cannot carry himself, then I will carry us both. I am certainly strong enough. “We still have a few days before the paralysis takes effect.” Maybe. If we are lucky.

“It’s not days,” he responds, the words flat. “It’s hours, and I need rest.”

Panic continues to pummel the door. I will not let it in. “Then you will rest.” As much as we must push onward, sleep would benefit him greatly, even if it’s for an hour. Antidote or not, the mission does not end here. “How much farther until we reach Notus’ realm?”

I feel the arhythmic pulsations from his skin, likely his muscles fighting the venom’s grasp. Again, Zephyrus pulls away, but doesn’t go far. He touches my wrist, his stiff fingers locked, unable to bend. “Fifteen miles? Forty?” He shakes his head. “I can’t remember, but it is too far and too much to ask of you.”

“It’s not,” I reassure him.

“You’re not listening to me,” he says, growing agitated. “I’m telling you it’s dangerous. I’m giving you an out. Why won’t you take it?”

He reminds me of a captured bird, too fearful to flee when the cage stands open. “What is this truly about, Zephyrus?”

His emerald eyes meet mine. “Why won’t you leave me?” he whispers, low and agonized.

How like a child he sounds. The answer, it turns out, is simple. “Because I know how it feels to watch someone walk away from you, and I would spare you that pain if I could.” With our hands locked in an undeniable embrace, I squeeze tighter. “And because we’re in this together.”

The knob at his throat dips, and my attention drifts to the muscles working beneath the strong column. “Together?”

I nod. It doesn’t sting as it once did. It feels fresh, like newly healed skin.

“Lie down,” I say, and help him settle into the grass, his head resting atop my thigh. “I’m going to tell you a story from the Book of Fate.” My fingers slip through his hair, separating the damp curls, and Zephyrus sighs, sagging fully against me. “The story begins, as all stories do, with a dream.”

CHAPTER 33

A shudder wracks the massive slab where we've made camp, startling me awake. The low rumble of distant thunder follows.

It is dark. Zephyrus sleeps, unaware of the grit shaking free of the overhang to blanket his clothes in pale dust. One tremor bleeds into the next, and the forest groans, straining to keep itself rooted to the mountainside.

The West Wind squeezes his arms to his chest, fingers curled into unnatural shapes, a tic pulsing beneath his jaw. Mile after mile, we traveled until reaching the mountain Zephyrus claimed led to his brother's realm. There, we stopped to rest, eating the last of my food. I promised to take watch, but shortly after he fell asleep, I must have followed, succumbing to the exhaustion of fleeing both Yakim and the Orchid King's Hounds. I'm not sure how much time has passed. The hours shift strangely belowground. We must move.

"Zephyrus." As I shake him awake, the ground lurches, tossing me into the wall. Something cracks in the vast darkness beyond sight.

He stirs, props himself up with an elbow. "Brielle?" In the watery light cast by the waning moon, his skin appears sallow, his eyes deep pits.

The terrain ascends steeply from the mountain's base where we've made camp, shrouded in shadows so thick they appear almost tangible, soft and drooping with weight. We couldn't risk a fire.

Another shock rolls through Under. "What's happening?" I whisper.

A gust snaps from Zephyrus' palm to race across the valley, blasting through brush and felled trees. Less than two heartbeats later, the wind returns, dragging a fetid scent with it.

He peers out into the darkness, grim-faced. "Under demands blood," he replies. "It must be given soon if it is to survive another cycle."

I, too, scour the landscape. I do not recognize this realm: rivers and mountains beneath the earth. "What happens if it doesn't receive any?"

Zephyrus falls quiet for a time. "If it fails to receive my power, the realm will begin to collapse. It did not used to be this way, but once Pierus took power, Under grew dependent on my blood and ceased making that power for itself. It is under much strain, as you can see. The tithe cannot be delayed for long."

The next quake runs cracks through the stone, sharp-edged pebbles tumbling into piles of debris. When the rumbling quiets, I hear it: the baying of hounds on a hunt.

His breath spikes, and his pupils shrink, twin drops of blood squeezed to nothing. His smell—crisp sunlight—begins to turn, curdling like a bowl of milk having spoiled.

"You killed them," I remind him. He tore those beasts apart with nothing but wind.

Zephyrus scrubs a hand down his face. "Pierus has countless Hounds at his disposal. An army, if you will."

Beneath the spreading numbness, I am afraid. I wonder when this journey will end. "How close?"

"The Hounds move quickly," he replies with increasing fatigue.

“They will likely arrive within the hour.”

We cannot outrun them.

We must outrun them.

Zephyrus shudders then, though the ground itself lies still. One hand fists atop his thigh, long fingers contained to the clasp of his hand, scraped knuckles pushing white against his skin. “Pierus calls for me.”

Thickness gathers in my throat. Despite my better judgment, I catch his hand in mine, clutch it with all the strength I can muster. “You’ve ignored the call before,” I remind him, “when you visited Boreas.”

I called for you three months ago, the Orchid King had said.

“Yes.” Zephyrus nods with a vague blankness. “Distance eases the strain. If we can reach Notus’ realm, I’ll be safe.”

I’m on my feet, gathering supplies and shoving them into my knapsack. Pivoting, the roselight held high, I take in the cave mouth a stone’s throw ahead, tall and narrow, chilled air wafting from the mountain’s depths. The light shines scarlet against the granite face.

“If we keep pace,” I say, turning to face Zephyrus, “we should reach your brother in a few hours.” That is, after all, what he told me yesterday.

“It won’t be a few hours, Brielle.”

I understand the journey’s difficulties, but I grow weary of his skepticism and negativity. Biting my tongue, I say with notable civility, “I know things haven’t gone smoothly—”

“I can’t move my legs.”

My lips part soundlessly, but no, I did not misinterpret him. It is as though I hear these words from a great distance. They cannot touch me where I stand. “Are you sure it’s not the tremors—”

“I think I know when I can’t move my legs,” Zephyrus snaps, and squeezes his eyes shut. “Shit.”

Air expels hard through his nostrils. Then tension, its reluctant climb

and inevitable peak beneath his skin, grooves of strain carved in its wake. His legs splay out in front of him, lifeless.

What can I offer that has not already been given? *I wish.* The most treacherous of dreams. Will we make it through, or will the weight of the unknown shatter upon our backs?

Zephyrus doesn't acknowledge me as I kneel beside him.

"Can you feel this?" I pinch his toes inside his boots.

He stares at his thighs. "No."

I press and pinch up his legs. Only when I pass his hips does he say, "I can feel that. Everything below the waist, I can't."

There is howling on the wind. The greenery, forced flat against the rocky incline, endures the perpetual battering. Dust and shale collect in low, sinuous clouds, adding yet more layers of filth to our clothes. My hands shake, but I fold them into fists, shove them under my arms for additional warmth, and smother the panic before it catches. It will do no good to fall apart. "We knew this was going to happen," I say, my gaze steady on the West Wind. "But we still have time."

He continues to stare at his unresponsive legs. "Time?" A fragile laugh deteriorates upon his tongue. One hand drags through his curls, yanking strands of hair free. "We are out of time. We cannot reach my brother if I cannot walk."

"Then I will carry you." Simple enough.

He shakes his head, and oh, what bitterness that smile has wrought. "You cannot carry me, Brielle."

Normally, I would not take offense, but I am weary, hungry, and short on patience. My reply snaps out. "And why not?"

A momentary brightness revives his gaze. It is nearly as shrewd as I remember. "Perhaps on a sunny day, across flat ground, after we have rested and filled our bellies. But fleeing the Orchid King's Hounds in the dark?"

While Under shakes itself to pieces?” He attempts to push himself upright on quavering arms, then sags, cursing beneath his breath when he fails to gather the required strength. I could help, but the West Wind has his pride. “These obstacles would be trying for a god,” he adds, “much less a mortal woman.”

Zephyrus isn’t the heaviest thing I have carried, but he has walled himself into an early defeat. He sees how high the walls rise and remains confined until the light is gone, his world naught but damp and cold.

“All I want,” I insist, “is to try.” We owe it to ourselves to do so.

He shakes his head. “You are strong, Brielle, but this flight has taken its toll on us both.” His voice warbles with suppressed emotion. “I cannot expect you to carry me. I will not ask it of you.”

“You do not have to ask.” Only now do I rest a hand atop his. “I’m offering.”

“It’s too far,” he grinds out.

“Says who?”

A gust snaps through camp. “What will you do, drag me the remaining ten miles? Will you break your spine to ensure I reach Notus before my demise?” Breath by scalding breath, the West Wind darkens. The air crackles around him, adhering to his skin like a budding storm. “I will not subject you to that burden.”

“You are not a burden,” I argue fiercely. “Not to me.”

He slumps lower to the ground. “Return to Carterhaugh and forget about me.”

I watch him calmly, hoping to draw his gaze back to mine, but Zephyrus, Bringer of Spring, is too defeated. He is both a god and a boy, beloved, abandoned. His hurt reflects my own.

“Do you think so little of me so as to believe I would abandon you in your hour of need?” I whisper, curling my fingers around my pendant, the

trinity knot points poking into my leather glove. “Have my actions misguided you?”

“Your actions have only demonstrated your kindness and compassion, but it’s not about me,” he growls, a sound more animal than man. “It’s about you, the life you must live. There’s still time to make this right. You can return to Miles Cross and rejoin your people. You will live a long, happy, healthy life. A *free* life.” His breath catches, and he wipes sweat from his brow.

I have heard the stories of old. What a life the West Wind lived. Bright, cherished, adored, yet insecure, riddled with jealousy. Aggrieved by Hyacinth’s death, then banishment, servitude, loneliness. Yes, Zephyrus has lived a life. But not a happy one.

“Zephyrus.” Reluctantly, his gaze meets mine. “Do you think I would come all this way, go through all this trouble, to turn back?” My mouth quirks. Brielle of *then* would never have taken such a risk.

He appears tentative, unsure of his place. “I would not blame you if that were so.”

“It’s my choice.” My tone will not yield, and neither will I. “I don’t care what you *think* you deserve. You have inherent worth just for existing. You have atoned for your actions, and now is the time to forgive yourself.” Then I add, as if speaking to a small child, “You can have good things, too, you know.”

“What is the point of having good things,” he whispers, “if I fail to care for them?”

He blinks, and I’m shocked by the tears slipping down his cheeks. Here, at the end of days, the West Wind falls to pieces. My heart aches at the sight. “Zephyrus—”

“I sabotage,” he goes on. “I do not know how to do otherwise. I take and I take until nothing remains. It is a sickness in me.”

“You are not your past.” Gently. “You are so much more than your mistakes.”

“Brielle.” Shame colors his skin a dull pink. “You are perhaps the only good thing in my life, and I treated you no better than a dog called to heel. I took advantage of your generosity. I spurned your trust. I saw good, and I sought to sully it.”

Fresh tears course down his mud-streaked face. I let him purge these hurts. This, I understand. “I am sorry,” he says. “For everything. Pain and suffering is all I can offer. You deserve so much more.”

Cupping his face in my hands, I brush my mouth across his damp cheek. “Do not cry for me, Zephyrus,” I whisper. “Cry for the girl who had yet to meet you, who did not realize how small her world had become.”

No matter the times Zephyrus has wronged me, my heart is a cup filled to brimming. I imagine the West Wind entering the church, seeking repentance. I imagine what the Father would say.

“I forgive you,” I murmur into his cheek. “For all that you have done, I forgive you.” My arms band around his shoulders. His settle against my lower back. “I’m here,” I say, “and I’m not going anywhere.”

He turns his head, studying the cave opening as the barking nears. Even with a head start, I question whether we will be able to outrun the Hounds. “Are you sure you can carry me? I’m a grown man. It will not be easy.”

I pull away, give him a dismissive once-over: lean musculature, a distinct lack of fat. Zephyrus is a stalk of wheat on the best of days. “Please,” I scoff. “Don’t insult me.”

CARRYING THE WEST Wind, as it turns out, isn’t nearly as bad as the long

days spent carting barley from the fields. I'd suggested tossing him like a sack of grain over my back, but he'd taken offense, so we settled on my arm wrapped around his waist, his hooked over my shoulder. Zephyrus hobbles forward without complaint.

Guided by the roselight pulsing dimly in my hand, we venture through the carved network of tunnels below the mountain. The light grows feeble in the passing hours, small clots of blood held suspended inside the glass. I try not to think about it. What matters? The next step. As long as we keep moving, we will reach the South Wind's realm.

We round a bend and fall into yet more darkness. My back twinges as Zephyrus' weight drags at me, but I heft him higher against my side, tightening my arm around his slender waist. Another step, a slow shuffle against the hard-packed soil. Eventually, the dim begins to recede.

Gasping, I pick up the pace. First mauve, then gray, then blue, the pinprick of brightness ahead guiding me onward despite my body's depletion. And then I am running, bounding, hauling Zephyrus into my arms, slipping through the narrow vein to emerge, unscathed, into the world above.

The light is a flood, and I recoil from its intensity, the cool darkness driven back by a swell of unbearable heat. My knees tremble, but I clutch Zephyrus tighter, waiting until the pain abates before cracking open my eyes.

Mounds like gold coins scatter in the wind. Their gleaming peaks slant into strips of cool violet in the troughs between the massive dunes. At my feet, the earth is baked red, cracked like a turtle's shell. The sun boils overhead, heating this massive forge. Its fall westward indicates approaching sunset, the landscape cast in an orange glow. After days belowground, the sun—the *real* sun, not an enchantment—warms my weary soul.

“Zephyrus,” I breathe. “You were right.” The world is vast, and what a shame it would be to know only one piece of it.

East to west and beyond, there is the sky. It is sapphire, cerulean, cobalt, azure. At our backs, the cliffs, smooth clay interrupted by pale striations, stamp their massive shadow onto the baked earth. Blistering air pinches my skin into a rash. Even my lungs prickle from the heat.

There is no sign of Under’s twisted roots. Only salt. Only sand.

“Will your brother meet us here?” I ask.

A scorching gust screams over the dunes, and in the ensuing silence, I realize I have not heard my companion speak in some time.

I look down. Zephyrus hangs limp in my arms. His face is slack, eyes closed, jaw loose. “Zephyrus.” I shake him hard. His head lolls.

I lower him onto the sizzling rock, small grains of sand stirring atop the cracks. My hands tremble as I check for a pulse. It is too faint.

A glance around the gold and ruby landscape. This cannot be the end. We had time. We *still* have time. The earth is wide, it is grand, but what of the South Wind, whom we have need of? Did he receive his brother’s message?

“Stay with me,” I croak, turning back to Zephyrus. Sweat drips across my scalp and slides down my back. If the South Wind is not here, we cannot stay, but neither can we return to Under. I have given up everything I am to protect this man from captivity, but when does the cost become too high?

As I brush the curls from Zephyrus’ clammy forehead, a shadow falls over me. Springing to my feet, I whirl, drawing my dagger in a seamless motion.

CHAPTER 34

The tip of the man's blade rests level with my throat. Mine points directly between his eyes.

An impressive physique strains the long, sapphire robe hanging loose around the man's legs, the pristine fabric embracing his hulking torso. The slitted hem hits knee-high, revealing cream trousers and soft, worn slippers. Wide, dense, compact. Zephyrus is practically anemic in comparison.

A scouring wind stirs the ochre sands. My attention shifts to his sword, that confident, assured grip. The curved, thinly hammered metal splays toward the tip—an unusual design, to be certain. My old bladesmithing mentor had one hanging in his forge. Scimitar, I believe it's called. It is thrice the length of my dagger.

“Are you the South Wind?” I ask. I do not lower my blade. I do not dare.

He only stares. His black eyes, set beneath heavy lids, remind me of small, glinting seeds.

My sweaty palm moistens the leather-wrapped hilt. Even on the hottest days in the highest altitudes, Carterhaugh offers shady reprieve. With no trees for miles, the heat cooks my flesh. “Do you understand me?”

With a dismissive glance, he skirts my reach, striding for Zephyrus. I plant myself between them, dagger raised, eyes cold. “Not another step.”

The man’s gaze narrows above the white scarf concealing the lower portion of his face. A bolt of equally pale cloth swathes his skull. “I received a message from my brother.” His voice rumbles with the resonance of bass church bells.

I consider him carefully. Gold thread brightens his blue collar. “You are the South Wind?” He looks nothing like Zephyrus. His skin is the brown of baked bread. But why else would he appear at the border between realms?

That staid gaze skips to Zephyrus’ prone form. After a moment, he lowers his weapon, and I follow suit. “Is he dead?”

Days of travel without stopping for rest, and my exhaustion outstrips any intruding fear. “Paralyzed, or nearly so.” He has ignored my questions. I do not expect this time to be any different. “Will you help him?”

He regards my unsightly appearance, then Zephyrus’ disheveled state, evidence of our arduous trek.

“I will not.” Turning heel, he strides for the dunes.

My mouth parts in surprise. He’s serious.

“Wait!” I stumble after him. It’s so hot the heat seeps through the soles of my boots. “Where are you going?”

“Home.” He keeps walking. For a man of shorter stature, he has an impressive stride.

“But he’s your brother.” Lifting my shredded skirt, I pick up the pace, knees to chest as the cracked ground transitions to soft sand. A thousand golden grains slide beneath my feet. I slip sideways, which allows the South Wind to put additional distance between us. “Don’t you care for his life?”

His scabbard slaps the outside of his thigh. “You obviously do not

know Zephyrus.”

“A manipulative, selfish ass?”

His footsteps slow, revealing a trail of shallow indentations leading back to the West Wind. Hours from now, the depressions will smooth, the winds filling what is empty. How many pass through this realm, all evidence of their presence cleansed come morning?

“However he has wronged you,” I say, “Zephyrus is changed.” Somewhat.

The South Wind cuts me a sidelong glance, then shakes his head. “My brother is many things, but *changed* is not one of them.” He begins to climb the nearest dune, blue fabric snapping around his legs, veering toward a dark shape ahead, long lines and arching curves nestled in the sand. The distance between brothers grows, and piling within that space, complete helplessness of the situation. My chest tightens. Though I feel myself shrinking beneath the prospect of confrontation, I am no longer that person.

A burst of speed plants me in his path, palms lifted to halt his progress.

I do not see the man move. A sword point pricks the tip of my nose, drawing exactly one droplet of blood onto the metal. “Stand aside, girl.”

“Please.” Hands clasped, I fall to my knees. Pride means nothing to me. Neither does reputation. I will beg, I will plead, I will explain my case however many times is necessary. “We came all this way. You wouldn’t believe what we have been through, what Zephyrus has endured.” What *I* have endured.

The man peers down his nose dispassionately. “That is not my concern.”

I stare at him in bewilderment. “Then why did you answer his call for aid?”

He gazes beyond my shoulder. When he speaks, the response is one

of utmost craftsmanship, each word tucked deliberately in its place. “I did not know whether I would help until I saw him. I remembered, then, his past transgressions. Brother or not, my time will not be wasted on a man who lacks honor.”

The South Wind does not bid me goodbye. He simply strides off, a figure swathed in jewel tones, shrinking beneath the wavering heat. When he vanishes behind a dune, I return to Zephyrus, because it comforts me, and because I will stand by him, even at the unfortunate end. Tomorrow, the paralysis will likely claim him. I must decide what to do next.

I kneel, stone jarring my creaking knees. This realm, strange and alien around me. Dry where Carterhaugh is damp, unstable where the soil is firm, scalding where the forest is cool. “I’m sorry,” I whisper, fighting tears. Clutching his hand to my chest, I bow my head. “I tried, but it was not enough.”

If I had stayed in Thornbrook, if I had remained where it was safe and familiar, perhaps my heart would have remained unbroken.

My lungs twinge on the exhale, gut hollowing out, scooped clean of feeling. So this is the end of the road. It was a laborious journey, a collection of thrilling highs and unspeakable lows, mental anguish, my mind akin to a spring bloom, freshly unfurled. I’d hoped for a more victorious outcome. It was not meant to be. If we cannot go forward, then we must return to Under.

What will occur when we cross back into Pierus’ realm? Will I be able to return to Thornbrook content and purposeful after what I have experienced, the West Wind in chains beneath the earth?

“You care for Zephyrus. Why?”

My head snaps up. The South Wind stands over me, sturdy legs braced, one hand clasping the hilt of his sword. That’s twice I have not

heard his approach. The sun sinks at his back, and what a glorious sight it is to behold.

“Because he is lost,” I say. “Because he has made mistakes. Because he is hurting. Because he has embraced the gray areas of himself.” And maybe I have, too.

I swallow salt and go on. “Because he is too clever by half. Because a lonely life is not easy. Because of his infectious smile. Because he wants to change.” Tenderly, I wipe a smudge of dirt from Zephyrus’ jaw. “You question your brother’s ability to change, but I have seen it. So I ask you again. Will you help him?”

Though the scarf conceals the lower half of the South Wind’s face, I’m imagining a tic in his jaw, the slow pulsation of disinclination, a mouth flattened by aversion. The wind kicks up, yet settles when the lines around his eyes smooth. “A god’s memory is long,” he says in that low, resonant tone. “I cannot forget all the ways in which my brother wronged me.”

I pull my dagger from its sheath. “You claim Zephyrus lacks honor.” I lift the blade so its dark taper gorges the light. Sweat rolls down the grooves bisecting my spine, the divot between my breasts. “But what of me?” When he does not respond, I press, “A duel. Let me prove my honor in Zephyrus’ stead.”

The South Wind examines the knife, its iron glint, perhaps more curious than he lets on. “There is an oasis not far from here,” he relents. “Its waters have the potential to heal Zephyrus, but it is no guarantee.”

I don’t need a guarantee. Hope is enough to sustain me.

He steps back, sweeps those black eyes over the West Wind’s disheveled state. Then he angles away. “I will aid my brother, just this once. And when he awakens, we will duel, and he will watch you die.”

My expression remains neutral despite the twist in my gut, but I nod.

The South Wind likely underestimates my capabilities. I can use that to my advantage.

“Gather Zephyrus. Meet me at my sailer.” He gestures to the wavering contraption in the distance. “Do not delay.”

Since I do not entirely trust the South Wind to keep his word, I race back to Zephyrus and haul him into my arms. His limbs swing freely. Like a corpse.

I’m panting by the time I reach the South Wind’s strange apparatus. It looks like a sailboat, yet instead of a curved hull, the bottom is flat, cut into the shape of an arrowhead. Two masts jut upward, sails secured to the wooden beams. As the South Wind unties the canvas, he calls over his shoulder, “Sit at the bow. Don’t touch anything.”

I glance at the vessel in uncertainty. “The bow?”

He pauses, turns to look at me, eyes remote. “The front.”

“Oh.”

Climbing toward the vessel’s tapered nose, I lay Zephyrus near a stack of boxes secured with rope and settle beside him. The canvas sails snap open, wind filling their hollow bellies. Then the South Wind moves toward the stern, takes the large rudder in hand. Particles of sand float free of the dunes.

“Hold on.”

The boat jerks forward, lifting clear of the sand as air erupts from the South Wind’s palms into the makeshift sails. A scream wrenches free of my chest. We are climbing, hurtling, careening. We soar with breakneck speed.

Nearer the sky sinks, a swath of unpolluted cerulean hanging like the most vivid tapestry. Upon reaching the peak of our ascent, we drop, the nose plunging sharply into the trough, my stomach dragged in its wake. I keep my eyes open, though I wish dearly to squeeze them shut. The desert

ripples in waves, catching the bottom of the sailer clumsily, Zephyrus pressed against me as we spin down the heaving back of a great dune.

Air buffets the side, stabilizing the spiraling vessel. A glance at the stern reveals the South Wind shifting the rudder, feet planted firmly despite the imbalance, eyes thin over his face scarf. If Zephyrus is an errant breeze, his brother, Notus, is the most stable of substances—the rigid, unbending earth.

Wind shrieks past my ears, and my fingers clamp the boat's frame as I brace for a steeper ascent. We kiss the dune's apex, then release our hold on the earth, which sizzles beneath in patches of brown, violet, and gold, the air hammered into a glaze. The sky is endless, blue in perpetuity brushed by the whiteness of intense sun.

After a time, the terrain flattens, rolling into soft, wet sand, a body of water flanked by boulders and sparse greenery. Palm trees, with their slender trunks and sword-tipped fronds, cast meager shade. I've read about them in books, though I never imagined I'd see one in my lifetime. The South Wind closes his hands, curbing the strength of his winds so the vessel coasts to a halt near the bank.

He leaps from the boat, and I follow, Zephyrus in my arms. He spares no concern for his brother, merely waves me over to the water.

“Submerge him up to his chin,” he instructs.

The water is shockingly cool, and seeps greedily into Zephyrus' filthy clothes. I roll up his sleeves, his trousers. Shallow waves lap ashore.

“The oasis contains special properties,” states the South Wind, staring at the dark veins running up his brother's arms, “but its powers cannot heal everything. If it is successful, you should expect to see a reversion of whatever ails him by sunrise.” He then gazes westward. A strip of gold clings to the horizon. The sun is nearly gone. “I'll build a fire.”

THE NIGHT IS colder than any I have experienced, but the fire simmers pleasantly, a red-gold ring sitting flush against the surrounding darkness.

Zephyrus lies on the sloped, muddy bank of the oasis, submerged neck-high in the water. The South Wind and I sit higher up the incline. Either Zephyrus wakes, or he doesn't. If the oasis fails to reverse the nightshade's paralysis, then I'm not sure what comes next. We traveled all this way. But life, I've learned, has its own rhythm, one I cannot always foresee.

The South Wind has not spoken in hours. The moon, that white and swollen bud, drags its belly against the darkened hills, cutting the god's silhouette into defined shadow and light. Square jaw, straight nose, wide cheekbones. Following the sun's descent, he'd removed his face scarf, though left his head scarf intact. The man appears to be hewn from granite.

"You mentioned Zephyrus wronged you," I say, knees drawn to my chest. The crusted emerald gown crinkles uncomfortably against my legs. Beneath, the wound I sustained from the Hounds is freshly bandaged, the oasis waters having cleansed it of infection. "What did he do?"

The South Wind tips back his head to study the eve's basin overhead. Without Carterhaugh's snagging branches, the sky extends its great curved spine. I am unused to such weight. If I were to lift my hand, the tips of my fingers might stir the stars from their distant nest.

"Early during our banishment," he says lowly, "Zephyrus sent out a call for aid. My brothers and I were to join forces against Pierus, who had crossed into Carterhaugh to oversee Zephyrus' punishment. The plan was to kill him. Unfortunately, I was the only one who showed. I am lucky I was able to escape Pierus alive."

I frown, yet my attention does not stray from the god's face. Every faint seam, every shallow groove mapping his skin announces emotion, and I seek to understand what lies beneath the reserved façade.

“Zephyrus didn’t show?” I murmur.

A dry gust skates over the ground, plucking at his white head scarf, cutting the embers into sparkling flakes. “He did not.”

Oh, dear. While I am tempted to defend his behavior, the Zephyrus of *before* did not hold himself to the same accountability, or any accountability, for that matter.

“Did you ever ask your brother why he failed to show?”

“I was never granted the opportunity,” he says.

“You didn’t visit him?”

The South Wind at last shifts position, one hand pressed flat against the sand, perhaps calling back the heat that has leached away in the passing hours. “People fall into their lives, and their world narrows to the walls they’ve built. The desert is my realm just as Carterhaugh belongs to Zephyrus. There is order in separation.”

I wait for him to go on, but he seems content to let the silence stretch. “You don’t talk much, do you?”

The South Wind takes his time responding, a certain care to his demeanor, a distinct lack of vicious guile. He and Zephyrus could not be more different. “My brother talks enough for the both of us.”

I smile, mostly because I agree. The West Wind is fond of the spoken word. I suppose I’ve become fond of him, too.

The realization sobers me, and I straighten, a fist pressed to my heart. Fond, or is that too weak a word? Would I have risked everything to help someone I was merely fond of?

The South Wind tosses a stick into the fire. His dark eyes drink in the light. “It has been a long time since we were children, a long time since we first became men. I do not know how my brother has changed.”

“Did you know about Hyacinth?” I ask.

He cants his head in a preoccupied manner. “Zephyrus and I were

never close,” he replies. “He kept to himself when it came to matters of the heart.” He turns to me then. “I commend you for helping my brother. Not many would.” With that, he rises, the hem of his sapphire robe fluttering around his cloth-clad legs. Off he goes, his silhouette etched against the expansive eve.

Hopefully he will not go far. We need his sailer to return to Under safely.

I doze for a few hours. It feels as though I’ve just closed my eyes before I waken, body stiff with cold. Day breaks like a robin’s egg to the east. Since I have never experienced a desert sunrise, I watch the realm warm to blush, the dunes sparked with gathering light.

It’s quiet here. Carterhaugh, with its clambering vines and slithering roots, rarely allows space to breathe. I hear no cooing owls or burbling brook, no tolling of the bell signaling curfew. There is sand and there is wind. Together, they make their own music.

Pushing to my feet and brushing sand from my dress, I check on Zephyrus. Water sloshes my boots as I drag him higher up the bank. Pulling open the tunic at his throat, I examine his chest, stomach, and arms with impending dread. There has been no change overnight. The veins remain blacker than ever, a green tinge to the surrounding skin.

There was always the possibility we would fail. If we did not escape the Orchid King, if we could not outrun the Hounds, if we could not acquire the proper antidote, if we succumbed to exhaustion prior to reaching the South Wind... But I did not want to believe it.

Blowing out a breath, I brush the wet curls from Zephyrus’ face, the tips caked in sandy grit. He stirs at my touch. “Brielle.”

I nudge the point of his chin. “I’m here.” At least he’s awake. At least there’s that.

“You’re sad,” he murmurs, eyes still closed. “I can hear it in your

voice.”

The knot in my throat thickens. It is a deeper sadness, one stitched into my heart. “We reached your brother’s realm. He brought you to an oasis last night. Supposedly, it has special healing properties.”

“Let me guess.” He cracks open his eyes. Fatigue clouds the emerald rings. “It didn’t work.”

I consider how best to phrase my response, but in the end, the truth is best. “No,” I reply. “It didn’t.”

There are many forms of pain, after all. The pain of heartache. The pain of grief. The pain of unrealized dreams. The pain of regret, wasted time. But I think this might be the worst pain of all: what could have been.

Whatever ache the oasis eased, it floods anew, a collection of fine lines marring the smoothness of his face. “Then I will need to return.”

Did I expect this? Was my attempt at saving his life always a fool’s errand, a mortal woman battling powers too strong, too strange, to comprehend?

As soon as the West Wind steps foot into Under, the Hounds will descend. The Orchid King will drag him back to that cavity in the ground, his lifeblood consumed by nightshade. I do not want Zephyrus to suffer. It frightens me how far I would go to prevent that.

“We tried,” he says. “I would rather return to Pierus, chained yet able-bodied, than spend the rest of my existence paralyzed.”

He has a point, though I’m reluctant to agree. “Can you move your limbs at all?”

He lifts his arms, his legs. Even if the oasis wasn’t able to nullify the venom, it managed to temporarily reverse the effects. There’s no telling how long the reprieve will last.

Quietly, I ask, “You truly wish to return?”

“Wish? No.” He gazes upward and sighs. “Pierus will enjoy his

punishments, but after a few centuries, he will lift the chains again. He enjoys playing with his victims.”

It’s never too late, I realize, to develop trust in another. I believe what he says, despite the precarious lies he has built his life upon. “You deserve more than a cage.”

Zephyrus sits up, and water streams from his shoulders. His soaked tunic molds like a second skin to his frame. Not that I notice. Well, not on purpose anyway.

“There are many things I deserve, Brielle. I’m not saying this to attract pity. I’m saying this because the world works in mysterious ways and somehow, those responsible always pay their dues. People like me?” A cold smile curls his mouth. “We are deprived of happiness.”

I sit beside him on the shore. “What is the point of an immortal life if you spend eternity in misery?”

“Easy to say when one is mortal.” When our eyes meet, I recognize his resolve, the acceptance of the hand one has been dealt. “As much as I yearn for another life,” he says roughly, “it’s not possible. I will return to Under, and I will accept Pierus’ punishment. Such is my fate.”

I cannot accept that. I won’t.

The sound of approaching footsteps draws my attention. The South Wind has returned, face scarf back in place. A hot, dry wind blows, turning my mouth to dust.

The West Wind peers upward at his brother, expression guarded. From this position, the South Wind appears massive, a giant among the sands. “Notus.” Zephyrus then notices the curved sword his brother carries. “I hope you’re not here to use that on me.” He offers his most charming smile.

The South Wind tosses me a small bundle stuffed with fresh fruit,

and a waterskin. "It is time." He gestures to an area of cracked earth resting between two palm trees. "I will await you," he says, and strides off.

As Zephyrus observes his brother's departure, his suspicion deepens. "What was that about?"

I palm the dagger tucked against my back. My fingers slip around the hilt, solid, familiar as my own name. "Your brother's assistance came with a price," I admit, watching the West Wind's eyes narrow. "A duel."

Blood drains from his face, whitening it to a ghostly hue. "Tell me you speak in jest."

The South Wind completes a pattern of exercises in my peripheral vision, sword a blur, sparking silver in the patchy shade. For a man so bulky, he moves with understated grace.

"He wouldn't have agreed to help you otherwise." My thumb passes over the etching at the blade's base, proof that this dagger is mine, the metal fired and cooled, hammered by my own hand.

Zephyrus leans forward, dropping his head into his hands. "This isn't a good idea." His body trembles, and after a moment, he looks at me, face drawn. "I urge you to reconsider. Think of the risk. Think of all there is to lose."

I stand, brush the sand from my gown, and take a deep, satisfying swallow from the waterskin. It washes the salt from my tongue. "I weighed the risk days ago. And anyway, it's not your decision to make."

"His strength will overpower yours ten-fold."

I do not think it will. I'm stronger than I look.

Zephyrus closes his eyes and murmurs, "I would not see him hurt you."

Something inside me softens. "While I appreciate your concern, you forget I have trained, too."

"He is a god."

“And?” I hold his gaze until he looks away. “I am the Father’s servant.” Even if it’s not reason enough for him, it’s reason enough for me. The weight of my dagger confirms this decision is right. Blade to blade, I will face the South Wind.

The West Wind tries to catch my hand upon my passing. “Brielle, wait.”

“This is my life, Zephyrus. It’s time I start living it.”

CHAPTER 35

The desert is a field: barren, burning pale upon the dunes. We gather on the hard, flat ground, the earth baked into a glaze. Beyond the oasis, dunes pile high, their swells etching shadows where we stand. The sun has yet to pull away from the horizon and I'm already sweating.

The South Wind and I stand a few paces apart. He surveys me calmly. Blade—paltry, frail. Attire—inadequate, the dress likely to tangle around my legs. Physique—lacking muscle, to all appearances, my curves unmistakable. Let him think what he will.

He has the advantage. The desert belongs to him just as Thornbrook belongs to me. I know every darkened passage, every creaking stair, every cracked window and loose stone. Here, I am a visitor, ignorant, uninformed.

The West Wind sits propped against a nearby palm, hand lifted to shield his eyes. As usual, he has made himself comfortable in the most uncomfortable circumstances. It must be a gift.

My opponent stands before me, having sunk into the guard position, scarf snapping around his face. The cold blacks of his eyes hold mine in thrall. The South Wind is ageless, but even gods have their shortcomings.

My gaze skips over his blade, the incandescent curve, so thin it might be shaped from the air itself. How brightly his scimitar gleams.

“Make the call, Brother,” announces the South Wind.

Zephyrus looks to me, mouth tight with suppressed distaste. I meet his gaze without flinching. No matter his opinion, I understand actions have consequences. I gave the South Wind my word, and here I stand.

At my nod, he calls, “Begin.”

The South Wind uncoils, quick as an asp. I track the bunch of his shoulders, the angle of his hips, the arc of his blade. I’m lifting my dagger in retaliation, for this motion is familiar, one of the first attacks I learned the moment Mother Mabel took over my training two years prior.

Metal sheers as the blades’ edges clash. I’m out of reach less than a heartbeat later.

He doesn’t follow, merely begins to circle, forcing me into motion if I want to protect my back. He steps firmly, yet with that particular lightness all Four Winds must possess. The first strike was a test. He questioned my strength, reflexes, agility. I’m prepared when the power of his arms falls into mine.

This blow is decidedly stronger, a great force rattling my teeth. I hold, our blades locked above the hilts, his scimitar overshadowing my much smaller dagger. My muscles engage—back, shoulders, arms—and strain, unwilling to give ground. His arms flex beneath his robe, and the veins pull taut in his neck, blue threads stitched into brown skin.

Down he pushes, forcing pressure into my wrists. They twinge painfully. Though I stand a few inches taller, the South Wind possesses wide, powerful shoulders, a physique chiseled from hard labor. Sweat slicks my hand, fusing my glove to the leather-banded hilt. I cannot break.

But I do not anticipate the sun, nor the angle of his blade. This god is clever, his deception well-planned.

A starburst hits the shining metal. The reflected light, pure aggression, whitens my vision. I leap backward, the sharpened edge nicking me in the arm, a bright sting.

“Careful!” Zephyrus snarls.

The air stirs to my right. I whirl, tracking the hiss of grit over rock, my skin prickled with perspiration, attuned to any change in shape the air takes. Through slitted vision, I pursue my opponent’s blurred outline until the blindness recedes.

He lunges then, and we collide. The speed of his engagement forces my focus to narrow. Block, strike, duck, then parry, mind utterly blank. My opponent is always one step ahead. By the time I aim for his abdomen, he is already gone, flicking the sword tip across my upper arm. I hiss at the bite of metal severing flesh.

“Enough.” Zephyrus climbs to his feet, one hand braced against the curved trunk. Green fronds drag their sword tips through the sand. “Let this duel be done.”

“Ignore him,” I pant, refocusing on the South Wind. What is a duel without a little blood? I will not make the same mistake twice.

In the next blink, he slips his blade beneath my guard. I dodge, knocking the sword aside. The time for defense is past. What is here in this moment? A god and a mortal. My blade, and his, the scream of metal, its ringing clarity.

I am a blade.

I move through the exercises fluently, utilizing every piece of knowledge at my disposal. When the South Wind reveals an opening, I lunge. My dagger swipes low, across the heavily muscled thigh, parting cloth and flesh with the ease of a vessel through water.

He withdraws, dark eyes flat with irritation. For the second time, he circles me. I draw him in with an opening, force him back with a series of

brutal stabs. Now that I'm better acquainted with his fighting style, I adapt around it. Strikes lead to retreat, reevaluation. He favors jabs and unexpected deflections. The man is too quick.

I give it my best, and I give it my all, but in the end, it is not enough. Who am I to think I can best a god? It is hardly a match. In the next heartbeat, his blade flicks upward, kissing my throat.

The South Wind examines me with cool detachment, the blacks of his eyes having brightened during the bout. He has not broken a sweat. Was it even an effort for him?

"In my realm," he murmurs, "he who wins a duel, takes a life."

I swallow, feeling the scrape of the metal tip. *He* who wins a duel. I'm assuming women do not wield weapons here. But he is right. I made a promise.

"Touch one hair on her head," Zephyrus spits, "and you will not live beyond your next breath."

The South Wind regards his brother calmly. "You would deny me my prize?"

Zephyrus flinches. His face has always been complex, but certain shades and facets have since multiplied, evolved. "Not her," he whispers. "Please."

"The deal must be upheld."

I do not cower in the face of death. If I am to die, let it be on my feet rather than my knees, back bent in defeat.

"What do I have to do in order for you to spare her?" Zephyrus grinds out.

The South Wind lowers his blade a hair. "Would you give up your life in her stead?"

"Yes."

"No," I snap. Stupid man. What is the point of having gone through

all this trouble to heal him from the venom, only for Zephyrus to give up his life? “The bargain remains incomplete. I accepted the consequences. Let it be fulfilled.”

“Brielle.” It sounds like a plea. He stumbles forward a step. “This isn’t about you. Don’t give up your life for one so undeserving.”

The South Wind considers his brother for a moment. He glances between us, then lowers his sword, the grooves around his eyes deepening in puzzlement. “Well fought.” The husk of his voice has warmed with what I believe is respect. “I underestimated you.”

He will not kill me?

Zephyrus goggles at Notus, but the South Wind doesn’t rescind his offer of mercy, instead heading for the oasis while Zephyrus and I retreat to the shade of the surrounding trees. Kneeling on the damp bank, he unwraps the sweat-soaked head scarf, revealing short dark hair plastered to his skull, a line of sweat dampening the length of his spine. He dips the fabric into the cooling water, wrings it out, before refastening it.

Higher the sun climbs. Sweat soaks my pores, and a rash has begun to spread across my freckled skin. I miss the low-hanging mists of Carterhaugh. I am not built for heat like this.

After sheathing my dagger, I accept the waterskin from Zephyrus.

“You did well,” he murmurs.

The water slides down my throat like the sweetest relief. I drain the container of its last drop. “For a novitiate,” I say, looking at him. “Right?”

He acknowledges the barb. “For anyone.” If I’m not mistaken, he regards me with newfound admiration. Respect, even. “Who taught you how to fight?”

“The bladesmith I apprenticed with taught me the fundamentals. I studied with him for three years. Sometimes I’d spar with the boys in

town.” A blade in my hand freed me. It still does. “Mother Mabel took over my training two years ago.”

His head cants in curiosity, but he only says, “I’m impressed you held out for so long against Notus. He is a superior swordsman.”

“He is.” The best I have ever fought. The longest five minutes of my life.

With the skin empty, I set it aside, tip back my head to the burning wind. The palm trees bend, yet never break. “How long until we return?” I fear when the day is done.

Zephyrus rests his hand atop mine, drawing my attention. I still wear my gloves. “Tomorrow.”

It is too soon.

I’ve prayed for a miracle. I’ve done everything in my power to save the West Wind. But his curse precedes my arrival and will persist long after I am gone. Better to return to Under while he is still of able body.

“We had a good run, yes?” In the shade of the palm, his green eyes brighten like the purest jewels.

The ache in my chest migrates to my throat. He tries to make light of the situation, but it hurts too much. “It didn’t work.” We’d fought and fallen and risen again, but Zephyrus is no nearer to freedom.

“I’m not so sure,” he murmurs, fingers tightening over mine. “I suppose it depends on one’s perspective.”

What is he talking about? “We failed.” My voice strains. “I failed you.”

“My darling novitiate. You could never fail me.” At my look of skepticism, he says, “How to explain? It has been a long time since I’ve allowed myself to hope, but you brought it back to life. That is something I will never be able to repay. Whatever time we have left, I’m grateful for it.”

Why do the people I care for always leave me? “I wish...” Yet my

longing dies, the thought too tender, a bruise.

Together, we gaze out at the oasis, the water placid, painted blue from the sky's reflection. The South Wind has made himself scarce.

"You once asked me if I believed in faith," Zephyrus says, "and I told you no." He lifts his solemn eyes to mine. "The truth is, I have not believed in a higher power in a long time, but with you, I'm convinced there must be some unexplainable phenomenon, some all-encompassing good."

It is nearly impossible to swallow, for the emotion sticks behind my tongue. His admission is less important than the sentiment: *I believe you.*

But I have never been good with words, so I cup the West Wind's cheek, his bristly facial hair scraping my glove. "Can I ask why your face continues to change?"

"Because you have begun to see the decency inside me," he says, "instead of only the foul parts."

"I do not understand."

"My brother, Boreas, cursed me to wear that hideous face. Only when someone recognized a change in me would I begin to change myself."

I sweep my touch along his jaw. He tips his head into my hand, an expression of quiet agony passing over his features.

"I see you," I whisper. It has taken months, but I see the West Wind for who he is: deeply flawed, a man amidst transition.

Zephyrus exhales a shuddering breath. "Wait." He pushes my hand aside. "Ask me why Boreas cursed me. Ask me why I crossed into his realm, knowing Pierus' wrath awaited when I returned."

I have wondered this. And now I ask.

A pinch to his features, and then: "I planned to kill my brother."

Sometimes, the wind makes strange calls, wails of hollowing darkness interspersed among frail keens. But the air has fallen still and there

is no mistaking the confession. I do not know what I expected. Certainly not this.

Thou shalt not kill.

Deep beneath the blanketing shock, I am saddened. I didn't realize how immoral Zephyrus was in the years before we met. Family must mean little to him.

When I say nothing, he goes on, the words thick, caked in long-buried regrets.

“Many months ago, Boreas' power had begun to spread beyond the Deadlands' border. Pierus was not happy, and for good reason. Whatever affects Carterhaugh, affects Under. The realm began to wither, its strength sapped by cold. I thought, if I could fix this one thing, if I could stop my brother's power from infiltrating, maybe Pierus would reward me. Maybe he would shorten my sentence.”

I do recall the strange chill settling over Carterhaugh last winter. “So your solution was to kill Boreas,” I state flatly.

He drops his eyes, properly abashed. “Not at first.” Grabbing a fistful of sand, he lets the grains sprinkle into a small pile, the gentlest hush. “I arrived at his doorstep, hoping to reason with him. When that didn't work, I planned to steal his staff, use it to kill Boreas, thus ceasing his power's infiltration. I could have used my bow, but I thought I'd have a better chance in close proximity, with a weapon he would not expect. He knows of my skill with a bow. He has created protections that would prevent me from carrying out his death.”

I see. “Why wouldn't Boreas listen to you?”

“I was not welcome in his home.” His gaze skips to the water, the distant dunes—everywhere but me. “You see, it was not my first visit to the Deadlands.”

My skin tightens with foreboding, for I cannot see what lies beyond

this moment. Change, to be certain. “Go on.”

“I visited Boreas three centuries prior. He was married then, with a son. I beseeched him to fight Pierus for my freedom, as I had beseeched all my brothers, but Boreas, understandably, said no. He had a family to protect. He was content and wasn’t interested in conflict.”

There is a pause. “The plan was already in place. Notus had agreed to help and would meet me in Under. I did not hear from our youngest brother, Eurus, but I expected that. Boreas was the last piece of the puzzle. I couldn’t take no for an answer.”

The Bringer of Spring: devious and self-absorbed, yet in this moment, shame-faced, wrecked by guilt. My apprehension grows fangs.

“I resorted to manipulation,” he says, too quiet. “His wife was easier to sway. I planted falsities in her mind, and from there, mistrust took root. I convinced her she would be happier in Carterhaugh, she and her son, though I harbored no romantic feelings toward her. She was merely a tool.”

“Stop.” I lift my hand, fighting for breath in the heat. “I don’t want to hear anymore.” The thought of coming between a man and his wife, voluntarily tainting that relationship, makes me ill. The Third Decree: thou shalt not covet.

“Please, Brielle.” He looks as though I’ve shot him through the heart. Maybe I have. “I need to say this.”

The moment I begin to accept Zephyrus for who he is, he reveals yet another sharpened corner, and I retreat, unwilling to prick myself against it. I think about trust, vulnerability, the terror of being seen. I promised I would stay. I gave my word, and he trusts me not to abandon him. Willing or not, I must see this through.

I nod, the motion stilted. Zephyrus swallows and goes on.

“When I offered Boreas’ wife the opportunity to visit Carterhaugh, she accepted. It was my hope Boreas would follow. Once there, he and I,

along with Notus, would journey to Under and fight Pierus for my freedom. Only, we never reached Carterhaugh.”

He stares at the ground so intently I’m surprised holes do not form in the sand. I do not like the direction this story has taken. “Why—”

“Bandits attacked us mid-journey, killing Boreas’ wife and son.”

My heart wrenches in my chest. A god’s loss must be ageless, every day a bruise flushed anew. I turn away, eyes closed.

Zephyrus speaks in a rush, a great outpouring of emotion. “When Boreas discovered what had happened, he spiraled into rage and grief. I fled, fearing his wrath, and stayed away for centuries.”

“But you returned,” I grind out. People change, yet the past is present. He will always carry that man with him, for without it, who he is today would not exist.

I take a steadying breath, turn to face him. Zephyrus flinches beneath my disparaging gaze.

“I did return,” he whispers. “Many months ago, I crossed into the Deadlands in an attempt to reason with my brother, convince him to pull back his power. But I had not learned my lesson. In the centuries following the death of his late wife and son, Boreas had remarried.”

He mentioned his brother’s wife once prior. Wren.

“I felt feral,” he says. “Overcome with jealousy, guilt, hatred at myself. I am not proud to say I tried to convince his wife to kill him. If I did not deserve happiness, then neither did he. But I underestimated his dedication and love for this woman, her developing feelings for Boreas. I failed. Again.”

What was it the Orchid King had said to Zephyrus?

I’m surprised your brother let you stay at all.

He swallows, his voice tremulous with what I believe is self-loathing. “I’m lucky he did not kill me, though I wonder if that would have

been preferred. Boreas is clever. He knew the curse would prolong my suffering.”

I don't know what to say. I'm sickened, tormented, melancholy. But mostly, I'm confused. I wonder what kind of person would go to such lengths to hurt another, much less a brother, and I think it must be someone who believes themselves beyond redemption.

“Is that what you believe? If you don't deserve happiness, no one does?”

His eyes sheen, and he blinks rapidly to clear them. “I am not a good man, Brielle. I fear my past transgressions will always burden me.”

I consider his tale with newfound perspective. A tragic mistake? Maybe. I will not know until I ask the only question able to alleviate my doubt.

“Are you sorry for what you did? Do you regret treating your brother poorly?”

“Every day,” Zephyrus says. “Every gods-forsaken day.”

The pressure in my lungs eases, and I sigh. Relief in acceptance.

I believe him.

“There is a rot within me,” he says. “It cannot be changed, nor can it be purged. It stays with me, always.”

We are all made of separate parts. Zephyrus might always carry this rot with him, but who is to say it cannot be burned away to some degree, or lessened? The West Wind is the grower of green things. He is relief in the cold. I choose to see him as a collection of parts, some undesirable, others shaped by curiosity, playfulness, wonder.

“Maybe you're not the most likeable person,” I admit, to which Zephyrus laughs, a noise strained to breaking, “but I like you well enough. I'm not perfect either. You erred, as we all do. What matters is how we learn from our pitfalls. That is how we grow.”

His lashes dip low. “You are,” he begins haltingly, “too good.”

Now that’s just silly. “I am Brielle. Nothing less, nothing more.”

One of his hands lifts, strong fingers encircling my wrist. “We do not have much time.”

Indeed, the sun has begun its descent. I look to Zephyrus’ hand, pondering all I have been through. I wonder what tomorrow will bring. I ask myself what I will regret. I think of what could have been.

Pulling my wrist free, I begin to tug off my gloves, and Zephyrus watches, marveled by the sight of my pale, freckled hands, their hardened calluses. Our skin is colored in contrast—sun-kissed and cream.

As his gaze locks with mine, my belly quivers. If he were to close the distance, I might again experience the sweet pressure of his mouth, the wet slide of his tongue. But I have made my position known. He will not breach the barrier I’ve erected. It’s up to me then.

“You once asked me if I wondered what a man’s touch felt like,” I say, and those piercing eyes flicker. “I didn’t then. I do now.”

He watches me with grave understanding. I have removed my gloves, this barrier cast aside at last.

“I want to know what it feels like to lie with a man.”

“Brielle.” Zephyrus shifts closer, though he does not touch me. “We don’t have to do this. It is enough to be in your presence. There’s nothing you need to prove, not to me, nor anyone else.”

“I have nothing to prove,” I state. “I want to know how it feels, just once.”

“Only a virgin may become an acolyte. You said so yourself.”

“I know.”

There is a change, and it is a change in him, and in me, a fabrication of two contraries falling into harmony with one another. “Are you sure?”

“Zephyrus.” I cup his face in my hands, and oh, how his skin sings to

mine. “I am sure.”

Leaning forward, I press my mouth to his. Curved and smooth, his lips part, slotting briefly into mine. Warmth blooms in my sternum as I ease back. “Though I do not know what to do.”

Wrapping his fingers around my wrists, he anchors me in place. “Do you trust me?” The hot press of his skin sears with delicious heat.

“Yes,” I whisper, allowing him to pull me closer. “I trust you.” That which had been broken is finally mended. It is worth more to me now. “Will you have strength for the task?”

The tightness in his face eases, and his hands loosen, skimming up my arms, across my shoulders, down my back. “The oasis gifted me a reprieve, but we will not have long. What about pregnancy? Is there... that is, you’re not taking anything to protect against it, are you?”

Considering I am chaste, it would be pointless to do so. “I am not.”

He nods, having likely suspected as much. “Here.” Nestled in his open palm, a small shoot spreads its leaves from the reaching green stem. The roots have attached to his skin. “Chewing on these leaves will prevent pregnancy. You might feel a bit nauseated tomorrow, but the effects will wear off in a few days.”

The leaves taste bitter, but I dutifully swallow them. I appreciate Zephyrus’ foresight.

His expression softens as he takes me in, and my cheeks flame. “I am remembering that kiss in the glade.”

A flutter stirs my heart, for I, too, recall the scents, the hushed darkness, how distant I felt in that moment, completely removed from reality. Some bold, entirely fearless part of me dares ask, “What do you remember about it?”

Reaching out, he presses a fingertip to the pliant center of my lower lip. “I remember your smell. I remember the small, breathless sounds you

made. I remember the shape of your body in my hands. But mostly,” he says, low with yearning, “I remember you left me wanting. I have been wanting ever since.”

Clasping my jaw, Zephyrus angles my chin downward, forcing my mouth to part, his lips capturing mine. Together, we sink. Peace in drowning.

His breath is elixir. It floats past my teeth, pours like honey down my throat. The air is but particles between us, our faces so near I can count the pores on his nose, the silver striations in the dark green irises. Our noses brush, and my eyelids sink closed as the heat of his tongue plunges past my teeth.

My heart leaps. I gasp, hands clamping his shoulders, spearing upward into his curls. The tresses slide through my fingers, smooth as silk.

So many textures await exploration. The cliff of his jaw, coarse with facial hair. The shell of his ear, delicately veined. The tight weave of his tunic. The warm skin of his neck near the collar where the sun has flushed its surface. I touch them all with unabashed curiosity.

“I love your freckles,” he whispers, dragging a fingertip down my nose. “Like small grains of sand.”

“Zephyrus,” I breathe. “I like your freckles, too.”

His mouth returns. My desire catches as he feasts with full, penetrative strokes of his tongue. My lips move with equal fervor, asserting *more*.

I push to my knees. The West Wind grunts and hauls me closer, the gold sand beneath the shaded palms scattering like a thousand flaming stars. The kiss does not break, only deepens. I am unraveling. Consumed. Body and mind reshape themselves, for I am pious, yet desired. A novice, yet always a woman.

Zephyrus licks at my teeth. I suck on his tongue. It’s an entirely

instinctive act. What do I wish? To climb beneath his skin. To tuck my heart alongside his. To know, truly know, that I am loved—mind, body, soul.

As the sun begins to set, the warm tones give way to cooling hues, and still we are kissing, reaching, tangling into one being. It's a messy affair. Saliva smears the corners of my mouth. His fingers tangle in my snarling hair, tightening near the scalp, and a moan breaks free. He bites at my lips, a rough growl dragged from the depths of his chest.

After two failed attempts, I manage to spread my legs across his lap. Something long and stiff juts into my core, and I whimper.

Zephyrus breaks the kiss, panting. His eyes flicker, pupils like dark pools within.

“I adore you like this,” he whispers. “With your legs spread and your weight atop my lap.”

The gravel in his voice intensifies the flush in my face. “You are pleased?”

Gripping my waist, he shifts me back and forth across his erection. My breath catches as the pressure begins to sharpen. “Do you not feel this?” He grinds upward, and the delicious friction sends a hot pulse through my legs. “You are aware of what occurs when a woman lies with a man, aren't you?”

“I am,” I stammer. Strands of damp hair stick to his temples, his skin warmed by the sinking sun. “Can I touch you?”

The question slips out with all the awkwardness of untried youth. I want to know what Zephyrus feels like in my hand, but it is difficult navigating a road untraveled.

Down his hands slide, stroking the tops of my thighs. “Brielle.” Bright, glancing heat marks the curve of my neck, a swipe of his ravenous tongue. The slow spread of his smile is my undoing. “I would love nothing more than for you to explore my body.”

“What if I do something wrong?”

“Darling.” Affection lightens his expression. “You can do nothing wrong as long as you are touching me.” His palms coast around my thickened waist, up to the heavy curves of my breasts. The dress is so torn the neckline hangs in strips, exposing the generous flesh of my cleavage, which twitches with each shortened breath.

With some effort, I manage to detach myself, sliding free of his lap onto the sand. His stiffened groin pushes against the cotton of his trousers, ending in a splayed head, slightly flattened at the crown. It twitches beneath my gaze.

He widens his legs suggestively, and my throat tightens, desire and shame warring within me. It smells of baked stone, the musk of perspiring skin. In the violet-edged dusk, I am bold. Reaching out, I clasp my hand around his length awkwardly atop his trousers.

The West Wind expels a deep, shuddering groan. He studies my efforts through slitted eyes. “How does it feel?”

I titter nervously. “Strange.” Neither hard nor soft, it pulses as I run my thumb beneath the lip of the head, tracing its fleshy rim through the cotton. I give it an experimental squeeze.

He curses, and I snatch my hand away, cheeks hot. “Bad?” I whisper.

His laughter snags against a rough edge. “Too good,” he grits, one hand fisted atop his bent thigh. “Here.” He angles my hand, places it over his bulge. “Try again.”

As my fingers clasp his thickness, he guides me in a steady rhythm, his larger hand enveloping mine. Tucked inside his trousers, his length pulses against my palm, then hardens, the wide head oozing dampness into the fabric.

My mouth parts in surprise. “You reached completion?”

The West Wind snorts. “No, though I admit I’m close.” The strokes

are firmer, long and unbroken, root to crown and back. His hips twitch, rising to meet my touch.

Mother Mabel never educated us on sex. I was forced to acquire any pertinent information from books or town gossip, so my understanding is rudimentary at best. It is pleasurable. It hurts. It is messy. It is brief. It is prolonged. It is uneventful. It is life-altering. I wonder which is true.

“Feels good,” he breathes, head falling forward. He watches my hand work him over.

I, Brielle of Thornbrook, will bring the West Wind to his brink. It does not seem entirely real.

Up my fingers skate, circling the head, squeezing in curiosity, and the wet spot enlarges, a spreading blemish in the fabric. I continue to pleasure Zephyrus until he removes my hand.

“Lean back,” he coaxes.

I follow his guidance, nestling into the cooling sand while he hovers over me. A thrill heats my blood. His teeth have lengthened to sharpened points.

One hand drifts down my gown, tugging the hem suggestively. His burning gaze meets mine. “May I?”

The oasis drifts in the darkness of desertion. The South Wind has disappeared, and we are alone. I trust Zephyrus. I will not be afraid. “Yes.”

Carefully, his hands slip beneath the fabric, coasting up my calves, behind my knees, across the paler insides of my thighs. A gentle push widens my legs, which he kneels between. The West Wind is faithless, I remind myself, but tonight, I might be his altar, my flesh and blood an offering, his head bowed as though in prayer.

Higher my dress creeps, gathered in folds around my waist. My feet dig into the sand, and I stare upward through the fronds, beyond which lie

the Eternal Lands. Warmth gathers in my pelvis—lower. My inner muscles clench, then release.

“I once asked if you had ever touched yourself,” Zephyrus murmurs. Long, deft fingers drift nearer to the apex of my thighs. “You did not give me an answer then.”

It was too embarrassing a thought. My own flesh, forbidden to me. Now? Legs bared and spread, my breasts so sensitized they twinge from their binding inside the corset, my heart thundering with dizzying madness, spiraling beyond my control. This moment feels inevitable, as if it had been set in motion all those months prior.

After my return from Under, my skin felt too tight, brushed by new sensations. I grew curious. My attempts at shuttering those licentious thoughts failed. I locked my bedroom door and explored my body. I touched my breasts, between my legs. Come morning, I knelt before the altar, head bent in repentance.

“I have.” Breathy and low.

His gaze snaps to mine, stunned. The West Wind’s smile grows, a decidedly hungry thing. “How did it feel?”

It is too humiliating for words, so I mutter, “Fine,” and leave it at that. *Exquisite* seems too revealing a description, but it was—exquisite.

“You already have an idea of what you like. We can work with that.” He massages shallow circles into my thighs. When his fingertips brush the edge of my chemise, I stiffen.

Zephyrus retreats as if nothing is amiss, moving back down my legs to my knees, calves, ankles. The skin tingles with sensitivity, and small, involuntary pulsations fizz along my nerve endings.

He moves upward once more. A broken sound rises in me as he skims the top of my pubic bone. My core clenches in reflex.

Without looking at me, Zephyrus asks, “How did you touch

yourself?” In the ensuing silence, he meets my gaze. “Will you show me?”

The thought of him watching an incredibly private act... I do not know if I am brave enough for that.

“Close your eyes,” he croons. “Pretend you are alone in your room at the abbey.”

“Will you touch me?”

“Not yet.” He peels the skirt away from my legs. “I want to see how you pleasure yourself. I want to imagine my hands on your skin, the breathless sounds you’ll make.” A droplet of sweat slides across his upper lip, which he licks clean.

Delayed gratification. I think I understand.

Settling deeper into the soft, whispering sand, I close my eyes. Dipping one hand beneath the hem of my chemise, I brush the top of my seam with two fingers, a bright, livid touch. A hiss seethes between my clenched teeth. I remember sliding my hand between my legs, evening veiled beyond the window, all those lightless pockets of Carterhaugh abed until morning. I’d felt maddened, compelled, free.

As I did then, I slip my fingers between my thighs, lightly brushing the bud nestled below the thatch of mahogany hair curled atop my pubic bone. The sweetest agony darts through me, and I bite the inside of my cheek, hips lifting nearer to the touch.

Here is something I never told Zephyrus: when I first touched myself, I imagined his hands cupping my breasts, that leanly muscled torso bent between my legs. Wetness trickles through my folds, which I catch and use to ease the passing of my fingers across my aching flesh. Slowly, I circle around my entrance. Pleasure gathers to a point.

Something grabs my wrist, and my eyes fly open. Zephyrus kneels above me, face painted deepest red. His eyes glitter like cut gems.

“I have a confession,” he says.

My thighs clamp together, and I nod, licking salt from my lips.

“The thoughts I have about you are not meant for mortal ears.”

It is cruel, his beauty. I’m caught, dragged in by the enchantment that is the West Wind. “Tell me.”

His focus intensifies, and I see the man he had once been, before his life took an unfortunate turn. The charm and captivation. How hungrily it drags me down.

The admission, when it comes, is choked by desire. “My mind is twisted,” he whispers. “I want you filthy, unclean. I want you breaking apart beneath me. I want to fuck you like an animal, to claim you as mine.” One of his hands cups my breast, his thumb brushing the boned corset where my nipple puckers beneath. “I want everything you can give me. I want it all.”

His fervor frightens me even as it comforts me. To know the wanting is soul-deep, beneath the skin. He is here and he will stay. That, too, frightens me, comforts me.

“Zephyrus,” I say. “I want that, too.”

Pushing my hand aside, he hooks his fingers in the hem of my chemise, yet pauses, looking to me for permission. I nod and lift my hips, allowing him to push the folds of the undergarment toward my stomach.

A shiver of cold air slinks across my naked legs. I’m afraid Zephyrus notices the size of my thighs, their unsightly pallor, the lack of defined muscle. But his lips part, and his eyes darken with unmistakable hunger.

His hand replaces mine at the juncture of my thighs and begins to move, drifting across the wet folds, lower, before dragging upward again, brushing the nub there. Over and over, his touch draws the pleasure to higher peaks.

My hands scrabble blindly for an anchor. Sand scrunches in my sweaty palms as the trembling worsens and the ache between my legs

throbs so intensely I fear I might pass out. The first time I experienced release, I was terrified. I thought it would hurt, but it felt better than anything I could have imagined.

Leaning forward, Zephyrus catches my mouth, flicks his tongue across my teeth. “Let it come.”

The resonance in his chest soothes. One of his hands lifts, cupping the back of my head while the other slicks upward in a hot glide, and two fingers brush the top of my sex where the nerves pinch, quivering. Faster and faster, he circles. My legs widen, heels digging into the sand, hips lifting for prolonged contact. The burn is unbearable.

Zephyrus licks at my ear, tugs the lobe between his teeth. He coasts toward my entrance, then drags the streaking wetness upward. When he returns to the throbbing bud, pinching slightly, my eyelids flutter heavily. He flicks there, and the heat ruptures. A hoarse, broken moan peals out of me.

The drowning deepens.

My body splinters and heals in turn. My muscles clench and unclench, hips stuttering as they rise and fall, his fingers plunging inside me, and the pleasure explodes with heightened, glittering intensity. I cry out, clamping my legs around his arm as a second wave of pleasure barrels into me, sweeping me asunder. My vision flashes white.

All at once, the tension inside me drains, and I slump onto the sand. As Zephyrus pulls away, I grab his arm. My eyes search his.

“Do you need space?” he asks carefully.

“No.” I try to catch my breath. “Do *you* need space?”

He laughs, and I laugh, because it’s the most infectious sound. “No, Brielle,” he chuckles. “I need the opposite of space, if I’m being honest.”

I smile, for I, too, desire the closeness of two bodies aligned.

“You’re sure this is what you want?” inquires the West Wind. “It

cannot be undone.”

I reach for his hand, seeking the connection that’s been built, strengthened, broken, and reforged over the last couple of months. “I’m certain.”

“We’ll go slow,” he assures. “All right?”

My eyes drop to his groin. I swallow to draw moisture to my mouth. “Yes.”

A few deft movements, and Zephyrus disposes of his trousers. The length of his sex protrudes, veins ridged down the shaft, purpling as blood gathers beneath the skin. His pubic hair is much darker than what lies on his head.

It’s... well. Again, I’ve seen nakedness before, but never a man fully erect.

As if sensing my trepidation, Zephyrus cups my face with a hand. “If at any point it feels uncomfortable, tell me. I’ll stop.”

He will. If nothing else, I trust him to honor my boundaries.

Settling back, I focus on slowing my breathing. A breeze disturbs the moonlit pool. When the head of his erection brushes my entrance, I tense, yet force another exhale from my lungs. I feel no apprehension over this decision, merely fear of pain.

I’m not sure what I expected. I’ve heard the first time can hurt. It stings as he pushes inside. The stretch makes me wince.

Knees braced, Zephyrus leans forward, gripping my outer thighs, and slides deeper. I flinch, hissing softly.

He stops, head bowed. Eventually, the ache eases, and I gesture for him to continue. Another push, and the pain returns. My legs tremble.

“No.” He shakes his head and pulls out. “We’ll do it another way.”

I prop myself on my elbows, thoroughly confused. “I want to continue.” I see no blood. Not yet, anyway.

“Not like this. Your first time should be handled with care.”

Emotion swells as a lump in my airway. I appreciate his consideration, though admittedly, I’m distracted. His erection glistens, the head ruddy with color. It’s quite unsightly, if I’m being honest, yet I’m compelled. A look, a taste, a touch. My fingertips brush the flared crown. It twitches beneath my exploration, a clear substance beading at the slit, sticky to the touch.

“Lie back,” Zephyrus orders, and I relent, his gaze warm, bright with adoration. He massages my upper thighs, thumbs indenting the soft skin. They are my greatest insecurity. I hate how they rub together when I walk, their lack of firmness near the rear, but as he bestows gentle kisses against my white skin, those deep insecurities begin to fade.

His mouth drifts upward, skimming the top of my sex where the dense hair curls. Zephyrus pauses there, inhales, eyes pinched shut. When they open, the emerald glimmers with vibrancy.

“I want to taste you.”

I blink at him. “You mean—” I cringe at the thought. “But it’s unclean.”

“Is it?” He drops his nose to the slope of my pubic bone. I try to close my legs, but his shoulders prevent me from doing so.

“Zephyrus.”

“Do you want me to stop?”

I bite the inside of my cheek. “If you’re sure.” I would never force him to do something he didn’t want to. I can’t imagine I would taste good.

A low, pleasant hum slides into the most soothing melody. “All I want is to bring you pleasure. That is all.”

He sinks his weight into my hips, pinning me as his tongue darts out, swiping the divot at the top of my seam. Another slow, lingering swipe of his tongue, the end curled, dragging upward through the wiry hair. Sparks

fly behind my closed eyelids, and I gasp as a wave of heat rolls through me. Pressure climbs, morphs into strain, and the feeling manifests into trembling thighs, a locked spine, fingers curled rigidly.

The wet, slick sounds grow louder with increased enthusiasm. The smack of his lips drives a hard pulse to my core. When his fingers catch my folds, spreading them apart, the air grazes my sensitive flesh and I squirm, lifting my hips to prolong the contact.

Again, Zephyrus dips his head. The heat of his mouth latches over the swollen bud, and his tongue flutters, bending the tension through my core. A low keen snags in my chest.

“That’s it.” His whisper floats in smooth, lyrical threads of sound. “You’re doing so well, Brielle. I love how your body opens at my touch.”

The praise lights me up, and I pinken in pleasure. I want to please him. I want to know him as he knows me, two hearts colliding, bodies connected in harmonious togetherness.

My hips lift, drawing my sex nearer to his face. Hands clasping the outside of my thighs, he suckles harder, lapping at the quivering bud, then lower, across the engorged flesh. I spread my legs wider, groaning. My mind blanks out. I do not think of who I was before this moment. I chose this. I cannot regret following my heart, no matter how filthy the act may seem.

His first finger slides in easier than the second, but once he begins to work me open, the pain lessens, my muscles relaxing to accommodate the intrusion. He scissors his fingers, pushing against the walls until they give. The pleasure crests, warm and slow and drenched in heat.

“Zephyrus.” A whimper shudders out of me.

“Am I hurting you?”

“No.” On the contrary, I’ve never felt so relaxed, so attuned to another, so unashamed in my nakedness.

He pulls away then. Saliva slicks his reddened lips. “Get on your hands and knees.”

I do as he commands. He lifts my dress, tossing it over my back. My exposed backside tingles in the cool night air.

I should be embarrassed. I should be awash in shame. I have broken every vow, snapped them as easily as twigs. But I feel crazed by the West Wind’s smell, like sun warming the wet earth, the delicious abrasion of his touch. My senses snap and sharpen, and I am awake.

One palm coasts over the curve of my rear. A crack rings out, and I whimper, jerking forward as the sting erupts across my naked cheek.

His palm returns, rubbing the irritated skin until the rash abates. My nipples catch the inside of my corset, peaked and aching.

“Too much?” he asks.

I’m panting as though I’ve run miles, but I shake my head. I want to feel alive. I want to know a life different from mine.

“Brielle,” the West Wind murmurs. “You’ve been an obedient girl, but I see what desires lie in your heart.” He leans forward to suck my earlobe into his mouth. “Such thoughts are sinful and must be punished.”

My back arches in preparation for his next strike. Humiliation and abandon war within my thudding heart.

“What is it you seek, darling?” That warm, vibrant tone strokes along my neck. “As your Text claims, ask and you shall receive.”

I glance over my shoulder. Zephyrus continues to rub my backside with a look of sharp greed. “Will you do it again?”

His eyes are very dark. “I see you have not learned your lesson.” A light tap falls into a harder force. My arms wobble beneath me. My head drops forward, scarlet curls curtaining my face. I bite my lip as the smack rings out.

Abruptly, he grasps my hair, drawing my neck backward until it

strains. His sharp teeth hook into my shoulder, and a moan floods out of me. My body tightens as the West Wind, curled over my back, begins to slap my rear with increasing force, the hot wind stirring the sting into permanent irritation.

I am neither obedient, nor devout, nor pure. I am simply Brielle, a woman, desired.

Shoving two fingers into me, Zephyrus hammers them against my inner walls. Tension spirals. Guttural noises fall from my open mouth. Then release rips and roars through me.

I scream.

My body contracts on a wave of heat. I'm so far gone I don't realize Zephyrus has removed his fingers until the head of his sex nudges my entrance.

"Slow," he reassures me, and sinks in.

My loosened muscles allow him deeper penetration compared to our previous attempt. A continuous push and retreat, a wonderful, breathless stretch. When he's fully seated, he murmurs, "All right?" One of his hands clasps the back of my neck. The other grips my hip.

My head hangs. "Yes." There is no pain, merely a feeling of fullness.

His slow, deliberate thrust sends warmth blooming through my lower belly. My fingers curl into the sand, sweat dripping from the tip of my nose. As the fronts of his thighs slap my bottom, I choke for breath, arms trembling. At the next thrust, my vision slides out of focus.

Faster, harder, wickedly deep, Zephyrus finds his rhythm as the heat builds, wet, punishing smacks cracking the night in two. What am I? A vessel for the West Wind's pleasure. He squeezes my breasts, bites my shoulder, teeth hooked into my skin as he growls out filthy expletives. I take it all. I release myself from shame. I become my bones and skin, heart and breath. I simply *become*.

“You feel so good, Brielle. So damn good.” The rhythm stutters, yet Zephyrus anchors me in place as he slams deeper, hitting a spot that makes my nerve endings sing. “I’m close.”

Wherever we go, we go together.

“Zephyrus.” I’m panting, drenched in the heat of lovemaking. I remember only his name.

He stiffens, his seed spurting in warm pulsations. Yet still he thrusts, his release trickling down my inner thighs.

My core clenches around him as a second wave hits unexpectedly. I moan through the pleasure, riding it out until my arms can no longer bear my weight. Together, we collapse onto the sand. I’m not sure how it’s possible, but somehow, we have traveled lifetimes in the span of a few stolen moments. I would not trade it for anything. For the first time in my life, I have taken something for myself.

The realization sends a shockwave through my body. I have seen the world. I have touched another’s heart as Zephyrus has touched mine. I am a woman in motion.

Tears slide down my cheeks. Despite trying to dampen all I feel, a sob wrenches free.

Zephyrus freezes, his eyes snapping to mine. “Did I hurt you?”

I grab fistfuls of his tunic. “It’s not that.” How sheltered I have been. At the first taste of freedom, I gorged until my stomach split, fingers sticky with the honey-sweet taste. Tonight, I betrayed the Father, and I fear what comes next. “Sorry.”

He soothes me with long strokes up my back, his concern plain. “You have nothing to apologize for. Let it out.” He kisses my cheek. “You need not hide from me.”

A garbled keen squeezes past my teeth, and I choke, crying in

earnest, my heart raw. To think I might have missed the feeling of being held close by a man I have grown to care for deeply.

Zephyrus pulls me close, crooning to me as I lie curled against his chest. In time, my emotional high returns to rest. Our bodies cool. The world returns in fragments of color and sound.

It doesn't take long before the West Wind's breathing evens out. Sleep, however, eludes me. I have traveled far. I have fought and overcome. I have fallen and risen again. I have pushed myself to the extremity of what I believed I could sustain. Lying beneath the stars, I can't help but wonder.

What if I have seen my god in another?

CHAPTER 36

Time is not my friend. Stars wheel overhead in the lengthening hours, yet despite Zephyrus' presence, I'm unable to sleep. My heart knocks insistently, peace hovering beyond my grasp. I know how this night will end. Eventually, moon will give way to sun. The star-dusted sky will brighten to a rosy hue, and my time with the West Wind will expire with a final exhale.

Dawn, however, is still an hour off. Moving quietly, I retreat to the sloped bank of the oasis, where I kneel. Dampness pools around my knees, and the palm trees impress their shapes into the backdrop, trunks lean, fronds long-reaching. The water sleeps.

It has been days since I last prayed. The distance between who I was then and who I am now is vast. I am Brielle, changed. Brielle, transformed. The prayers I'd once spoken do not sit comfortably in my mouth. They pile up like barbed rocks, cutting into my tongue.

"Hello, Father." It sounds too informal of a greeting. Nonetheless, I continue. "It has been some time since we last spoke. I hope you will forgive me for the oversight."

Eyes closed, palms pressed to the moist sand, I retreat inside myself.

Here awaits my tended garden, sunlit, honey-drenched in sweet fragrance. And yet, my heart is full of tiny, snarling knots. It *hurts*. That is something no one tells you. Faith is not separate from your life. It touches upon every aspect. When you begin to question how it fits, small tears form, and the slightest wind might collapse the painstaking build.

“I returned to Under, Father, but not for the reason you might think. While the Daughters of Thornbrook awaited the tithe in Miles Cross, I stole away. My duty was to Zephyrus. However, I fear I have come too late.”

Tears collect along my eyelashes, and I gaze upward, soothed by the sky’s expanse, its paling hue. “His body fades. Today, the paralysis will likely reach completion. We have no choice but to return to the Orchid King. I fought so hard to free him, but it wasn’t enough. I fear the fault is mine.”

If I hadn’t killed off the nightshade... but how was I to anticipate the detriment of removing Zephyrus prior to the ritual’s completion? All I saw was a man in need. I acted without thought to my own safety.

“I know you must be disappointed in me. I abandoned my peers, endangered Mother Mabel as well. But those are the least of my transgressions.”

The wind, when it blows, is cutting. I cannot differentiate between the Father’s touch and the desert’s scathing mark, if He is, in fact, present.

“I have failed you, Father. You, who have never turned from me, even in my darkest hours.” No matter how my throat spasms, I ignore it. I must shed this weight, for only in confession will I be free. “You see, I have given my heart to another.”

The wind dies then, a shocking stillness that claps upon my ears, a high, tinny ring. I go on. I cannot stop a flood in motion.

“It was not my intention,” I murmur, staring into the glassy water, “but in opening my heart, I’ve realized how narrow my world has become. I

have grown, become so much greater than Thornbrook's walls. Mother Mabel worries I will leave. I ask, can I not keep the faith without giving all of myself to it? Can I not be your Daughter *and* Brielle?"

I am no singular entity. I have spread beyond my bounds. I am not afraid. For that is an even greater strength, to look at something and decide, *That is not for me.*

A subtler breeze skates across the water, stirring the surface into shallow waves. It smells of rich earth, the incense used during service. It settles over my shoulders, the warmest, thickest cloak. I do not know what this day will bring, but I've learned the difference between proper and real, what one should be and what someone is. I will only ever be Brielle. It's time I embraced that.

My fingers twitch, gouging into the cold, gritty muck. I end the prayer with a softly uttered, "Amen."

To the east, a sleek object arrows over the dunes, shadows rapidly evaporating in light of the rising sun. My gut clenches as I watch the South Wind skim nearer on his sailer. Silence does not necessarily mean peace. I have learned the distinction over the years. Silence lacks, yet peace is full.

There is no peace within the desert.

With a heavy heart, I return to find Zephyrus sitting upright, knees drawn to his chest, peering across the oasis in contemplation. "How are you?" I whisper, kneeling beside him.

A groove notches the space between his eyebrows, then smooths. "As well as one can be returning to captivity." He looks me over, and his expression softens. Such exquisite bone structure, planes and angles married in flawless harmony. "I do not regret this time spent with you." His hand rests atop mine, no gloves between us. It trembles. "Whatever awaits me back in Under, I will face it without fear. I have you to thank for that."

He will not face it alone. Not if I have anything to do with it.

Zephyrus clears his throat. "How do you feel from last night? Sore?"

The memory of his hands marking my skin draws heat to my cheeks. My bottom smarts. "A little," I admit, dropping my eyes. "I feel somewhat nauseated from the herb." And yet, I do not regret what we shared. How could I when my heart beat alongside the West Wind's, peaceful at long last?

His fingers tighten over mine. "I worry for you. What will happen when you return to Carterhaugh? Where will you go?"

I stare at our intertwined fingers, their pattern of wheat and cream. Our Abbess on High determines the severity of offenses. Once she learns I am no longer a virgin, I will be dismissed from service, my title stripped. I may never again serve as a Daughter of Thornbrook.

"I will speak to Mother Mabel after the tithes," I say, softly but not weakly. "Then I will be dismissed from the abbey."

"Brielle." Quietly and with feeling.

My smile strains. "It's all right, Zephyrus. I'm at peace with the choice I made." When I imagine myself departing Thornbrook's pale stone walls, I do not despair. My skill as a bladesmith will allow me to begin again elsewhere. Kilmany, perhaps.

"And if I am not?"

I appreciate his willingness to shield me from the consequences of my actions, even if his efforts are wasted. "What's done is done," I say. "There's no use dwelling on the past."

"Not if I can help it," he mutters.

The hiss of sand draws my attention. Twin canvas sails, bloated with wind, snap with fury as the South Wind speeds toward us. He hits a peak, leaping an incredible distance before sliding down a smaller dune and skimming across the cracked ground where the terrain transitions near the oasis. He leaps from his vessel mid-slide.

“We must go.” He is breathless, dark eyes oddly bright above his white scarf. “I’m needed back at the palace.”

“Back at the palace?” Zephyrus scans his brother’s face, intrigued. “Whatever for?”

As the South Wind glances between Zephyrus and I, my hand lifts to my burning cheek. He can probably infer what occurred last night, if the wild state of my hair is any indication. He responds by turning heel and climbing aboard his sailer. Right. He may have agreed to help his brother, but that doesn’t mean he has forgiven him, or even likes him, really.

“Well.” Zephyrus sighs. “Let’s get this over with, shall we?”

Even if I wanted to move, I cannot. A part of me recoils at the idea of leaving the desert haven. I do not know if I can handle another loss.

“Brielle,” he murmurs. “It’s time.”

So it is.

Slipping an arm around his lower back, I help Zephyrus hobble onto the vessel awaiting departure. Once settled, the sails bow with wind, and we’re off.

The return journey passes too quickly. Sand blurs into strips of riotous color, and above, the realm’s enormous basin pools east and west, north and south, cool blue lapping at the edges of the sizzling landscape. Sitting mute beside me, Zephyrus observes the passing dunes with faraway eyes. Mother Mabel always claimed prayer did not hold the world’s answers. It couldn’t make water into wine. It couldn’t change what had been done. Turns out she was right.

We sail until the sand recedes and the earth splinters into fine cracks. The vessel slows, skittering over the uneven ground.

Ahead, the cliffs climb to impressive heights, beneath which lies the cave entrance—the boundary between realms.

I wish. I want. Neither matters, as I’ve learned. The gods decide.

They always have.

We disembark, lurching from the boat as Zephyrus' right knee gives out. I pull him tight against my side, absorbing the tremors running up his legs. He regards the South Wind for a moment, head bent in rare humility.

“Thank you, Notus, for your help. I know I have acted dishonorably in the past, but I hope to earn back your trust over time.” Weak and disheveled he may be, but he attempts to straighten, stand tall despite the hardship. “I will not forget this.”

The South Wind: quiet, introspective, yet always a brother. “Be well, Zephyrus.”

He dips his chin. A hot breeze snaps the trousers around his legs. “And you.”

Thighs bent, the South Wind springs onto his vessel, rudder gripped in hand, the air wrangled into submission. Moments later, he vanishes beyond the shimmering lines of heat.

Zephyrus turns to me. Resignation sharpens what lies beneath his somber expression. Namely, the despair of living forever, and the lack of freedom in how one lives their life. “Once we cross back into Under, it will not take the Hounds long to pick up my scent, if they are not already waiting for me.”

I slip my hand into his, palm to palm, flesh to flesh. “Whatever happens,” I whisper, “never forget that you are good.” Together, we will face the day as a united front.

We cross into Under with heavy hearts. An uprise of grass sprouts beneath my boots, crisp and green, and scarlet-tinged light blurs the gloom of the underground. Tucked against my side, the West Wind limps forward, panting, curls askew. The sweet aroma of rotting flowers drifts from the passage, along with a sound I know well.

We slow, and Zephyrus braces a hand against the wall where a

roselight flickers. “The Hounds.”

The baying is all noise. The air shudders with their thunderous approach. It hits me then—what I have gained, what I will lose.

“Zephyrus.” I grab him by the shoulders. “Were you lying when you said there wasn’t another way to break the curse?” When he does not respond, I give him a shake. “Were you?”

Fingers clasping my wrists, he lowers my hands, perhaps the last touch we will share with one another. “It would make no difference, for it will never come to pass.”

I search his green eyes. How dear this color has become to my own perspective of the world, a pasture of sprouting clover, the tender shoots of heralding spring. “Why not?” I croak.

He smiles sadly. “Because I broke your trust, and that was an unforgiveable offense.”

What was broken has now been mended. The heart endures. This I know. “I forgive you, Zephyrus. I do.”

“Brielle,” he whispers. “It’s too late.”

A tear slips from the corner of my eye. He catches it with his thumb, wiping away the watery track as if it had never been.

Clutching the front of his tunic, I draw him forward, hips notched, legs aligned. My mind is a sieve. There is much I desire to say. *I adore you. I understand you. I see you. I need you.* Loving someone is no imprisonment, as I had believed. It is the cool, bracing relief of clean air within the lungs. It is, at its heart, a choice.

But as the yelps magnify to a crashing uproar, my confidence flags, and I yank him forward, crushing my mouth to his. All that I cannot say, I tell him with lips and tongue and teeth. I kiss him for the *maybes* and *could have beens*. I kiss him because his taste is the only one I have ever known,

and I do not want to forget it. Maybe we will find one another again. If not in this life, then the next.

Zephyrus breaks away first. “There’s not much time.” He angles me toward the wall. A crack has pried the stone wide open, creating a crevasse large enough to hide a person from view. “Shelter here until it’s safe. The grassy path will lead you back to Thornbrook.”

He is not yet gone, and already, I miss him. “I promised I wouldn’t leave you,” I choke. “I promised.”

His eyes sheen. “I know.” The dim presses in with its chill, shadowy hands. Beneath the wailing Hounds, the clop of hooves echoes in sharp punctuations. Horses—many of them. “But I would have you live, Brielle. I would see you happy, free of this wretched place.”

“Zephyrus.” I cup his cheek with one hand. “I am happy. I *am* free.”

He kisses me then, hard and swift, barely a taste before he pulls back. The baying hammers upon my ears. “Forget this,” he says. “Forget me and do not return.”

Does the sun not sink to the west? Do rivers not flow downhill? These are truths, and here is one more: I cannot forget the West Wind. I would always remember him.

As his head whips toward the clotting darkness, he shoves me back into the opening. When I regain my balance, the West Wind has vanished from sight.

Frustrating man. If he expects me to watch him martyr himself, he is sadly mistaken. Knife in hand, I lunge through the opening.

Pain shatters through my face, and I recoil with a frail cry, my shoulder clipping the back wall. Something trickles from my nostrils. I swipe at it in bewilderment. Blood. By the Father... I press my palm against the smooth, transparent partition erected in the niche. Somehow, Zephyrus

constructed a wall fashioned of air, a barrier to keep me out of sight until the immediate danger passes.

Crouching down, I seek out a crack or potential seam that might collapse beneath the right pressure. Nothing. I stand, and pace in the narrow space, wondering if the Hounds have arrived, if Zephyrus has collapsed, if Mother Mabel has noticed my absence. Sooner or later, the barrier must fall.

The click of nails reaches me, followed by the sound of gnashing teeth. Zephyrus lurches into sight, thudding into the rock as the Hounds surround him. Their emaciated bodies hang in tatters of old skin. I rush to the wall, palms flat, pulse erratic. The largest Hound, its face hideously cratered like the rest, parts its oddly shaped mouth to reveal fangs coated in thick slime. A shudder wracks Zephyrus' body, and he curses, sliding to the ground as the paralysis claims him.

“Zephyrus.” I pound the barrier, my voice muted. “Zephyrus!”

Either he cannot hear me, or he ignores my call. My nails scrabble at the partition. I pace again, the iron blade hanging between my useless fingers, for it's all I can do. Am I to watch his demise? He went to enormous lengths to protect me from the Hounds, yet I cannot do the same. I must sit here, bound to this cage.

A sharp whistle draws the beasts to heel. As one, they arrange themselves in a tidy line, awaiting whatever lurks in the shadows.

A handful of roots slithers into sight, as pale and fleshy as the skin of a waterlogged corpse. They coast over the stone with an awful hiss, dragging the Orchid King into the shining red light.

Hanks of silver hair plaster his naked chest. Beneath the curled fronds of his eyelashes, a set of pitiless blue eyes examines Zephyrus where he has collapsed, head lolling, face drawn with fatigue.

An engorged vine wraps around Zephyrus' waist as Pierus pulls free of his nest. “Zephyrus.” He tsks in disappointment. “I'd hoped you would

have learned by now you cannot escape justice.” Those viperous blooms gather in a bloody eruption across his shoulders and back.

My fist connects with the barrier. “Pierus!”

The Orchid King gives no indication that he heard me. While I can see him, hear him, I might as well be locked in an airless box.

“A worthy attempt. To be honest, I am not surprised, though I do not appreciate the tithe’s delay.”

Zephyrus regards his captor blankly.

“You are aware of the contract. The Daughters of Thornbrook are only required to give their blood on the promise that you provide the majority of Under’s power. Should you fail to sacrifice yourself, the contract between Under and Thornbrook is nullified.”

I wasn’t aware of this loophole. I assume Mother Mabel isn’t either. She loathes the tithe.

“Due to your insolence—” Pierus smiles thinly. “—I was forced to extend Thornbrook’s lease of Carterhaugh to assuage Mother Mabel. Why, you might wonder?” Higher he rises. His upper lip twitches, blue eyes remote and cold. “Because you were not there, Zephyrus. And without the West Wind, the tithe remains unfulfilled. But we will rectify that situation soon enough.”

From the blackness beyond, a small herd of white horses emerges, fair folk perched in fine leather saddles across their pristine backs. Each newcomer wears a jewel-toned cloak: emerald, ruby, sapphire, amethyst, citrine. I recognize Pierus’ council immediately. The large, ornamental rings hanging from their snouts glint in the low light.

Collectively, the five fair folk hiss out a command, drawing the Hounds away from Zephyrus. When I next blink, the beasts have blotted into darkness.

Pierus shifts closer to his captive, his bulk engulfing the much

smaller West Wind. “You smell of the desert sand. A visit to Notus, is it?” When Zephyrus fails to reply, Pierus frowns. “Ah. Allow me.”

The flowers on his shoulders unwind, suctioning themselves to the West Wind’s face and neck. Their crimson petals flutter as the stems bulge and contract like muscles in a throat. I grimace, for the knot in my gut cinches tighter with increasing trepidation.

Color seeps into Zephyrus’ face. His eyes brighten, and sharpen in the harsh glare. Even the stutter of his breath smooths. After a time, the nightshade flowers detach, slithering back to their nest among Pierus’ muscled torso. I fumble in my pocket for the roselight. The pink hue pulses gently against the glass orb, all signs of hemorrhaging gone.

“Better?” asks the Orchid King. “That must have been uncomfortable for you.”

Zephyrus pushes to his feet, quiet with defeat.

“By the way, how *did* you escape the cleansing ritual? It is not possible unless an outsider aids you.” He gives a bird-like cant of his head. “Where, might I ask, is your sweet, red-headed friend?”

I shrink, make myself as small as possible, though I am well shielded. When Zephyrus does not reply, a smile crawls across the Orchid King’s mouth. “Your silence is telling. But no matter. Come,” he says. “Under is expecting you.”

BY THE TIME the barrier vanishes, Zephyrus and the Orchid King are long gone.

The air hangs limp, any trace of Zephyrus’ scent—loam, fresh roses—crushed beneath Under’s rot. Standing alone in the darkened passage, I weigh my options. The grassy path twists to my right. According to

Zephyrus, it will lead me safely back to Thornbrook. But that is not where my heart lies.

I'm no god, but I'm overcome by the desperation that sends mothers into burning buildings to save their children. What would I do to spare Zephyrus from his fate?

Anything.

As I follow the tunnel at a run, the strangest thing occurs. Grass erupts beneath my boots, carpeting the ground ahead—the opposite direction of Thornbrook. Under must sense my intention, the urgency to reach Miles Cross in time. As I hurtle around another hairpin turn, the scarlet gleam bleeds upward and outward, but I experience little fear. I place my trust in this path, for it is a reflection of myself.

The cave empties onto a grassy knoll, which perches atop a spreading green field. Gasping, I survey my surroundings, all set beneath a dark sky. I've been here before. There is the bridge my peers and I crossed days earlier, the spread of the River Mur beneath. Tucked amongst the woods edging the opposite bank, the cave leading to Miles Cross awaits.

Movement draws my eye to the distant shore. Five white steeds surge forward like snow rolling down a mountainside. They run parallel to the river. They cannot be stopped.

The Orchid King sits at the head of the party. His gruesome load of roots dwarfs the poor beast forced to carry him. I spot the West Wind at the very back, tied to a man wearing a ruby cloak.

Palming my dagger, I take a running start downhill. Cutting them off before reaching Miles Cross is Zephyrus' only chance.

The journey has left marks on my skin, and I am in desperate need of a bath, but with suffering comes steel in my spine, the will to rise, clarity of mind. The horses are still a mile off when I cross the bridge and reach the

wall of trees. There I crouch, awaiting their arrival. I've my knife and my conviction. It's all anyone really needs.

Thunder quakes the ground. With Zephyrus seated atop the last horse in the group, it will allow me to drag him down without the danger of being trampled. I will need to act fast though. They are nearly in reach.

My legs tense. Pushing aside the ferns, I prepare to leap.

But I have overlooked the West Wind's inherent inquisitiveness. He ponders, he questions why. Even the slightest disturbance draws his focus, for his gaze meets mine with startling ease.

Zephyrus yanks the reins then, steering the horse *away* from me, and slots into place near the river. The cloaked man snarls, regaining control of his mount. By the time I realize what he's done, the party has already galloped past, five white steeds disappearing into the darkness of Miles Cross.

CHAPTER 37

An altar has been erected in the center of Miles Cross.

Lush grass cushions the slab of pure white marble. Overhead, three tiers, shaped like an inverted cake, surround the field. There, the fair folk have gathered, partially shielded by shadows where the moonlight pouring through the ceiling ends. The third tier is so high it hangs behind wisps of fog. Every so often, black flickers through the heavy veil—dark stars in a bed of snow.

Vines cling to the archway of an abandoned side entrance. It is there I slink, crouching in the dim. I do not see Zephyrus. Nor do I see Mother Mabel. Only the altar, the glen, tendrils of thickening darkness.

A set of massive wooden doors heaves open in the back of the cavern.

Firstly, the roots. Their white, waxy coating, the small, bristly hairs. The patter of loose dirt follows. It sprays the air as the Orchid King sidles his bulk over the threshold.

It is so quiet I can hear the spit of candle flame. Breath held, I watch Pierus slither toward the altar, those tear-drop eyes bright with anticipation.

His muscled abdomen flexes with each sinuous movement. Upon reaching the altar, he turns to face the audience.

A bell chimes. Again, the doors open. I bite the inside of my cheek so hard blood marks my tongue.

Five cloaked figures drag Zephyrus into the cavern, jewel-toned cloaks hissing in their wake. His head hangs. Rusted chains bind his wrists at his back. They haul him across the grass by the arms, his legs trailing. It sickens me how quickly the fair folk come alive. A roar of approval shudders the cave walls.

Fury is a hard, pointed star inside my chest. His garb hangs off his frame in precarious threads, and filth coats him from head to toe. He appears defeated. For a ritual possessing hallowed undertones, I would expect him washed, donned in clean clothes, his skin pristine. Until I figure out how to save his life, I must wait. The time to act has not yet arrived.

He's tossed at the base of the altar, a crumple of limbs, while Pierus' council departs. After a moment, Zephyrus manages to prop himself upright using his knees.

Livid green eyes glare through the dirt-caked curls hanging in his face. It eases the tightness in my throat. I was wrong. He is not defeated. Not yet, anyway.

"You remember this altar, do you not?" The Orchid King runs a hand across the marble surface. "You will be reacquainted soon enough."

The West Wind regards the structure coolly. Meanwhile, the crowd's eagerness continues to climb, tearing free of the earth's restraint. It soon reaches ear-shattering heights.

"Look alive, Zephyrus," drawls the Orchid King. "You have a visitor."

A disembodied voice drifts through the heavy fog. "All rise for the Abbess of Thornbrook."

The doors at the rear of the cave groan as they're pushed open a third time, allowing a small procession to enter: twenty cloaked acolytes and novitiates, and lastly, the face of one I know well.

She glides forth, the sleeves of her alb swathing her delicate wrists, hands clasped solemnly at her front. The sleeveless gold chasuble envelopes her body with loving hands. Every strand of fine blond hair has been fixed at the back of her neck in a tight bun. It tugs the skin of her face into severity.

A hush seeps into the cavern. The Daughters of Thornbrook, draped in white and red, position themselves against the far wall in a half-moon at Mother Mabel's back. I spot Harper at the rear, hunched beneath my white cloak. What have they done over the last few days? Did they return to Thornbrook, or sleep in Under's vast belly? Did anyone notice my absence, or care?

As if scenting iron, the fair folk retreat deeper into the shadows, stony eyes wary. The sight passes like stillness through me: all these women, shepherds of the Father, blades seated comfortably in their palms. Meirlach hangs at Mother Mabel's waist. Its ruby pommel shimmers star-bright.

With soundless footsteps, she approaches Zephyrus where he kneels, head bowed, back bent, hands bound. She lifts a hand, and the silence deepens.

"Bringer of Spring," Mother Mabel intones. In Thornbrook, the high cathedral ceiling of the church lends a warm, sunlit tone. Here, the sound is peculiar. It lacks resonance, hitting as abruptly as a rock chucked at the ground. "For centuries, you have been bound to Under, the realm fed by the power in your lifeblood. Tonight, we celebrate the mark of another tithe and call in your debt."

Zephyrus' back expands with his inhale. I watch the curl of his

fingers in the soil, skin stretched over knobbed knuckles and joints. He lifts his head to study the Abbess. In profile, his jaw cuts, his nose sharper than I have ever seen it. “I have heard of you, Mother Mabel.”

She dips her chin. “And I as well, Bringer of Spring. A pleasure.”

“I confess I do not share the sentiment.”

The fair folk stir like a nest of worms, their interest piqued by the unanticipated malevolence. Nausea continues to churn in my belly, for I am familiar with Mother Mabel’s expression, the polish coating the surface of her flat, ebony gaze. She is far from pleased. “And why not?”

“Only the truly conniving take advantage of the gods.”

She stiffens, and her nostrils flare in warning. “I do not take advantage of the Father. It is because of His mercy that I am alive to this day, standing before you.”

Zephyrus chuffs a laugh. A trickle of blood oozes from his split lip. “Then you deny the corruption of your faith?”

She surveys him as one would a stain upon a pristine robe. “I’m not sure I understand.” Her voice goes cold. “Would you care to elaborate?”

He bares his teeth. “What of your vows, your Seven Decrees? Or do you only abide by them when it is convenient?” A few of my peers gasp at the implication. “Your willingness to participate in this violent ritual reveals how debased you truly are.”

A fine, bloodless line shapes her mouth. As Mother Mabel begins to circle him, she says, “I have my reasons. Thornbrook’s preservation depends on Under’s health. That is why your blood is necessary, my charges’ blood necessary.”

“It is cruel.” His gaze cuts to Pierus. “I am not who I was centuries ago.”

One of the Orchid King’s vines reaches out to stroke Zephyrus’ hair,

tugging on a wheaten curl until it springs back into its tight coil. A light titter breaks the quiet.

“How precious you believe that,” whispers Pierus.

Mother Mabel continues to survey the West Wind. “The gods remain unchanged. It is a truth of the world you know well.”

“I disagree,” Zephyrus says quietly.

An impatient sigh cuts the hush. “This does not have to be difficult,” she says. “You know the law. Another cycle has reached its close, and your curse remains unbroken. An unfortunate occurrence, but according to the Orchid King, unsurprising.”

So there *is* a way to break his curse. What must Zephyrus do? Is it as impossible as he mentioned, or merely improbable?

“The time has come,” she announces, a shrill declaration. “Kneel, and let your power empty into Under.”

A smile stretches wide across the West Wind’s mouth. He does not move. “I will not bow to a false god.”

Mother Mabel bristles. “Considering your precarious position,” she snaps, “I would suggest you mind your tongue.”

The West Wind is all smiles despite the chains. I have missed those laughing eyes, the guile whetting their depths. “Look at you. Look at these women at your back. They have offered their lives, placed their trust in you, and you’ve led them into a viper’s nest.”

“Do not speak of my charges,” she warns.

From where I crouch, I observe the women exchanging worried glances amongst themselves.

He goes on, nary a care. “What is it that bothers you, Mother Mabel? That I speak the truth, or that you are not strong enough to weather it?”

She halts her circling. My peers hold tight to dark iron at her back. Those blades were forged by my hand. Had I understood what purpose they

served in perpetuating this bloodletting, I would have set down my hammer long ago. “I will not tell you again.”

“Punish me as you see fit.” He shrugs. “My life is forfeit anyway.”

Her eyebrows crawl all the way to her hairline. Then the Abbess smiles, face pinched into punishing angles. “You want your life?” She draws her sword. “Then fight for it.”

The Orchid King lurches forward with a scowl. “That is not in your power to decide, Mother Mabel. Zephyrus is mine.”

Mother Mabel keeps her focus on the man bent before her as she says, “Do you doubt my ability to win this bout? You have seen me spar before. Your subjects came all this way.” She indicates the audience overhead. “Of course Zephyrus is yours. That is inarguable. Why not give the fair folk a tithe to remember?”

Jeers cut the air, and shadows flex in the darkest corners. The Orchid King considers the Abbess of Thornbrook, then the West Wind, blue eyes keen.

“Very well,” he drawls. “I suppose there is little harm in it.”

My fingers curl into the grass, hooking me in place so I will not intervene. Aside from our weekly training, I’ve witnessed the Abbess duel a handful of times during my apprenticeship. Deft and precise, she handled the blade with remarkable mastery.

“Well?” She peers down at the West Wind.

He stands. How can he not? Many centuries he has run, but today, Zephyrus, Bringer of Spring, will flee no longer.

“You have a blade,” he states evenly, “but you will not grace me with one?”

Mother Mabel swings Meirlach overhead, testing its response to a new master after centuries gathering dust. It unsettles me. A blade is a tool,

a method of defense, yet Mother Mabel, a woman of station in the faith, intends to shed blood.

“You are a god,” she replies. “You have your winds, your wit. Let that be enough.” Hilt enveloped snugly in her grip, she nods to the Orchid King. “Break his bonds.”

Tonight, I understand the true meaning of fear. I understand it is personal. It slicks across my skin, manifesting in twenty iron daggers held in the hands of the pious, the clank of chains clattering onto softened grass, a heart ceasing its beat. Why suggest this duel unless Mother Mabel wants the West Wind dead? Meirlach is god-touched. If he falls beneath this blade, he will not rise.

Zephyrus rotates his wrists, massaging away the stiffness with a bland expression. He rolls his shoulders, plants his feet, a sword carved from the air materializing in hand, its silvery curve haloed in milky light. A pulse of distress cramps my stomach further. As a swordsman, Zephyrus is adequate at best. If only this were a duel of the tongue.

Shadows stretch and bend around the fair folk as they grow unruly, electrified by the promise of blood. Occasionally, the veil dissipates in odd, random pockets, revealing nails curling from the end of a long, knobby hand, or the swell of a shoulder, its skin bearing the texture of weathered stone.

Zephyrus pads closer. The altar, an eruption of white stone at his back, smolders. As he lifts his silvery sword, its tip directed at Mother Mabel’s chest, the shape blurs. However substantial it appears, it cannot compete with solid steel.

Help him, I think. Stand by his side, face Mother Mabel together. And then what? Betray my mentor after a decade of guidance? I cannot win. Whether or not I choose to fight, I will lose.

Sinking low in preparation of the duel, Zephyrus girds himself for

Mother Mabel's strike. But as she lifts her sword, black eyes remote, she whirls toward the Orchid King instead.

Pierus has anticipated it. That is abundantly clear as his own sword materializes, driving upward to catch Meirlach with a startling clash. The Daughters of Thornbrook scramble backward, pressing into a huddle, the wall crowding their backs. The fair folk howl and shriek and collapse into squeals of outrage.

Between the cross of their blades, Pierus gifts Mother Mabel with a close-lipped smile. "All these decades I've wondered when you would make your move. I'm relieved the time has come at last."

Strands of blond hair hang around her reddened face. I've seen disappointment disturb that cool serenity, exasperation, even moments of outrage, rare though they are. Never true abhorrence as I witness now. "It is true I've bided my time." The statement cuts with cold fury. Despite the Orchid King's overwhelming height, her stance remains unbending. "I have endured your horrendous nature and repulsive proclivity for violence, your parasitic bloodletting, the disrespect toward my charges. I have endured it all for this moment: an end to an era."

Zephyrus glances between king and servant, then lowers his blade. If Mother Mabel kills Pierus, he would be free. It is in his own benefit to sit back and watch.

"For seven years you kept me captive." Mother Mabel speaks no louder than is required for intimate conversation. The vast ceiling magnifies the rest. "No matter the ways I pleaded—*begged*—for mercy, you refused to listen."

The Orchid King's eyebrows wing upward. "You knew the consequences of a broken contract."

Teeth bared, she leans into the stance. "I approached you multiple times concerning the tithe. I wanted change. You agreed it was a barbaric

ritual, to force *my* charges to give blood, only to grow *your* power. We agreed Thornbrook's participation in the tithe would be no more."

His blue gaze burns with the repression of holding oneself motionless. One of the nightshade flowers snaps at Mother Mabel's arms. She does not flinch.

"You chose to endure the punishment in your charges' stead," he argues. "I did not make the decision for you. The fact is, I did nothing that was not already explicitly stated in the contract. You failed to show up for the tithe with the required twenty-one donors. It was well within my right to steal away a few of your women."

"I do not regret taking the place of my charges all those decades ago. They were young, ignorant of Under's deplorable conditions. They would not have survived the abuse." Her arms begin to shake, yet she adjusts her stance, pushes against him so he's forced to give ground. "But I did."

Two pale vines curl around her ankles, slinking toward the junction of her thighs.

"You did," the Orchid King concedes. "You were strong for a mortal woman. No matter the cruelty you endured, your faith never wavered." Higher the vines climb, snaking over her stomach, up to her breasts. "I admire conviction."

"Unhand me," Mother Mabel hisses.

"May I remind you, Abbess, that you entered *my* realm? What did you think to accomplish by revealing your hand?"

She sneers. I've never seen such outright revulsion. "I seek to accomplish nothing. Your death will burden me less than your life. I am ready to make that sacrifice."

The Orchid King peruses Mother Mabel as though considering how best to dispose of her, yet he releases the vines, breaking away to skulk across the open field toward the pond, sword dangling from his hand like an

afterthought. The fair folk, his most devoted servants, toss fresh flowers from their perches.

My muscles creak as I shift to a more comfortable position in the tunnel entryway. Zephyrus lounges against the wall, arms crossed, calmly observing the fortuitous turn of events. I've half a mind to drag him away from this place, but I stay put. As silly as it sounds, I fear Mother Mabel's wrath were I to interfere. Tonight is more than the tithe. Tonight is for vengeance, for cleansing.

The First Decree: thou shalt not kill.

"You wish to end my reign?" Pierus considers her with an insulting lack of concern. "I welcome the challenge."

Mother Mabel leaps nimbly across the space. He blocks one, two, three blows before hacking at her stomach. She pivots sideways and slashes low, lopping off a vine at its base, darting out of reach.

A high-pitched keen shivers from the severed appendage. Dark fluid oozes from the flowers, which whiten, then crumble to the fine powder of soot gone cold.

Zephyrus smiles slightly.

The Orchid King stretches higher atop his tangled roots. "You may carry a god-touched blade," he says, "but I do as well." The steel in question protrudes from a wire and leather hilt. "Your necklace offers no shield against it. I'm sure the Stallion informed you of its shortcomings before you claimed it. Everlasting life you receive, but no further protection against death. And when I snatch it from your throat, why, you will crumple into a husk."

Until this moment, I've acquired information only in segments. Together, they unfold, clarity at long last.

What do I know? Mother Mabel was held captive by the Orchid King after taking the place of three novitiates decades prior. For seven long years

—an entire cycle—she was imprisoned until the day she managed to escape.

But she did not return to Thornbrook immediately. She sought out the Stallion's Grotto, stole the serpent necklace resting against her collarbones. Not a piece of pretty jewelry, but an artifact, a gift of everlasting life.

She then returned to Thornbrook, carrying that trauma with her, whetting it, oh so slowly, until it bore a sharpened point. Years it must have eaten at her. Carved out all the joy until it went to rot. If she was to one day enact revenge on the Orchid King, she must live long enough to do so.

And Meirlach? How long had she planned to acquire it? Was my bladesmith apprenticeship part of that plan? Did she hone me as a blade so I might one day duel the Stallion and win?

The Orchid King lunges, slicing a line through her chasuble. A piece of gold fabric flutters to the ground. Mother Mabel meets the next strike, parries nimbly and returns. She is reliving her suffering cut by cut. A few vines lash out toward her legs, but she skips aside, far more agile than the Orchid King, whose nest of bramble weighs him down. By the time she slips around his front, quick as an asp, her blade rests at the base of his throat.

He goes still.

“Tell me where you go when you die,” she demands, “so I may ensure you never return.”

His jaw clenches, and a vein pulses at his temple, fat and worm-like. Pierus would likely chew off his own tongue before caving to the Abbess' command, but Meirlach demands the truth, and eventually, the compulsion to speak overtakes him, the words emerging as a snarl.

“Your people call it Hell. Where I come from, we call it the Deadlands.”

He winces as she sinks the tip into his neck. A bloody droplet rolls achingly slow across his skin.

“The thought of your death,” she says, “is the only thing that got me through the days.” The Daughters of Thornbrook observe in silence, faces solemn beneath their red and white hoods. “Today, I begin anew.”

Two vines whip toward Mother Mabel’s face in retaliation. When she spins out of reach, a third vine slams the backs of her knees, forcing them to fold. Meirlach flies from her hand as she hits the ground.

I fail to muffle my horrified scream as both opponents dive for Meirlach. The fair folk lean forward with bated breath, suspended within the tomb of Miles Cross.

Mother Mabel reaches the sword first. A blink, and she’s back on her feet, slicing through vines, roots, lopping off the vicious flowers. Pierus bellows in pain, attempting to deflect as he scurries from reach. Her next swipe goes wide, hacking through a pillar that drags the ceiling into partial collapse.

“You tire, Pierus,” Mother Mabel pants coarsely, spinning to avoid a slice to the thigh. “Such is the behavior of a man fatted on power.”

A wall of vines erupts in a wave of deadly points. She severs two. A third clips her on the shoulder, spinning her toward the altar. She hits the corner with shattering impact, crumpling to her knees. Someone screams.

Terror locks me in place as the Orchid King descends. She’s not moving. *Get up!* Yet his sword falls, a precise crescent toward Mother Mabel’s neck.

She snaps upright, teeth bared, and thrusts Meirlach through his heart, the long, steel blade protruding from his back. Blood mats his locks of silver hair and patters onto the grass. Mother Mabel’s black eyes hold the Orchid King’s blue, which gradually dim.

With a twist, she yanks the sword free. The Orchid King sags

forward with a groan, collapsing at the altar's base. Within moments, the scarlet flowers hemming his shoulders wither to ash.

Shock ripples through Miles Cross.

I look to my peers. Their pale faces glow within their shadowed cowls. A few glance at the knives they hold, hands shaking, and promptly drop them. Someone faints near the back, toppling the nearby women into a heap.

The fair folk are oddly mute, their movements stiff with uncertainty. Do they mourn the Orchid King? Are they, too, free? But through the unholy quiet, a new realization emerges, one of breath and a life yet lived. The West Wind, unburdened by chains. For with the Orchid King's death, the Bringer of Spring walks free.

Without the slightest unease, Mother Mabel lifts Meirlach, studying the sullied blade, then promptly wipes the blood clean with the hem of her alb. I gasp. The crimson stain appears black in the moonlight.

“By the Father,” someone whispers.

Pulling a square of cloth from her pocket, she mops her clammy face before turning to Zephyrus, her expression as cold and closed as ever. “If I am correct, I believe the debt between you and Pierus is void, is it not?”

The West Wind pushes off the wall he leans against, yet keeps a healthy distance between them. Flowers spring from the press of his heels against the grass, and his green eyes possess an immortal glow, flush with unleashed power. The air snaps, sweet with the scent of spring. “It is.” He searches her gaze, stares a touch too long at Meirlach, which she still holds. “I thank you for the favor.”

Mother Mabel studies him with icy disinterest. At some point during the duel, her bun loosened, and now her hair hangs freely, the first I have ever seen it unbound. “I did not do it for you, Bringer of Spring.”

“I'm aware.” One of his hands slides into the pocket of his filthy

trousers. “Nonetheless, I benefited, as did you.”

She glances down at the mythical blade. Zephyrus’ attention returns to the sword as well. “You must understand my predicament,” she clips. “My duty is to Thornbrook and my charges. It has always been so.”

“I understand.”

“I’m not sure you do.” Meirlach cuts through the air with a high whine as she tests her swing. I watch the Abbess carefully. She is not herself. “Unfortunately, your presence complicates matters.”

He quirks a brow, at ease to all outward appearances, but I have spent enough time in his company to recognize the subtleties of mounting concern. My feet bid I go to him. I would stand at his side as I promised to do, yet I’m reluctant to show myself. Mother Mabel is dangerous with a blade in her hand. “Enlighten me, please.”

“Your life is a hazard to all I have built. I cannot allow you to further tempt the women under my protection.” She holds the gleaming steel steady. “It’s nothing personal.”

It is not personal to her, but it is personal to me. This was something I had not foreseen.

Zephyrus angles toward her, for she has begun to approach. “I have no need to tempt anyone now that I am free.”

“You are a god, Zephyrus of the West,” she murmurs, “and gods do not change.”

She leaps, hacking toward his neck with brutal ferocity. He springs sideways, aided by a rush of air beneath his boots, and touches down on the other side of the pond. Grass rushes upward around his thighs, their long stalks looping into multiple braids, which lash out at Mother Mabel’s legs.

She cuts them down. Zephyrus’ reign over all things green tears up walls of roots, individual blades of grass arrowing toward her exposed skin.

Small, weeping cuts color Mother Mabel's face and neck. I flinch as another wound peels open her cheek.

A sphere of air punches out from Meirlach's tip, barreling toward the West Wind, who diverts its path with a gust of his own. The sphere slams into the wall, spraying grit.

Enlivened by the entertainment, the audience cackles and screams. My stomach drops. I had completely forgotten about Meirlach's ability to command the wind. It means even footing for Mother Mabel, a disadvantage for Zephyrus.

The duel deteriorates before my eyes. Both hurl wind at the other with increasing force. I'm not sure what I fear more: Zephyrus' death, or Mother Mabel's. At one point, they veer frighteningly close to the novitiates and acolytes. Harper shoves the younger girls behind her, iron dagger held aloft, pointed side out as she had claimed. I grit my teeth, forcing myself to remain in place as the fight progresses toward my hiding place.

Blow by blow, the cavern crumbles to dust. Deflected gusts pummel the ceiling and walls. The West Wind rams Mother Mabel into a pillar, which cracks, the rock groaning from additional strain. A chunk plummets from overhead, missing the Abbess by a foot.

She climbs to her feet, seething. Sweat drips from her face. No matter the effort she exerts, Zephyrus is always one step ahead. She will never be able to reach him on foot. He is simply too powerful.

As Mother Mabel lifts Meirlach, black eyes aflame, wind explodes from the blade, sending Zephyrus soaring across the room. Moments before he lands, she plants her feet, taking aim.

In hindsight, it was all meticulously planned. For I understand that, with Mother Mabel already in motion, it is too late for him.

Her wrist snaps forward. And as the gold-plated hilt leaves her hand,

I spring from the corner, hurling myself into the path between god and blade.

The sword hits my left breast, sinking deep. Blood pours from the opening as I stumble, then fall, hands scrabbling at the protruding hilt, Zephyrus lurching forward with a roar.

And just like that, I have come undone.

CHAPTER 38

My body hits the ground with a distant thump. Immediately, my senses dull and darken, as though I observe the world through a film of murky water. Mother Mabel's face drains of color so quickly she sways. "Brielle?" The word folds before it ever truly forms.

As my vision fades, so too do the vibrant flowers dotting the glen, which blacken, then wither into earthen decay. Green rot spoils the air.

The West Wind falls to his knees beside me. All-powerful Meirlach, whose steel can master any foe, protrudes from my left breast. "No," he whispers. "No, no, no, no, no—" It is a mantra, the holiest of chants.

Mother Mabel stumbles forward one, two steps. She stares at the spreading pool of blood. "I didn't see her. How—?" She lifts a trembling hand, presses two fingers to her quavering mouth. Bewilderment curdles to the dourest emotions—dismay, horror—as she scans the novitiates clumped together in their white cloaks, Harper among them. Her hood has fallen back, revealing lustrous ebony hair, blue eyes swimming with tears.

"By the Father," Mother Mabel chokes out. The Daughters of Thornbrook have begun to descend into hysterics. "What have you done?"

"I'm sorry," Harper whispers. "I didn't mean—" Her face crumples.

Gently, Zephyrus lifts me across his thighs. Blood slops onto his lap. “Stay with me.” He cups the side of my slackened jaw, and his voice cracks as he searches my face. I try to focus amidst the looming shadows, but I am floundering, dragged farther beneath the surface of the murk. The deeper I sink, the less agony I experience. I do not fight the pull.

“Look at me.” Fingers digging into my upper arms, he shakes me desperately. My head lolls. “Damn it all, look at me!”

As Mother Mabel reaches my side, a wall of air catapults her across the room. She hits the wall with a violent crack, and there are screams, terrible screams. She slides onto her backside, dazed. Blood trickles from her hairline.

“Someone get me a gods-damned healer!” Zephyrus roars.

Yet all is silent. All is still.

“We’ll fix this.” Sound strains as air is forced through his tightening airway. He fumbles for the hilt protruding from my chest. “We’ll...” Blood-soaked hands slip over the gold plating. No matter how he yanks, the sword does not pull free.

With a hoarse cry, he releases the weapon. He shakes, and fists his hands atop his thighs, fighting to maintain control, and then, as if having succumbed, deflates. One of the younger novitiates, a girl of thirteen, slips to the ground. Harper catches her around the waist, murmuring words of comfort. Tears map her bloodless cheeks.

The West Wind dips his head to mine. Even in death, his breath smells sweet. “You can’t leave me,” he murmurs. “Not like this.”

I do not have the words to inform him that I am already gone.

Peeling itself from my body, my soul floats higher in the cavern, far above the gathered spectators, the lush field of grass. I never gave much thought as to how I would die. Should my life reach an untimely demise, I

would spend eternity in the Eternal Lands. There, I would want for nothing. My belly full. My heart whole. My body restful, rid of aches and pains.

The Father calls to me.

Zephyrus smooths the red, tangled curls from my face with his filth-encrusted hands. A rough, broken sound falls unchecked from his mouth. “Why?” He lifts his head, that emerald gaze piercing Mother Mabel across the field as two acolytes help her to stand. “I thought you cared for Brielle.”

The Abbess of Thornbrook is many things. Austere. Rigid. Never bent, as she is now. “I care for each of my charges. Brielle was...” Her expression falters. “She was special. No one else was more dutiful or willing to please. I told her to stay on the grassy path. How could I have predicted she would stray?”

He sneers. “You claim to care for Brielle, yet it is clear you barely know her.”

“And you, pray tell, do?” Her eyes narrow. “I have looked after Brielle for a decade. You have known her for a handful of months.”

“Time is no precedent to knowing one’s heart.” His throat dips, and he goes on, tone icy with repressed rage. “She is a curious, willful woman. She questions the world she lives in. She desires to live a life of depth.”

“Let me be clear, Bringer of Spring.” Mother Mabel’s voice quavers despite the steel beneath. “It is because of *you* that Brielle is dead.”

A snarl rips through the cavern.

The West Wind leaps to his feet, wind-carved blade in hand. “Take accountability for your actions, Abbess,” he spits, elongated incisors poking into his lower lip. “It was your hand that threw the blade. Do not deny it.”

She shakes off the acolytes, who gladly return to their huddle, trying to make themselves as inconspicuous as possible. The fair folk, drawn by the whiff of spilled blood, have crept forward in their tiers, but one quelling look from Mother Mabel herds them back into the gloom.

“Do not doubt my care,” she goes on. “I loved Brielle like a daughter. I tried to guide her to the best of my abilities. I warned her to stay away from Under, but you were selfish. You wanted her for yourself. Now here she lies, a corpse.”

Indeed, my freckles appear as broken scabs pocked upon my colorless skin. My blank eyes resemble muddy pools.

“If you truly cared for her well-being,” Zephyrus hisses, lifting the sword with blood in his teeth and grief in his heart, “you would have nurtured her. You would have built her up, infused her with the confidence required to face the world. Instead, she floundered, torn down by the cruelty of her peers.” Another tear courses down his cheek. “The true mark of a coward is to do nothing.”

I peer at Harper from above, my soul grasping the last frail tether binding me to my physical self. She bows her head, shame-faced. Isobel appears equally remorseful.

“Better a coward,” Mother Mabel replies with cold scorn, “than a disgraced god. It is not my job to interfere with Brielle’s faith. That is the Father’s duty.” Her upper lip curls. “But what would you know of faith, Zephyrus of the West? You have avoided duty your entire life. Why cling to something that does not belong to you and never will? Why do you care?”

Though I await his response, it never comes. Can he not state with absolute certainty the reasons he cares? Some distant part of me wishes he would.

She steps forward, skirting Pierus’ body, the oozing roots. Her gaze falls to my blood-drenched form before skittering away, pain tightening her features. “Brielle belongs with her people. We will take her back to Thornbrook, where she will be buried. I will not allow her to rot in this place.”

“You would take her from me?”

Mother Mabel peers carefully at Zephyrus. She has always excelled at prying free what shies beneath the surface. “If you cared for her at all,” she says quietly, “you would wish her a peaceful rest.”

I’ve never seen his face so pinched. “I told Brielle to return to Thornbrook. I did not want Pierus to harm her.” He returns to kneeling at my side. “But she did not listen to me.”

“Do you not see the pattern of your actions?” A few more strides brings her within a stone’s throw of my splayed legs. “The death of one lover, the death of another. When will enough be enough? When will you learn?”

The devastation, when it hits, is total. I watch Zephyrus’ expression fracture, its slow crush beneath remembrance. Shame is its own weapon.

“Live your life, Zephyrus. Leave this place, if you wish. You’re free.” Mother Mabel reaches out a beseeching hand. “Just return Brielle to us.”

Freedom is something he has long desired. I’m only disappointed I cannot share this joyous moment with him.

Curled over my corpse, Zephyrus weeps in earnest. Great, heaving sobs that would break the back of a weaker man. His sadness is so potent it tinges the air, feathering the edges of my waning soul. Something tugs at my gut as I float a bit higher. The Father calls. I’m not ready to go.

“I don’t care for my freedom,” he grinds out. “All I want is for this woman in my arms to be alive, unbroken, whole.” He touches the corner of my mouth where the blood has begun to harden and crack. “What must I do to bring her back?”

Mother Mabel’s mouth parts momentarily, hangs there, then snaps shut. “It cannot be done.” The long column of her neck elongates like a pillar of palest marble. “That is the unfortunate reality of a mortal life.”

“I do not accept that.” He snarls it, his face a mess of snot and tears.

“Under holds the well of my power, and I, dear Abbess, am a god unchained. We shape the world as we see fit. Nothing is stronger.”

She stands uncowed. “It is the law.”

“Laws can be rewritten.”

“Not this law,” she says. “Not death.”

Brow scrunched, Zephyrus stares into my pallid face. His palm cups my cheek tenderly, and I see the man he could have been, unburdened, free to choose. He is not like his brothers. He is neither bleak winter nor the scouring air to the south. Spring is gentle at heart. It shatters the earth’s icy, hardened skin.

He is beautiful to me. Look at his arrow-straight nose, the bow of his mouth, freckled skin touched by the color of sunlight. Why does every facet appear to slide into another, the curve of his tear-marked cheek splaying into the sharp, stubbled jaw, then dipping into the darker skin of his neck where the sun has baked it? Why have I not seen this sooner?

“Do you believe in miracles, Mother Mabel?”

Her black eyes narrow to slits. Fine facial lines tell the tale of restless nights. I wonder if she has slept since entering Under. Where did everyone stay while the tithes were delayed?

“It seems exactly the sort of question one who knows nothing of our faith would ask,” she responds with a bone-deep weariness. “If you had bothered to read our Text, you would know that in the Book of Grief—”

“Aiden the Blessed healed a drowned woman after she lay dead for three days?” Mother Mabel stares. “Or perhaps in the Book of Fate, when Ian the Just regained sight after a lifetime of blindness?” He smiles a hard sort of smile. “I am well acquainted with your Text, Abbess. Do not trouble yourself thinking I am ignorant. Although, I did not ask what your Text states. I asked if you believe in miracles.”

The question clearly makes Mother Mabel uncomfortable. Another

moment passes before she states, “I do.”

The West Wind nods, then says, “Take me instead. My life in exchange for Brielle’s.”

A hush dampens the gloom of Miles Cross. Clouds have drifted across the moon, for the moonlight streaming through the ceiling brightens the cavern no longer. Both acolytes and novitiates wipe their streaming eyes.

Mother Mabel blinks at him, dumbfounded. “You, a god, offer your life for a mortal woman?”

He dips his chin in a rare display of subservience. “I am kneeling before you, willing to do whatever it takes to bring the woman I love back to life. If you believe nothing else, believe this.”

She frowns, crosses her arms over her stomach, a shield to protect the soft, vulnerable parts of her body. “I do not know if it can be done.”

“You are a vessel of your god, are you not?” When she nods, Zephyrus says, “Then tonight, you will act as my vessel. We will use the combined power of our blood to reverse Brielle’s death. Mine, yours, the Daughters of Thornbrook.”

She contemplates the West Wind as one might a particularly frustrating enigma. The fair folk are so quiet they have faded into the background. “It has never been done before, but it could work. You loved Brielle, and I believe she loved you, too. Why else would she sacrifice her life for yours? Had Pierus not reached an untimely demise, the curse binding you to him would have been broken the moment she stepped in front of the blade, for she, a mortal woman, had done the impossible and fallen in love with you. Perhaps the power in such a gesture still holds true.”

The cavity in my chest where my heart once beat pinches dully.

Mother Mabel speaks true. In many ways, I still wear my cowardly skin, for I did not tell the West Wind *I love you*. It is too late now.

For a time, Mother Mabel peers down at me. How tall she stands when no longer cloaked in Pierus' shadow. "It is time Brielle returns to Thornbrook and takes up her mantle as acolyte. Once the death is reversed, she will remember nothing of this night, or any that came after your first encounter. It will be as though you had never met."

Higher I rise, my soul drifting through the far-reaching fog. I am nearly out of reach.

"If that is the price of her life," he whispers, "then I will gladly pay it."

Pressing a kiss to my chilled cheek, he sets me aside, careful not to disturb the sword jutting from my chest. He then stands before the altar, knife in hand. He does not flinch when dragging the blade through the center of his palm. Blood drips onto the white stone.

He turns, motions to my peers. Grief hardens his features. "They will each gift their blood. You will go last, Abbess."

The Daughters of Thornbrook calmly approach the altar, daggers in hand. They readily pierce their fingers, squeezing the skin until blood wells, and patters onto the snowy slab. Harper slices her palm with a quiet sob. The remaining women add their blood to the mix without complaint, even capricious Isobel.

Mother Mabel is the last to approach, appearing small and bent in the vast space. "Heavenly Father," she says. "For you, our hearts are open."

As her blood joins the small pool, a wind snaps through the cavern, stirring shadows into dust.

"Let it be done," intones the West Wind, and the world ruptures in the white light of a newborn star.

PART 3
THE GRACED

CHAPTER 39

“Shouldn’t she have woken up by now?”

“Hush.” A punctuated demand. “Healing takes time.”

I feel myself sloughing off the dense, dream-thick sleep, rising nearer toward the surface, toward sun.

“And you care why?” Isobel’s nasally voice. I would recognize it anywhere.

“Brielle almost *died*,” Harper responds with a low hiss. “Of course I would care.”

“Since when? You hate Brielle.”

“I don’t hate Brielle.” But she does not sound entirely convinced.

The silence, though brief, snaps against my skin with rising tension.

“I don’t know what’s happened to you of late,” Isobel sneers, “but I would rethink your allegiance here. The higher you climb, the harder you fall. Who you befriend matters. Remember that.”

Boots stomp across the room. A door opens, then slams shut.

The throb in my chest gathers to a point. My eyes fly open on a gasp, palm lifting to cover the hurt.

Except my hand is caught by another’s—long-fingered, porcelain

smooth. My bleary gaze lifts to Harper.

“Don’t touch,” she says, “or you risk reopening the wound.”

That fine-boned face, the midnight hair falling in sheets over her shoulders, a startling purity against the soft gray cotton of her dress. It feels like an age since I have seen her despite our paths crossing daily.

Briefly, I scan my surroundings. The infirmary is a rectangular room lined with cots, crisp white sheets stretched tautly over the thin mattresses. Salves, tinctures, and balms clutter the shelves built into the far wall. Curtains mask the windows. We are the only ones occupying the space.

I snatch my hand away. “What are you doing?” My throat grates, the words hoarse and weakened. Why is Harper sitting at my bedside? “Where’s Mother Mabel?”

Calmly, she reaches for the glass of water on my nightstand. Candles brighten the dim room with pockets of wavering light. “Thirsty?” She shoves the drink into my hand.

I stare at it. Plain water. Likely not poisoned. Maybe.

A small sip coats my parched tongue in cooling relief. I take a larger swallow before returning the glass, which Harper sets on the bedside table with the agreeable nature of a small puppy. How bizarre. “That still doesn’t answer the question. What are you doing?”

“Helping you.”

I can see that. “Why?”

Those lake water eyes meet mine. While her offense doesn’t surprise me, the softer, gentler compassion does. “Why not?”

This has officially become too strange for words. “Because my very existence offends you?”

She’s on her feet between one second and the next. Deep grooves carve puzzlement into her expression, yet she retorts, “You’re covered in bandages, so I would strongly suggest you restrain yourself, otherwise

you'll bleed out and cause more work for the rest of us." Pivoting, she strides for the door.

The sight of her retreating back sparks panic in me. "Wait." I attempt to sit up, yet cry out as my flesh tugs. The agony runs deeper than skin. It hooks into my insides. "What happened? Why am I injured?" And so gravely? The inside of my head holds only darkness.

She turns, blue gaze narrowed over her perfect nose. "You don't remember?"

I stare. "Obviously not, if I asked you why I'm here."

Her confusion resurfaces too easily. I am used to Harper's cruelty. Rarely her uncertainty. "Fiona and Isobel found you in the vineyards. You were..." Then she stops. Swallows. "Mother Mabel says you were attacked by a bear."

My jaw slackens. "A bear?"

She moves toward the shuttered windows, hauls back the heavy drapes to reveal the mountain's crown edged in warm sunlight, the River Twee a distant silver band nestled in the hillside. "Apparently, they found you just in time."

Stunned, I gently rest my fingers atop my chest where the ache unfolds. The wound feels raw, as though the skin has been recently sutured.

"You're certain it was a bear?" They're rare on the mountain, likely avoiding the strange power flowing through its heart. "Could it have been one of the fair folk?"

"It was a bear. Isobel saw it run off." She sniffs, leans against the windowsill. "You're lucky they found you in time. You could be a tad more grateful."

I'm not dead, but I should be. A bear attack? It doesn't sound plausible. Stranger things have happened, I suppose.

A thought suddenly comes to mind. "What day is it?"

“The Holy Day.” Harper fiddles with her cincture, tracing the three knots secured at her waist. I blink in shock. Since when did Harper become an acolyte? “They brought you in mid-week.”

Either she misspoke, or I’ve yet to cast off the fog dampening my thoughts. “Why would I have been in the vineyards?” I say. “I don’t work the vineyards in the spring.” My forge burns the majority of the day and well into the night once the cold season passes.

Harper goes still. “Brielle,” she says slowly. “It’s the harvest season.”

“What?” My heart thuds sickeningly. It cannot be. It is most certainly the growing season, when the foothills burst into riotous color beneath the frost. “I don’t appreciate the deception,” I growl. It’s bad enough I’ve awoken in the infirmary without any recollection of how I got here. This is a new low, even for Harper.

There was a time when any minor slight against her might erupt into an outburst, yet the tranquility Harper exudes takes me aback, for I do not recognize this unruffled woman.

“Why would I lie?” she demands.

“I don’t know. Because that’s what you do? Lie and scheme?”

Obvious hurt darkens her eyes. “Look closer.” She gestures to the vast spread of green beyond the open window—or there would be, were the leaves not tipped in red, the edges browning. Autumn in glorious luster.

Sweat coats my palms in warm stickiness. Nerves. Ambiguity. Any attempt at recollection sends me ramming into a mental block I cannot breach. “Was there head trauma?” It would explain the memory loss.

“Not that I’m aware of, but you were out for a few days. The injury was contained to your chest.”

“I don’t remember.” My voice catches. “Why don’t I remember?”

Arms crossed over her stomach, Harper studies me from where she loiters near the window. “Unfortunately, I don’t have an answer for you.”

Someone must have answers. If not Harper, then Mother Mabel. If not Mother Mabel, then Isobel, or Fiona, or any of the other women working the vineyards that day. “Don’t you think it’s strange I was attacked? Or that I can’t remember what happened despite the lack of head trauma?”

She plucks a sprig of barley from the windowsill, twirls its stem between her fingertips, then releases it to the wind. “It is odd, admittedly.” Harper purses her lips, as if pondering a number of responses, yet settles for, “I’m sure there’s an explanation. You probably hit your head during the attack.”

If that were so, wouldn’t I feel bruising on my skull?

“Hopefully it isn’t permanent,” she adds. “The memory loss.”

I stare at Harper until the silence grows uncomfortable. She seems to care for my well-being, though we both know that’s not possible. Then there is the strange lack of anxiety I experience in her presence. I do not understand it.

Harper clears her throat, pushes off the windowsill. “If that’s all, I will inform Mother Mabel you’re awake.” She closes the door at her departure.

Alone, I take stock of my faculties. I retain all my limbs, every finger and toe. My pulse climbs as the quiet ticks away. No matter how deeply I search my memory, I hit a wall. It is eternity. A massive, sucking pit. Nothing lives within it.

Who are we if not our memories?

My hands tremble, but that cannot be helped. Sleep will restore what is missing. It will patch the holes, exhume old pathways. Come morning, the world will right itself, and all will make sense.

A blanket covers my stomach and legs. I wear a soft white gown,

knee-length, loose around the waist. I need to see how severe the wound is, how close I came to embracing death.

Pushing aside the blanket, I carefully draw the gown upward, revealing legs mottled with bruises, skin covered in abrasions. A large white bandage wraps my stomach and chest.

Despite the pain shortening my breath, I manage to untie the bandage, peeling back the cloth to reveal the injury, its neat sutures. I freeze as a lick of cold moves through me. Indeed, it is severe. But that is not what causes my skin to pucker in unease.

The wound's shape is undeniable, and not the first I have seen. Harper is wrong. I was not attacked by a bear. Someone ran me through with a sword.

CHAPTER 40

Mother Mabel does not visit until sunset, when the bell signaling supper's end tolls. She does not knock. As Abbess, Thornbrook is hers to shape, hers to bend. Despite having never had an issue with it prior, I'm feeling particularly muddled, vulnerable, my thoughts fragmented. Privacy is something I crave.

"Brielle. How are you feeling?" She glides forward, the hem of her alb hissing against the floor, a rare softness to her unlined features. For whatever reason, she does not wear her gold stole, only the white cord around her waist.

My arms quiver with weakness as I push upright against the pillows. "Tired," I whisper.

"I can imagine," she soothes. "You have experienced an ordeal, and recovery takes time." She crosses to the window, where the last of the sun's rays vanish behind the ridge of maple trees clumped at the wall's perimeter. Catching the heavy curtains, she pulls them closed, a gloomy pall shuttering the space. The air, unable to move about freely, grows stale in the low candlelight.

Mother Mabel brushes aside an errant strand of hair that has pulled

free of her bun. “Maria informed me you are healing exceptionally well. By the end of the week, you should be able to return to your daily tasks. You will take it easy though. No smithing.” As she approaches my bedside, she spots the untouched plate of food on my nightstand. “You were not hungry?”

I should be hungry, considering I can’t remember when I last ate, but the craving isn’t there. “I’ve had much on my mind.”

“About?”

I bite the inside of my cheek. “Recent occurrences, I suppose.”

“Is that all?” she asks knowingly. And I remember, bright as a stinging rain against my skin, that it was she who raised me, and placed the heavily bound manuscript that is the Text into my hands. Obedience, purity, devotion. Mother Mabel knows me like no other.

The pit in my stomach, which has steadily amassed throughout the day, yawns deep and wide. Yes, Mother Mabel knows me, or a single version of me, but do I know her? I’m not sure that I do. If I did, wouldn’t I know, with utter certainty, how she would react to this information? “Harper informed me of what happened,” I say, fingers hooking into the blanket. It is soft, heavy enough to ground me. “I have questions, Mother Mabel.”

Sinking onto the edge of my cot, she smooths the blanket around my legs, adjusts the pillows at my back. “What are your questions, Brielle?”

“Harper informed me it’s the harvest season. How can that be? I don’t recall any passing time. Not the attack, nor what came before. I don’t remember *anything*.”

She nods, eyes soft with understanding. “It is a valid concern. After we carried you back to the abbey, we immediately sent for the physician. Your wounds were severe. Twice, we nearly lost you.” Resting atop her thigh, her right hand trembles, and she curls her gloved fingers tight into a

ball. “Due to the traumatic nature of the attack, Maria mentioned the possibility of temporary memory loss. It is your mind’s way of protecting you from reliving the experience.”

I take in all that she said. It makes sense, I suppose. Nothing is more powerful than the mind. “So my memory will eventually return?”

The straw-filled mattress crinkles beneath her shifting weight. She does not look at me. I dread the reason why.

“It could be some time before your memory returns,” she admits. “But there is the possibility it might not return at all.”

The panic I’ve struggled to pacify the entire afternoon surfaces, a wash of heat, then unbearable cold, the taste of copper upon my tongue. I cannot fathom the loss. “I see.”

I have lost the summer—an entire season—of my life. It’s not right.

My last recollection does not sit like a leaf upon a crystal pool, something I might easily pluck free. No, I must submerge my hand and sift through the mucky riverbed until I find it: a head of gold-tipped curls, a laughing mouth and crinkling green eyes. I’ve never seen a face so compelling.

Mother Mabel pats my hand, and I snap free of my stupefaction. “Try not to worry,” she says. “In time, you will begin to feel like your old self. I am certain.”

“It’s not that.” My hand drifts across my sternum, the bandages crusted in blood. They will need to be changed soon. “Harper claimed I was attacked by a bear, but the wound I sustained came from a sword.”

Mother Mabel is an excellent mediator due to her general lack of outward expression, but the notch between her pale eyebrows reveals a complicated emotion I cannot place. “Why do you think that?”

Her terse inquiry doesn’t sit well. She has never doubted me before. I

must be imagining it. “The stitches reveal a clean line. A bear would have torn the skin, left multiple puncture wounds.” And I would likely be dead.

“Brielle.” My name, a word infused with compassion. I’m helpless to resist its pull. “I know this is upsetting, but Isobel saw the bear flee across the fields.” She searches my gaze. “Are you suggesting she lies?”

“No,” I rush to say. For whatever reason, the implication leaves me breathless. “That’s not what I mean.” And yet, the concession only serves to heighten my turmoil. I want to believe her. The Abbess of Thornbrook is, above all else, forthright. But what she claims does not align with what I have seen. “Mother Mabel—”

“They killed the bear, you know.” Her icy declaration halts my tongue. “Kilmany sent out a group of huntsmen to search the woods. An attack is incredibly rare, but this one was ill, foam rimming its mouth. Who knows what could have happened had it not been brought down.”

It makes perfect sense, so why this sustained unease? “That is... good.” I attempt a smile.

“You must understand. You have experienced a traumatic event. You are likely trying to reframe the attack through a familiar lens. Bladesmithing is your safe space. Of course you would make that connection.”

Is it true? Has my own mind manipulated my perception of the experience in order to cope with the trauma of an attack I can’t even remember?

If it truly is the harvest season, then the tithe has already come and gone. Twice I have missed the opportunity to participate. I’m reminded of Harper’s cincture, the three knots proudly displayed at her waist.

“Can I ask, Mother Mabel, when Harper became an acolyte?” It stings a bit. I’d never considered the possibility she would ascend her station before me. She must have taken her Final Vows at some point during

the summer, her appointment shrouded in the vague pool containing my lost memories.

“It was recent, only within the last few months.” She frowns, suddenly concerned. “Are you upset? I know you’ve had your heart set on it, but be patient. Your time will come.”

The possibility sparks no joy inside me, which only deepens my confoundment. It’s what I’ve worked toward for the last ten years.

Mother Mabel sighs, then stands. “Do not strain yourself. Rest for a few more days. Returning to your routine will help center you, I’m sure.” On her way out the door, she asks, “Would you like me to gather your Text for the nightly readings?”

Only now do I realize how tightly my hands clamp the blanket. With some effort, I pry my fingers loose, let them relax atop my lap. Candlelight flickers and wanes, eating down the wick until the flame succumbs to the pool of melted wax. The thought of praying feels strange, but I nod anyway. “Thank you.”

She returns with the leatherbound manuscript, placing it on my bedside table. After a brief farewell, I am again alone, awash in dying light. Though the gleam of the oiled leather draws my attention, I do not speak my prayers aloud. Nor do I pray the next day. Nor the next.

CHAPTER 41

Four weeks following my attack, I return to my daily routine. Mornings bring prayer, breakfast, crisp dew on blades of grass. Then chores: weeding the gardens, scrubbing pots, fixing the carts, chopping vegetables for the midday meal. When the tenebrous air cools with approaching dusk, I retreat to the forge for a moment of stolen peace among the clutter of tools and half-baked metal. Another fortnight, and I can return to smithing. Physician's orders.

Late evenings bring fractured sleep atop my thin, narrow cot. I dream of an emerald gown, a set of hands bracing my waist. Sometimes, I light a lamp and hang it in my window, though I do not know why.

Waking or dreaming, I feel neither peace nor clarity. Thornbrook has dulled, and steps in a perpetual, lackluster gloom. My memories have not returned. When I address Mother Mabel about my concerns, she merely says, "Give it time, Brielle. You're still recovering."

One morning, when the bell tolls for breakfast, I trail my peers in their rush through the corridors, eager as puppies at play. My slippers scuff the flagstones, and the high ceiling captures the sound readily. As I turn into

the cloister, my neck itches, pricked by fine hairs lying beneath my heavy braid. Sunlight pours from the east. Against my better judgment, I slow.

The last novitiates slip through the doors to the refectory ahead. Alone, I peer through the open archways, into the quadrangle with its uprise of sunny grass, before shifting my attention toward the perimeter of the main compound, its marked trails winding through shrubbery. It is not the first time I have sensed another's presence beyond my line of sight.

No, the first instance occurred two days following my release from the infirmary. On my walk to the forge, something tall and lanky shifted in the corner of my eye. I turned, and watched a figure leap over the pale stone wall. Later that evening, I wondered if I had imagined it.

Three days passed before I again spotted movement: long, streamlined legs and threads of curling brown hair. No one seems to have noticed anything unusual, so I've told not a soul of my suspicion. I fear the madness will deepen.

I'm the last to arrive at breakfast. After washing my hands in the lavabo, I grab a tray and fill my bowl with porridge, my cup with wine, though I've little appetite. Harper and Isobel sit at separate tables, I notice. The latter still holds court with her band of followers. However, this is the third week Harper has eaten alone. Without Isobel to warm her side, no one will bear her company. At least my solitude is chosen.

Breakfast ends as quickly as it began. According to the schedule, I'm harvesting vegetables this morning. I look forward to spending time outdoors, reacquainting myself with the earth. The weather is quite agreeable, warm and sunlit, with puffy white clouds stringing the blue sky, the air plucking lightly at my cotton dress.

Unfortunately, I'm paired with Harper. She observes me from beneath one of the maple trees shading the enclosed herbarium, perched on the edge of a slatted bench, a few beams having rotted through. It's strange

to see her seated as opposed to standing, feet planted decisively, aggressively, on the ground. To watch her eyes catch mine before flitting away.

Chin lifted, I stride toward the storage shed. Normally, my unease stirs in Harper's presence, but my heart thumps with the placid rhythm of the undisturbed. Perhaps that is why I decide to acknowledge her. "Good morning." I still question her presence in the infirmary when I woke, but she was my only visitor during recovery.

"Morning," she murmurs.

After gathering a basket, spade, and gloves, I crouch at one of the larger vegetable beds and begin yanking carrots free by their scraggly green tops, tossing them into my basket. My bare hands work the earth. For whatever reason, I have abandoned my gloves of late. I haven't felt the need to pull them on. Admittedly, I've enjoyed the varied textures against my skin. I delight in each one.

I finish one row, begin another. Harper's attention feels hotter than the sun on my back. Still, I focus on my task. If she wants to speak with me, she'll need to take that step herself.

With the first bed complete, I move on to the next. Soil darkens my nails and sprinkles the tops of my thighs. Maybe I do not remember much, but I remember this: the give of the earth beneath my fingers, the wrench of roots being pulled free.

"How are you recovering?"

I startle, dropping a fistful of carrots. Harper harvests a neighboring bed, hair restrained in a braid, sweat dotting her face. For once, she appears unconcerned by her rumpled state.

I gather the carrots I dropped. "Some lingering pain, but otherwise, I am well." They fall into my basket with a distant thump.

Her gaze is steady, open. "Did Mother Mabel inform you of the

bear's death, the one that attacked you?"

"She did." My response elicits no waver, nothing to suggest an emotion other than gratified relief.

Harper shares in my relief, nodding far too enthusiastically for comfort. "It's very fortunate. Imagine if the bear still lived. I'm glad no one else got hurt."

It was no bear, I nearly say, but what if I am wrong? Now that my wound has healed, was it from a sword as I believed, or had my perception altered as Mother Mabel claimed? I am no nearer to answers than I was weeks ago.

I assume that will be the extent of our conversation, but Harper surprises me by adding, "If you're feeling depleted, I can finish the harvest. It's not an issue."

Our shared history dictates what follows: scorn, hilarity, the occasional physical assault. I do not trust her intentions. A mouse does not willingly venture into the nest of a snake. "We both know there's little reason for your kindness," I state. "Your deceit is unappreciated."

"It is no lie." A slight curve of her spine, as though she awaits a lash. "I swear it."

I stare at Harper blankly. First the infirmary, and now this. "You treated me horribly in the past."

At least she has the decency to appear remorseful. "I know."

"Then why?" Why offer a hand when it promises no benefit?

She clears her throat, begins in a halting tone, "According to the Text ___"

"Oh, please." Now she mocks me. "As if you care about that." I return to ripping up carrots, soil flying.

Harper falls quiet.

When the vegetables overflow my basket, I grab another from the

shed. Harper has ceased her harvesting. She kneels in place, staring at her gloved hands, her small frame swallowed by the gray dress. If I'm not mistaken, she has recently lost weight. I sigh, toss another carrot onto my pile, and demand, "Have I offended you?"

When she responds, it accompanies a pained smile fashioned from the cruel points of irony. "I guess I never realized how small I made others feel." She frowns, brushes the dark soil from her palms. "I do not enjoy the feeling."

Does she expect an apology? "It feels terrible, doesn't it." I regard her with limited patience. "No matter the kindness you exhibit, you are made to believe you contribute nothing in life. You are made to believe you are worthless."

A dull flush colors her sweaty cheeks as she drops her attention to the ground. "I've had to face—" Deep breath. "—uncomfortable truths about myself. Namely, that my behavior has been harmful to the abbey, our fellow peers."

"You don't say."

Her mouth parts, then clamps shut. "I don't remember you being this spirited," she says, blue eyes narrowed.

I shrug. I no longer care about Harper's behavior as I once did. I wasted so much of my life obsessing over her opinion of me. I'd like to think I've evolved.

There does, however, remain one mystery I'd like solved. "Why aren't you and Isobel friends anymore?"

Fine lines map her face. What is it she feels? Loss? Confusion? They've been attached at the hip since I arrived at Thornbrook. As novitiates, they shared a bedroom, but Harper has since moved to the second floor of the dormitory with the other acolytes. It is a difficult thing, navigating the world friendless.

“To tell you the truth, I’m not sure. I think we gradually became different people.” Her brow pinches. “I’ve asked Isobel what happened between us. She said I changed.”

I don’t recall this change. Perhaps it dwells in the hole of my mind. “Do you think you’ve changed?” There is, undeniably, a softness to Harper that was not previously present, a new yet welcome vulnerability.

She drops her spade into the bucket with a clatter, and the grass edging the beds whistles in the gossamer breeze. “Can we really see if we’ve changed ourselves?”

Wise words from a woman I believed possessed not a shred of self-awareness.

She taps a finger against her leg with obvious hesitation, then: “Has your memory returned?”

“No.” Daily, I scour within for any flicker of recognition, an anchor I might use to ground myself. But—nothing.

Harper nods, as if that was to be expected. But something in her expression snags my attention and refuses to let go. I straighten, and await another truth.

Dropping her voice so it will not carry over the moss-eaten walls, Harper says, “The truth is, I have blank spots in my memory, too.”

Carefully, I set my full basket of carrots aside. I glance around the herbarium, but we are alone in the walled garden with its neat rows of vegetable beds. “You’re certain?” Harper wasn’t attacked as far as I know, and I’ve told no one my suspicion about the sword wound. I don’t want that getting back to Mother Mabel.

“Yes.”

“Did you participate in the tithing?” Those who participate have their memories of the experience wiped.

“I think so?” Harper abandons her post to kneel at my side. She holds

out her hand, pointing to the scar across her palm, evidence of her contribution. “The problem is, I remember nothing of the months preceding the tithe either. I don’t even remember when I became an acolyte.” She gestures to her cincture, twisted into its trio of knots. “Wouldn’t I remember my ceremony, or at the very least, whatever task I was given to be proven worthy of the station?”

She makes a good point. “What else have you forgotten?”

As she speaks, she angles toward an adjacent vegetable bed and begins to snap matured broccoli crowns from their stalks.

“My friendship with Isobel. Looking back, I can’t remember any specific moment when we fought. It seems like one day I woke up and decided she wasn’t someone whose company I cared for anymore. I mean, we’ve been friends for years. Why would I suddenly change my mind without cause?”

Another valid point.

“But mostly, it’s how I feel in here.” Harper presses a dirt-coated hand to her heart. “I look at Thornbrook, and I feel changed. Do you understand?” She peers at me pleadingly.

I understand more than anyone. And since she admitted her apprehensions, I feel comfortable sharing my own experience. “I think someone’s watching me.”

Harper goes still, a head of broccoli clamped in one fist. “Really? Who?”

At least she isn’t claiming I’ve slipped into insanity, though that’s a definite concern I have for myself. “I don’t know. I believe it’s a man.” The breadth of the shoulders, the height and narrow hips. It all points to a male physique. “I can’t make out his features. He’s never close enough.”

She stares. “You’ve seen him inside the abbey?”

I nod. “Twice on my walk to the forge.” Then this morning, on my

way to breakfast, though I'd only sensed his presence.

A man watches me. What does he want? I haven't informed Mother Mabel of the issue. My trust in her is no longer absolute.

Harper appears deeply disturbed, for men are forbidden to enter the grounds. "What are you going to do?"

"I don't know." Those three words basically sum up the last four weeks. I feel stuck. Stagnant. I am not sure of my path forward.

She frowns, then says, "I will pray for your memories to return—and my own."

It is not her prayers I need, only that elusive truth. But I nod, and gather another basket, and harvest carrots until the noon bell tolls.

CHAPTER 42

Kilmany begins to stir as we arrive to set up shop. Soon, the main thoroughfare comes alive. The scents of burned sugar and roasted meat saturate the air, and color—the flash and flutter of woven blankets, jewel-toned skirts, bundles of wildflowers—brightens the wide, dingy lane, the stalls overwhelmed with abundance.

Within the first hour, I sell four knives. By noon, three more daggers have disappeared from my collection.

What's surprising is how many people ask after me. Though I do not remember, it's been months since I attended Market Day. They ask how I have been, if I am well. They inquire about my studies and ask if I will one day offer private commissions. I've considered it. Thornbrook, however, comes first.

"I understand," the local baker, Gabe, says with a smile. "But if you ever change your mind, consider me your first client." He passes over a small pastry box. Inside, four raspberry tarts sit like sweetened fruits, ripe for plucking.

I don't know what to say. "I can't accept these." I try to hand them back, but he brushes the box aside.

“Enjoy.” He winks, then departs.

A few stalls down, Isobel eyes my gift, her long coiled braids secured in a low tail. Pulling open the top, I select a tart, its cool white icing smearing my fingertips, and shove it into my mouth, all without breaking eye contact. She sneers, yet returns to her bartering.

“Are you the abbey bladesmith?”

A short, cloaked figure approaches my table. I peer down at the visitor, frowning. “I am.”

Pushing back her hood, the patron reveals herself. I gasp and stumble back. She is short and rotund, with twiggy legs and long, knobby fingers. A shabby waistcoat hangs over a gauzy white dress. Those dull, stony eyes are too cunning to belong to a girl, despite the adolescent visage. They swallow the brightness of midday like two holes in her face.

Fair folk. I thought they couldn’t pass through Kilmany’s iron gates, but I wouldn’t put it past them to carry enchantments that protect against iron, if such a thing exists.

My frown returns as she continues to stare. The weight of my knife reminds me I am not without a means of defense. “Is there something I can help you with?” Surely she would not attack me in broad daylight, though little is known about the fair folk and their motives.

The girl-woman’s lower lip pokes outward. “You do not remember me, sweet?”

I’m certain I would remember meeting this... creature. “I’m sorry, but you must have me confused with someone else.” From the corner of my eye, I search for Mother Mabel. I haven’t seen her since we arrived hours ago.

“Then it is true what they are saying,” she whispers. A lock of snowy hair brushes her chin. “You have forgotten us.”

I straighten and take a long look at the unwanted visitor who claims

to know me. I think of the months I've lost, the knowledge drowned. "Who have I forgotten?"

"The fair folk, of course."

One of the textile merchants across the lane crows in delight upon making a sale. I question what I know, what she knows, if they overlap in some manner. "We have met before?"

"We have. You were such a treat." She drinks me in, head to toe, lingering on my red hair. "Are you eating properly? You look wan." Reaching over the table, she touches my chin with a bony finger. "Who must I kill to avenge you?"

My heart thumps hard against my ribcage. She addresses me with too much familiarity for this meeting to have unfolded by happenstance. "That won't be necessary," I croak, easing out of range. A few patrons give the creature a wide berth, but most people are too focused on their shopping to notice. "When did we meet?" I press. "I was in an accident and don't remember much. Were we... I mean, are we friends?"

She purses her lips. "Not friends, but we were friendly in the months leading up to the tithe." Then she smiles, showcasing a congealed mass of rotting gums. "You were so innocent then. It was the most irresistible allure."

A chill pricks my body despite the heat. The fair folk cannot tell a lie. *Tithe*. Mother Mabel claimed I didn't participate. Is it true? What have I forgotten? What, exactly, did I lose?

"Were you there?" I demand, low and urgent. "Did you witness the tithe take place?"

She opens her mouth to respond when Mother Mabel suddenly materializes. She jostles the patron aside and snaps, "If you aren't buying, move along."

The girl-woman—I don't even know her name—glares at the

Abbess. Her long, crooked fingers pet the soft fabric of her dress, black eyes dull with suspicion. “As a matter of fact, I was inquiring about this knife.” She points to a recent design, the hilt solid silver. It took me weeks to complete.

“That dagger is pure iron,” Mother Mabel states. “How do you expect to wield it?” Upon receiving a lack of response, she inclines her head. “As I suspected. Move along.” A not-so-gentle nudge sends the girl-woman out onto the road.

I’m frowning as Mother Mabel whirls toward me. “Brielle.” Her waspish tone carries over the crowded lane. “You must be careful with the fair folk. I do not want to see you fall to one of their scams.”

My attention shifts to where the girl-woman vanished into the crowd. “That girl—”

“You cannot trust every traveler you meet.” Grabbing my upper arm, she steers me through the bustle of the market, dodging carts with expertise. “People will say anything to gain your trust.” When we reach a less congested area, she slows, turning to me. “I am only looking out for you. The world is not safe.”

A strange sensation passes through me. I do not believe her. Neither do I trust her.

Pulling my arm free, I respond, “I appreciate your concern.” It tastes a bit unpleasant. Bitter, even. “Next time I will be more vigilant.”

It is not her relief I notice. It is the lack of it.

The skin around Mother Mabel’s mouth tightens. “Very good. We will return soon, so I suggest you begin packing up any leftover inventory. Meet me at the gates within the hour. Do not be late.”

As she wanders off, I think, *When am I ever?*

THE QUEASY FEELING does not abate by the time we return to Thornbrook. I think of that girl-woman, a creature from the depths of Under. My mind swims with unanswered questions. It is my belief Mother Mabel knew of my connection with her and purposefully sent her away. The only question is why.

I head to my room to change for dinner. As I gather clean clothes for my bath, I spot my journal tucked alongside my garments. I haven't written in it since... Actually, I cannot remember. There had been a time when I would write daily. This journal was my mother, my father, my friend. Unwrapping the twine holding the cover closed, I crack the spine to my latest entry.

I suppose there's not much to say. I've tried to fight this feeling, but I don't think it's sustainable to deny my heart. The truth is, I love him, and I don't know what to do.

The entry is dated five months ago.

My heart pounds so forcefully I fear it will crack a rib. This cannot be right. Me, fall in love with a man? I can count on one hand the number of interactions I've shared with men, and they were always in the presence of Mother Mabel. I promised my heart to the Father, yet these words claim otherwise.

I trace the messy scrawl marking the rough parchment. If this is true, where is the man now? What is his name and what qualities did he possess that would make me rescind my vows? Something has changed. Me. I'm ready to learn what happened, though I wonder how high the cost will be.

Girding myself for what will come, I flip back to the last point in time I remember. It would have been early spring. Then I begin to read.

I do not know where this man has come from. I am not sure of my way forward.

I frown in puzzlement. Sparse information—too sparse. Perhaps I

met this man during one of our visits to Kilmany.

I must know more. I flip the page.

His eyes are inhumanly green, like light shining through colored glass, but there is a darkness beneath the surface I sometimes glimpse. I wonder what pains him.

And the next page.

After visiting Under, I cannot trust the West Wind's intentions. Unfortunately, I do not have a choice. Not if I want to become the next acolyte.

The West Wind. Why does my heart twinge? Could this be the man I claimed to love? It seems the most likely explanation. I question how we met, his role in what sounds like an unwilling partnership.

A breeze stirs the leaves beyond my open window. Lowering myself onto the edge of my cot, I read ahead, breath held.

I am very ill. I do not know if I will survive the night.

The scrawl reveals a jittery hand. This Brielle was afraid. Desperate. I return to the previous entry. *Not if I want to become the next acolyte.*

Information begins to patch the holes of this forgotten summer season. If I'm inferring correctly, I was eligible to prove myself as an acolyte. But if Harper earned the honor instead, she must have journeyed into Under with me, whatever quest we'd been granted forcing us into the realm beneath Carterhaugh. If Harper can't remember becoming an acolyte, what really happened in Under all those months ago?

My fingers tremble with rare fury. Slowly, I close my journal and set it on my desk.

I've struggled to identify my individual parts. I have been too trusting. I have drifted through time, idle and drowsy, awaiting change. But change comes from within. I cannot expect another to whet my blade.

This has Mother Mabel's name written all over it. Only she decides

one's task to ascend, which means she knows what I do not. Enough is enough.

Twilight softens the curves of the long arcade and puddles the grass in shades of darkest eve. I turn right down the cloister, passing the guesthouse, then the infirmary. I push inside the Abbess' house before courage deserts me.

Candlelight streams beneath her office door. I do not knock. It feels good to barge in and reclaim that power for myself.

Mother Mabel glances up from her desk in shock. "Brielle." She appraises me with a critical eye: the clench of my hands, the stretch of my spine, the directness of my gaze. "Is there something you need? Did you forget something in town?"

"That's not why I have come, Mother Mabel." I shut the door behind me and cross the room, ignoring the empty seat I would normally occupy to receive council. Today, I stand.

Deliberately, she sets down her quill, straightens in her high-backed chair. Curtains shutter the window at her back, veiling the evening landscape. "I'm listening."

"I want to ask you about that girl in the market, the one you sent away."

Her bland expression doesn't falter. "We have been over this. You cannot trust the fair folk. I am only looking out for you."

"I'm not interested in more of your lies, Mother Mabel."

She stiffens. "Excuse me?"

It frightens me how quickly the demands surge forth. I am obedient Brielle, agreeable Brielle, soft Brielle, demure Brielle. Mother Mabel fashioned the mold I had been poured into, but I do not have to retain this shape.

"Do you deny that you lied to me?" It takes every scrap of valor not

to quail before the woman who filled so many roles in my life. Mentor, mother, teacher, guide. I trusted her implicitly. I thought she could do no wrong.

“You are going to have to be a little more specific,” she clips. “After all, I cannot read one’s mind.”

Fair enough. “I want to know what happened during the tithing. I know I have visited Under. I—” This, too, must be said. “I had relations with a man.” How complex the relations were, I cannot say, but according to my journal, I had no regrets.

Her dark eyes flare, and my fingers twitch toward the dagger at my waist. A beautiful sword hangs on the wall behind her desk. Its blade draws the warmth of candlelight inward until it seems as if the light is subsumed, as if it is more than hammered steel, remarkable, transcendent. I’ve never seen this sword before. I can barely tear my eyes away.

With a strained smile, she nudges her documents aside. “You must understand. Everything I do for you girls, and for Thornbrook, is to ensure there remains a refuge for those who need it. What kind of Abbess would I be if I did not do everything in my power to spread His goodness, His kindness, to all?”

I’ve heard this before. Traps nestled in traps, one of distraction, another of evasion, to imbue doubt in my own thoughts.

“I wish things had gone differently, Brielle. I really do—”

“Enough.” My hand cuts the air. “You evade the issue. Do you deny that you lied to me?”

And Mother Mabel says, “I do not.”

My heart sinks, stone-like, and I retreat a step. Then surely this lie cannot be the first.

She does not apologize. The Abbess of Thornbrook preaches morality, truth, but she has not lived that life herself. My eyes sting. She

has, quite literally, raised me, shaped me into the woman I am today. Can I trust no maternal figures in my life?

“I want to know what happened during the summer months,” I say. “I deserve that much.”

She considers me for a long moment. I’m afraid she will deny me. It is well within her right. “Very well.” Her hands come to rest atop the desk, fingers interlaced. “To put it simply, you entered Under without my permission. Obedience—the first of your broken vows.”

I fight the urge, the necessity, to fold forward, bowing my spine beneath her disapproval. The force of Mother Mabel’s gaze is strong, but I will not bend. “According to my journal entries, I was selected to vie for the position of acolyte, and I’m assuming your quest sent me into Under. How could I break my vows if I entered under your instruction?”

“That was not the first time you had entered Under, Brielle.”

I go quiet. *Under*. It is a memory I can neither see nor hear nor taste, its identity obstructed behind the veil of forgetfulness.

“You were tempted by Under. I could see it in your eyes. You nearly died during the tithing. You would have, under different circumstances.”

Then it is true I was present during the tithing, though I do not remember. “How?”

“A sword.” The words tremble. “You were very lucky. It could have been so much worse.”

A sword. My attention shifts to the blade hanging from the wall, its ruby-inlaid pommel. I had been right.

“Who cut me down?” I was not aware that I had enemies.

A slow hiss seethes from between Mother Mabel’s thinned lips. It is another moment before she speaks. “The task I gave you and Harper was a difficult one. I asked you to seek out the fabled sword called Meirlach, which I then used to kill Pierus, the Orchid King.”

Light and shade take shape around that name—Orchid King. A ghost in my mind's eye.

“Is that it?” I point to the sword. “Meirlach?”

She dips her chin. “Yes. I was dueling the West Wind when you intervened. I did not see you, and by the time I realized what had happened, it was too late.” Her dark eyes meet mine. “I did,” she whispers. “I cut you down.”

She admits to maiming me, yet I feel nothing. No betrayal, no heartache. I touch the scar resting directly over my heart. A second scar mars my back. The sword pierced my body straight through. “I should be dead.”

“Yes,” she says with vague reluctance. “As I said before, we nearly lost you.”

Mother Mabel continues to withhold information as she has always done, but for now, I let it pass. I've other matters to discuss. “Who is the West Wind?”

Again, I've caught her off guard. Shifting in her chair, she peers out the window, only to find the heavy drapes masking her view. Her fingers drum atop the desk. “A man I believe you loved,” she says, turning back to face me. “It doesn't matter though. He's gone.”

Gone as in dead? My hand fists against my chest where the ache spreads with blunt force.

“I am sorry, Brielle. I truly am.” She smooths her palms down the front of her gold stole. One end bears a long stitching, neat and thin, as though from a tear. It appears recent. “You changed, and I would not see you return to that confused, conflicted woman.”

A bead of sweat rolls down my temple. The air is stifling. “What do you mean?”

“You turned your back on the Father.”

The blow lands exactly as she intended it to. But I do not flinch.

Mother Mabel is wrong. I did not turn my back on the Father. It was she who turned her back on me.

In a cool, detached manner, she goes on, “You claim to have had relations to a man, but purity, both of mind and body, is required to become an acolyte. I cannot in good conscience allow you to ascend.”

Then that door is officially shut.

I expected grief, its sundering wave, but my feet remain on solid ground. She has barred me the opportunity of taking my Final Vows, but the truth is, I no longer desire to give myself fully to the Father. Pieces of me, and of my life, yes, but a world awaits me beyond Thornbrook’s walls, and I can’t wait to begin exploration.

“I understand,” I reply calmly. “For what it’s worth, I believe you’re doing what you feel is right, even if it is misguided. I regret to inform you that I will not be joining you for evening Mass.”

She pauses with her hand on the Text. Even before she speaks, I sense her disapproval, like a whiff of some oily reek sweeping in through the window. “I do not follow.” Her eyebrows lift with deliberate displeasure, a darkness to her severe features. “Are you feeling poorly?”

“No, Mother Mabel.” It is easy to feel small in her presence, this woman who sits nearest to our god, but I do not cave beneath her will as I once did. “I must pack, for I am leaving Thornbrook.”

She opens her mouth, closes it after a moment of indecision. “Is there a reason why you feel the need to leave us? Is your connection to the Father not what it once was?” She does not give me the opportunity to defend myself. “Even though you are barred from becoming an acolyte, you can still remain at Thornbrook.”

Someone needs to continue forging blades, is that it? Mother Mabel

has lied to me, but that is neither the whole of it, nor the root. “Truth be told, I feel I have outgrown the abbey.”

She fists a hand atop the tome. “In what way?”

And I have wounded her pride, as I knew I would. “Mother Mabel —”

“Have I done something to offend you, Brielle?” A low, waspish tone.

The unease I’ve tried to stymie revives at full force. I knew informing Mother Mabel of my decision would not be easy, but I underestimated how powerful an influence she has been in my life, and that a small part of me still craves her approval.

“No, Mother Mabel. I’ve only realized my views of the faith no longer align with those of Thornbrook.”

Her eyebrows snap together over her hawkish nose. “I see.” She takes me in, seeking out any crack or fault or doubt. “When did you decide this?”

I do not make this decision lightly. Since my so-called attack, I have questioned my place at Thornbrook. I’ve asked myself those trying questions. Who am I? What, above all else, do I want? Learning of the Abbess’ betrayal solidifies this choice.

“When I decided does not matter,” I say. “My mind will not change.”

“What will you do out there? Where will you go?” Tension pulls her voice taut, and the skin around her mouth whitens. “The world is not kind to women.”

Does she think so little of me and my accomplishments? “It will take time to get my bearings,” I say, the words edged, “but I’m not without a plan.”

“You have no money,” Mother Mabel cuts in, “no means to build a life. Once you leave Thornbrook, I will no longer be able to protect you.”

I lift my chin. “Is it my protection you care for, or control?”

Her nostrils flare. Her spine straightens. It is answer enough.

Blowing out a breath, I unclench my fists at my side. Perhaps that was unfair. I believe Mother Mabel cares for her charges. I was given a home and a purpose when I had none. “You do not need to worry about me. I have some money saved.” I receive a small percentage of my sales. I’ve never spent the coin.

Once I reach Kilmany, I’ll contact my old swordsmithing mentor. I’ve no doubt he will hire me. After a year or two, hopefully my wages will enable me to open my own shop. “Thank you,” I say, “for putting a sword into my hand. That is something I will never be able to repay you for.”

“You can repay me,” she grinds out, “by remaining here, where I can keep you safe.”

Keep me safe. Keep me small. There is no difference in my eyes.

“I am going out into the world, Mother Mabel,” I state, heading for the door. “It’s past time my life begins.”

CHAPTER 43

“You’re sure of this?” Harper asks, watching as I store the last of my belongings. It’s not much. Three cotton dresses, two pairs of wool trousers, two cotton shirts, a scarf, and undergarments. Two pairs of shoes—slippers for service, boots for work. My journal, my most beloved possession, every word of heartbreak, self-consciousness, fear. The small woven basket containing my mother’s poultices. Then the Text, its pages worn thin. There is still much I can learn from its teachings.

“I am.” My pack, which sits at the foot of my cot, is only half full. The sight saddens me. Ten years I’ve lived here, yet nothing was truly mine.

“Aren’t you afraid?”

I turn to Harper. Arms crossed, she perches on the windowsill, stamped against the green wellspring of Carterhaugh framed at her back. Somehow, this fine-boned woman, her once-sharpened features having softened, has become a friend. For the last four days, we’ve discussed all manner of topics. Goals, interests, faith, even childhood. I have misunderstood her. I recognize that now.

“Yes, I’m afraid.” The thought of stepping beyond Thornbrook’s gates, never to return, kicks my pulse into a mad dash. Sleep? I cannot

remember what that is. I question if I will fail. “But the fear reminds me I still have miles to go on this journey.”

“To Kilmany?” She searches my face.

My mouth quirks, and I shake my head. “In here.” I rest a fist over my sternum. “I think I’ll know when I get there.” And maybe this journey will help me come to terms with my mother’s abandonment. The pain of losing her might always linger, but that doesn’t mean I cannot grow from it.

Harper frowns dubiously—an expression I know well. “I always knew there was something strange about you.”

I bite back a smile. It wouldn’t be a proper farewell without Harper’s uninvited snark.

“I’ll write you,” I say, securing my bag once the Text is nestled safely inside. “And you’re always welcome to stay with me once I acquire permanent housing.”

“I appreciate that.” She hesitates, then seems to come to a decision. “It will not be the same with you gone.”

“Harper,” I tease, seeking to lighten the mood. “Are you implying you’ll miss me?”

The woman sniffs, lips pursed. “I am saying no such thing.”

Through the open window, I catch sight of Mother Mabel crossing the outer grounds toward the church. With her hands tucked into the voluminous sleeves of her robe, she glides ghostlike across the grass. Harper, who notices where my attention has gone, asks, “What does Mother Mabel think of your departure?”

I flinch. My heart has not healed from her betrayal. It lies in pieces, their points grinding painfully between breaths. It hurts. All those lies. All those dreams that never came true.

I’m not ready to forgive. I’ve considered telling Harper the truth about Mother Mabel, but despite the Abbess’ questionable behavior, she

dearly loves Thornbrook. She cares for her charges. She sacrifices for our faith. She bleeds. Thornbrook needs Mother Mabel the way a plant needs sunlight.

“She is disappointed,” I admit. “She had high hopes for me.”

“Some people claim Mother Mabel barred you from becoming an acolyte,” she ventures. “Is that true?”

Of course the information has already spread. “It’s true.”

“Oh.” Wide blue eyes search mine. “Did you break your vows?”

Did I? Or was I merely following my heart?

Sorrow threatens to clot my lungs, but I clear my throat, take a steadying breath. I haven’t even walked out the door and I already want to dive beneath my blanket, curl into a ball, and await the next sunrise. The Harper I know now is not the Harper I knew then. Whatever I confess will not pass beyond these walls. “I did.”

She nods, her expression solemn. I would like to think I see understanding there.

Grabbing my pack, I swing it over my shoulder and face Harper. Somehow, despite living as enemies for a decade, we are parting as friends. “I guess this is goodbye.”

We stare at each other awkwardly, Harper in her white alb and diaconal red stole, me in my plain gray dress. The cincture will remain behind. It feels odd without the tightness at my waist, but I will grow used to it, in time.

I’m not sure who moves first, but we embrace. She feels small in my arms. Not weak. Never weak.

“Take care of yourself,” she whispers.

I remember Harper’s first words to me: *Move, cow*. But it will be our last exchange I intend to carry with me.

Pulling away, I smile at her. “You as well.”

I reach the threshold when Harper asks, “Don’t you want your lantern?”

I falter and catch hold of the doorframe. Against my better judgment, I glance at the lantern hanging in my window. The sight unnerves me. I’ve lit it nightly these past weeks, unable to temper the urge. I do not know why.

“Keep it,” I say, and quickly depart.

After stopping by the kitchen for bread and cheese, I head for the herbarium. A few apples, a handful of carrots, and I’ll be on my way. The journey to Kilmany will take the morning. I should arrive by noon, barring delays.

As I yank carrots from the soil, however, the back of my neck prickles. My hand, wrapped around the tufted greens, twitches for my knife.

I’m up, spinning toward the shed, when I spot someone hopping the wall, vanishing from view.

Abandoning my pack, I dash through the raised beds and crash through the side gate leading to the outer grounds. Long, eating strides carry me to the gatehouse. The porter opens the gate, and I dash through, catching sight of a man’s emerald cloak before Carterhaugh swallows his retreating form.

He will not escape me this time.

Dirt and pebbles fling from my bootheels as I navigate the winding trail downhill, racing over treacherous roots and moistened ground. He is but a phantom, a flicker of light and shade. His long-legged stride vaults through the bottlebrush ferns.

“Wait!” Another leap over a fallen tree, bracken catching at my dress. I must see his face. I must learn his name. I must ask him why.

Yet he is simply too fast. Feet like quicksilver, a gait buoyed by the

wind itself. My leaden legs pound the earth, and my chest burns, and still the distance between us grows.

But I do not stop running. Carterhaugh breaks apart, the forest thinning, its canopy punched through by sunlight splashing the moss-eaten ground. I burst into a small clearing, chest heaving, sweat fusing the fabric of my dress to my skin. And there the man stands, cast aglow in dew and sun, hands in his trouser pockets as he watches me stumble, then slow.

My tired heart begins to thunder with renewed energy. Beneath his knee-length cloak, the stranger wears a gray tunic and simple brown trousers tucked into soft leather boots. He is the loveliest man I have ever laid eyes on. An impossible beauty, warm as flushed spring.

Gold threads his corkscrew curls. Every facet of his countenance flows into devastating perfection, cheek to chin to jaw, then beneath, to the taut, tanned skin of his neck.

His eyes are green.

I'm staring. It's rude, but I can't help myself. I remember my journal entries. I remember the crowded, sleepless nights, a darkened gaze, like cut gemstones, flashing behind my eyes.

Today, I am bold.

"You've been following me," I say, chin lifted. "Why?"

Something passes behind his expression, vanishing between one breath and the next. A softened mouth parts around impressive white teeth. "Do you know who I am?"

The man's voice possesses a timbre I was not expecting. Its smooth, melodious resonance reminds me of church bells. "No." I step closer, afraid he'll bolt like a buck through the brush. "Should I?"

His throat dips. It's a motion I know well, when one swallows the words piling upon the tongue. "I suppose not."

There's something about him. I can't put my finger on it. Is it

possible I recognize him from the market? Kilmany is Carterhaugh's largest town, and many travel from their small settlements to acquire goods. My mother and I would visit from Veraness often.

"Have we met before?" I blurt.

He studies me for an uncomfortably long moment. I may as well stand naked before him. Cloth and skin strip away, unable to withstand the intensity of his scrutiny. "You remind me of someone I once knew."

My stomach sinks. Then he isn't the green-eyed man from my journal. The foolishness I feel is nearly as acute as the disappointment, but I am intrigued by him regardless. "What was she like?" Another step nearer. It's not my business. He is a stranger and I am a woman alone in the woods.

That pretty mouth quirks, and his eyes momentarily catch the light. "Marvelous."

"How so?"

The man rocks back on his heels, long and lithe and lean. His curling hair shifts with the motion. "Where to begin? She taught me about forgiveness. She taught me to listen when I would rather speak. She understood, perhaps better than anyone, that life is a journey." My, how his eyes shine. "But mostly, she taught me to open my heart and embrace a depth of love I had not experienced in centuries."

I blink at the unexpected statement. "Centuries?" A bit of laughter slips out. "Surely you mean years. Unless you are somehow immortal?"

For whatever reason, he appears ridiculously pleased by my question. "You are correct. I am a mortal man." Then his face alters, and all those bright points dim, sun giving way to muted shade. "You share the same laugh."

My face warms. The man's voice is nice, I decide. Not too rough or deep. "Is that why you're following me?" I whisper. "Because I remind you of this woman?" She sounds wonderful.

The stranger stares at a point over my shoulder, the ease around his mouth gradually replaced with fine grooves, a stilted shape. “I apologize if I scared you. It was not my intention.”

He did not answer my question. There must be a reason why.

“I noticed you carried a pack before,” he says. “Are you traveling?”

“Moving, actually.”

He blinks in puzzlement. “I do not understand. Your abbey is moving elsewhere?”

Somehow, I’m able to take a complicated sentiment and smooth it into something far simpler. “Not the abbey. Me. *I* am leaving Thornbrook.”

Beneath the dappled light, the man shifts nearer, partial shade muddying his eyes. “Do you turn from your faith?”

The notion seizes me like a physical ailment. “No.” The Father is a permanent fixture in my life. Always will be. But faith is not a mold I must pour myself into. It takes the shape of the person sheltering it within their heart. “I’m interested in exploring what faith looks like beyond the walls of an abbey.” Mother Mabel claims I’m making a small-minded mistake. It turns out she knows little of me and my capabilities.

“Are you frightened?”

Odd, that this stranger would ask me a question so personal, but I respond to him the same way I replied to Harper. “Very much so.”

His expression softens. “It takes courage to walk a separate path. Should you continue on this road, I think you will find yourself in a better place.”

His confidence grounds me, strangely enough. I offer him a small smile. “I hope so.”

Silence takes root, and blossoms. I’m not sure what to say. I cannot explain this pull to shift nearer. He is a man. He is a stranger.

“Well then.” The man clears his throat. “I don’t want to keep you.”

Our eyes lock and hold.

My pulse spikes, for I do not want to leave. I think, *I know him*. But I do not. His appearance, while pleasing, holds no familiarity. We are two people crossing paths, a journey having briefly converged.

“Right.” I force myself to retreat a step, nearer to the clearing’s edge. “Good luck to you.”

He swallows, appearing as if he might speak, yet nods instead. I feel nauseated turning my back on him, but I must return to Thornbrook for my supplies.

“Brielle.”

I pause mid-turn. The man—I still do not know his name—stares at me with tears in his eyes, and a lump wells in my throat. I do not understand this sadness, this profound grief. “How do you know my name?”

“It doesn’t matter.” The words are choked, frail things. At his back, the stretch of wood stirs with Carterhaugh’s exhale. “Here.” Reaching into his pocket, he pulls out a crystal sphere. “For those dark nights when you need it.”

My breath catches. How lovely. A perfectly encapsulated dawn.

As though caught in a trance, I take the orb in hand.

I know this object. I know its contrasting sensations—cool glass and warm heartbeat—and how the curve perfectly cushions the well of my palm. I know its unspoiled rosy kiss. I know the chime it makes upon hitting rock, like a nail flicked against a windowpane. I know its reassuring weight in my pocket. And I know that, until this moment, I did not realize I had missed its presence.

My eyes lift to the man standing before me.

“Zephyrus,” I whisper, for it could be no one else.

Tears pour unhindered down his face. “You remember.”

The cold, hard diamond fractures in my chest as, at long last, the pool of murky water runs clear.

For there is our first encounter in Carterhaugh, the West Wind unconscious. His unwanted arrival in my bedroom. My visit to Willow. Our kiss in the glen. With every unearthed recollection, heat gathers to a point, and climbs up my throat, and collects behind my eyes. I let it come. There is relief in surrender, relief in knowing I was not mad, that I have found him. Bringer of Spring.

Mother Mabel stole my memories, but I remember, I *remember*.

“I missed you,” Zephyrus whispers.

I fall to my knees.

I’m crying so hard it cuts my breath. My hands lift, shielding my face. Things had gone so horribly wrong. The tithe. How could I have forgotten? That final battle. The Orchid King’s death. And fabled Meirlach, puncturing my chest like a bright, silver star.

The heel of my palm digs into my sternum. Fresh anguish revives itself. It is both now and then, here and there. I am a body strewn across the ground. I am a woman bent over her knees. I am drenched in blood, and still.

Footsteps approach, but I angle away, unable to bear the sight of his face. Kneeling at my side, Zephyrus envelopes me in his embrace. Even after all this time, he still smells of damp earth, sprigs of clover, honeysuckle. My tears are boundless. For long moments, we do not speak.

“How?” I whisper. “How is this possible? How are you here, alive? My soul rose from my body, and I s-saw the bargain. Your life in exchange for mine.”

“One cannot give their life if they are immortal,” Zephyrus explains. “The tithe stripped me of my immortality.”

He could have been free. Now he is mortal, and powerless.

“Why?” he murmurs, a sound of quiet agony. “Why would you sacrifice yourself for me?”

As if he doesn’t know.

“I didn’t have a choice.” A sharp keen cracks against my teeth, and I choke, straining to make out his blurred form.

“You did have a choice. The sword was meant for me.”

“No!” I weep harder, folding into deeper blackness. “She would have killed you.” By the Father, I never want to experience that helplessness again.

“Brielle.” Leaning back, Zephyrus captures my hands, brings them to his tear-dampened mouth. “When I saw you step in front of that sword—” He breaks off, and the rough, tearing sounds in his chest shatter something in me.

“I would do it all over again,” I say, voice wobbling. “I have no regrets.”

My life ended in Miles Cross, but this man... I stare at Zephyrus, who comes into sharper focus. Bringer of Spring, who so loved his winds. I squeeze his fingers tighter. Everything he did, it was all to bring me back. “I know what power means to you.”

He appears slightly bemused. I realize I’ve only known Zephyrus as he was: a captive. But here kneels a free man, and I have never seen his shoulders so unburdened. “And what does it mean to me, darling?”

A warm breeze lifts the fine hairs falling around my face and coaxes Carterhaugh from its doze. “Control. Freedom.” He’d clung to both for all he was worth. “It means everything.”

“Brielle.” Gentle is my name in his mouth. “I was an incredibly powerful immortal. I was a *god*. And I was alone.”

Fresh emotion rises as a knot in my throat. His wound is my wound,

and if I could relieve him of it, I would. At times, loneliness feels like an ailment. I understand, I *do*, but— “Better alone than dead.”

“I confess I do not share the sentiment.”

My head snaps up, and I stare at him, wide-eyed.

“When I saw you step in front of that sword,” Zephyrus says lowly, “my heart stopped. And I knew then what I had denied for weeks: that my search for freedom had become secondary to a search for home, and that home was you.”

My heart. “Why do you say the nicest things?” I wail. “It’s not right.”

He chuckles. I have never heard anything more devastating than his laughter, its warmth and adoration weakening my knees. “Would you prefer I lie?”

“Are you certain this is what you want?” I hiccup. “Your power—”

His mouth brushes mine, effectively silencing my protests. “Power means nothing to me. You, the woman I love with my whole heart, mean everything.”

Fresh, hot tears stream down my sticky face. “But—” He would not lie to me. This I know. “You’re sure?”

“I have never been more certain.” He chuckles, cupping my face, the pads of his thumbs catching the salted droplets. “What can I say? You got under my skin. You were this timid creature,” he says, gaze bright with affection, “yet there was iron within you.”

I did not realize Zephyrus saw me as strong. More so, I did not realize how badly I wanted him to view me as such.

“I was alone in this world, and faithless, but you, with your stubborn belief and maddening conviction, drew light into my gray existence.” He mops my face with his sleeve. “The strength of your heart, the resilience of your spirit. You are a wonder. I have never met another like you.”

His admission turns the remainder of my willpower to dust. How can I stand against a man who makes me weak in the knees? How can I fight the pull of my heart? I cannot.

“Zephyrus,” I whisper. “I love you, too.”

I’m not certain who moves first. My arms twine around his neck. His band across my lower back, hauling me against him. The connection is euphoria. His mouth, and mine. The deep, overwhelming heat of a kiss reunited. Our tongues flirt, and Zephyrus draws mine past his teeth, licking deep. A groan rushes down my throat, rough with hunger.

All my life, I have wondered what was missing. The complete lack of fear in loving another—it frees me. My heart is a bird, and look how readily it spreads its wings.

In the end, I break away first. As Zephyrus searches my gaze, I lift a hand to his sun-warmed cheek. “I choose you, Zephyrus of the West. I choose you every day.”

He presses his forehead to mine. “And I choose you, Brielle of Thornbrook, for as long as there is breath in my lungs.”

Carterhaugh is bright on this day. The West Wind is just a man, a wonderful, mortal man with a lifespan equal to mine. We have today, and tomorrow, and the next day, and the next. Imagine all that we will see.

“Zephyrus,” I say. “We will make these years count.”

EPILOGUE

IN WHICH THE WEST WIND ATTEMPTS TO PLAN A PROPOSAL

It was not in Zephyrus' nature to ask. Never had been, never would be. Simply put, it was not the way of the gods. Hierarchy ensured order, progress, stability. Everyone and everything had their place. The gods were, of course, the highest pinnacle—worshipped, revered, showered in adoration. Meanwhile, their subordinates comprised the foundations of society of which he now found himself: newly mortal, nameless, powerless.

Indeed, asking was not the way of the gods. Thus, the West Wind had fallen into a predicament. He had it all planned: the white daisies, the raspberry tarts, the sunlit river, the verbiage. With each piece artfully arranged, the day would unfold with nary a hitch. After all, asking the woman he loved for her hand in marriage was no small thing.

As Zephyrus pondered his plan, he departed the small, two-bedroom home he shared with Brielle situated a mile north of Kilmany. A chill blew in from the distant mountain, though the air slowly warmed. He had dressed in his tailored trousers, green cloak tossed over a fresh white tunic.

Unfortunately, with his powers stripped and the new weight of his mortal skin, he was sweating by the time he reached the town square.

His first stop: the local florist. Shortly past sunrise and the line extended out the door.

Zephyrus waited nearly an hour to order. When he reached the counter, he asked Lionel to set aside a bouquet of daisies, which he would collect at the end of the day.

The gruff man nodded, jotting down the order on a piece of parchment. “Been busy, but it shouldn’t be a problem.”

That gave Zephyrus pause.

“The flowers are for a special occasion,” he explained. “If you can’t guarantee supply at the end of the day, I’ll take them now.” Better to carry the bouquet than not obtain it at all.

“It won’t be an issue,” Lionel assured. “If it were roses, on the other hand...” A graceless shrug. “I’ll set them aside for later. You can pay upon pick-up.”

Such reassurance enabled Zephyrus to exit the storefront with dignity, instead of tripping across the threshold, shredded apart by the rising pressure of this day, its impossible perfection.

His next stop was the weaver. After dodging rickety carts and unleashed dogs wandering the main thoroughfare, Zephyrus arrived at the storefront, only to find it locked, the windows secured. A piece of parchment had been nailed to the front door.

Out of town. Will return next week.

He stared at the dark, looping scrawl. “Shit.”

No blanket. It wasn’t the worst misfortune, but he hadn’t anticipated the setback. After a year and a day of togetherness with Brielle, he’d hoped to gift her something to symbolize their life, the tight weave of cloth mended whenever a tear occurred.

No matter. He referred to his list, then spent the day traveling from shop to cart to stall in an attempt to acquire the necessary supplies.

Candles. The merchant, however, was sold out.

A bottle of fine wine, which he managed to procure, yet it shattered when a stray dog tripped him in the town square.

A new leather journal. Brielle, however, was picky. She favored brown leather, and the salesman only had black leather in stock. He left the shop empty-handed.

With the majority of the day gone, Zephyrus headed back to the florist to pick up his order. Along the way, he passed the church, its curved, oaken doors open to reveal a pew-lined interior, the vast windows of stained glass.

Moving to Kilmany had been a difficult transition for Brielle. The first few months, she had cried nearly every night. She collected journals as though they were coin, filling the pages with her innermost musings, the struggles of redefining her faith. Zephyrus felt helpless in those moments, but he stayed, because how could he not? They belonged together. In love, there was no one else.

Eventually, they settled in, attending service every Holy Day. Word spread of her arrival, and after six months of working for her old mentor, she was able to open her own shop. The gray cloud of sadness dissipated, replaced with laughter, and smiles, and dreams. Even Harper visited on occasion. Though Brielle's relationship with the Abbess might never be as it once was, the woman had gone to great lengths to ensure the abbey would outlive the Orchid King, and since his death, Thornbrook was under no obligation to participate in the tithes. Zephyrus, who often acted as a mediator between Under and Thornbrook, had begun to witness Under's power return.

By the time he reached the florist, the line had vastly reduced due to

the waning day. He strode up to the counter without delay.

“I’m here to pick up the daisies I ordered this morning, Lionel.”

“Good day to you, Zephyrus.” The man cleared his throat. “Unfortunately, they’ve been sold.”

That word—*sold*—struck his skin like a sharp pebble. “You can’t be serious.” Empty hands and unfulfilled promises. Is that all he was good for? “You said you’d set a bouquet aside,” he whispered, voice dropping to a hiss. “You assured me.”

The florist’s mouth pulled with strain. “Business was unusually demanding, and I could not guarantee your return.”

“I told you I would.” And anyway, this wasn’t their first meeting. He and Brielle bought flowers from Lionel every few weeks.

“They are sold, as I said. Perhaps you should try again next week?”

Zephyrus gritted his teeth. “The proposal is *today*,” he growled, then turned heel and shoved out the door, blinking rapidly in the afternoon sun.

Panic thrummed at his temples. He could fix this. He could fashion flowers out of snow, ferns out of rain. Or he used to, rather. With his powers gone, he was just a man. *Mundane*.

He stood by his decision. He would choose this life—loved, fulfilled—ten times over, but there existed a hollow where his power had once resided.

With a sigh, he scrubbed his hands down his face, needing a moment to gather the scattered fragments of his plan. No blanket, no flowers. Fine. That left the tarts. Hopefully they weren’t sold out.

As luck would have it, they weren’t. After waiting in line for nearly forty minutes, Zephyrus purchased a dozen raspberry tarts—Brielle’s favorite dessert. They lined a small box, flaky dough resting beneath cool white icing. The day was looking up.

ZEPHYRUS VEERED DOWN South Street to avoid the worst of the congestion before cutting uphill to one of the forest trails. Brielle's workshop perched along the curve of the broad River Twee. It was a solitary, one-roomed structure, thick black smoke erupting from the brick chimney. He had hoped to draw her down to the river, but really, the proposal should take place within these four walls, the forging of two lives.

The back door lay open, a hot, ghastly mouth ringed in fiery teeth. The peal of a hammer impacting blistering metal rang through the forge.

Inside, the darkness belched flame. From his position near the doorway, Zephyrus watched Brielle work. She'd tied back her red hair, though a few curls had escaped. A sheen of sweat coated her bare arms, the prominent muscles bulging beneath the straps of her thick canvas apron.

He waited until she lowered the hammer before stepping inside. Heat immediately engulfed him, drawing sweat to his skin. "Hungry?"

Brielle whirled, beaming. "Hello, my love."

The endearment never failed to make his heart stumble. Each time he looked at her was like the first. Soil-dark eyes, rounded cheeks, those scarlet tresses, the bow of her soft pink mouth. He had never met someone more beautiful, both in body and in soul.

"What?" She touched the side of her soot-stained neck self-consciously. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

Sensing her desire to retreat, Zephyrus pressed a hand to the curve of her spine, sliding it low until he cupped her rear in his palm.

Her eyes popped wide. "Zephyrus!" She swatted at him, and he laughed. "That's inappropriate."

Gods, he adored her. "Is it?" A gentle squeeze to her backside, and she flushed.

The distance was officially too much. Dragging her close, he crushed

their mouths together and slid his tongue inside. Fire and salt—the taste of his bladesmith.

Brielle pulled away first. “You look nice,” she said, plucking the collar of his tunic. A set of custom-made kitchen knives lined the table at her back. “What’s the occasion?”

“You.”

Her mouth parted, and she swallowed, red-faced and sniffing. “You always say the nicest things.”

His nerves tangled tighter with each successive heartbeat. “That’s because they’re true.” No flowers, no candles, no wine, but at least he had the profession sweetening his tongue.

Zephyrus thrust the box of pastries at Brielle. “Here.” It was perhaps the least refined thing he had spoken in his life—ever.

She glanced down at the sugar-dusted confections, a groove notched between her eyebrows. “Um...”

His attention dropped to the container clasped between his sweaty hands. The chilled desserts sat wilting in the intolerable heat, pools of white icing having collected in unappealing lumps.

And still, his plan continued to crumble. “I guess I didn’t realize they needed to remain cool,” he said woodenly, staring at the sad, soggy mess.

“I’m sure they taste delicious,” she reassured, plucking a melted tart from the box and popping it between her teeth. Icing dripped down her fingers, which she licked clean. “It’s very good!”

It was going to shit. It was all going to absolute shit.

With a heavy sigh, Zephyrus set the pastries onto the worktable. “Never mind those.” He lifted a shaky hand to his damp curls.

“Are you ill?” Brielle reached for him, concern etching grooves around her brown eyes, the rose-petal mouth. “You’re sweating quite profusely.”

Indeed. His tunic stuck to his clammy back, and his underarms stung with pooling sweat.

Shit. He was going to faint.

Brielle's eyes widened, and she lunged, catching him by the arm before his knees buckled. "Here. Sit." She directed him toward a chair. "Was it something you ate? Should I fetch a healer?"

"I'm all right." Though if he vomited amidst professing his love, he would never forgive himself. "I need to tell you something."

The lines on her face deepened. "It sounds serious."

"It is."

She stared at him. This ambiguity had amassed before. The trepidation of new love, deepening intimacy, vulnerability.

Nonetheless, Brielle pulled up a chair across from him and sat. "Then we will discuss." She spoke simply. They were, in all ways, a team.

Rubbing his sweaty palms on his trouser-clad thighs, Zephyrus groped for clarity of mind. Why was it suddenly so difficult to grasp? His head felt waterlogged.

"Whatever it is," she whispered, cupping one of his hands, "we'll face the issue together—"

"I love you." The rush of emotion broke the words into unintelligible noise. He felt green as an untried soldier, ungainly, graceless. "I wanted—I need—to tell you that. I love you. Only you." By the gods, he was sweating like a stuck pig. "I love this life we've built. I love our home. I love going to service with you and... and our home." He'd already said that, hadn't he? "And when I say *home*, I don't mean an actual structure. I just mean you."

In those early months, Zephyrus had questioned his worth, for paired with the certainty of knowing you were loved was the possibility that you were not. But after a year and a day, he felt secure in their relationship. He had given Brielle his heart, and she had sheltered it ever since.

A soft smile gentled her features. “And I love you.” Cupping his face with her sooty hands, she pressed her lips to his, gently. Zephyrus blanked, and his mind frayed. Grasping the back of her neck, he slanted his mouth against hers, rough with hunger. Her taste was his undoing, always.

By the time they broke apart, strands of Brielle’s hair had escaped her braid, and her porcelain skin had pinkened with the color of sunrise.

It must be here, and it must be now. “Brielle—”

“Will you marry me?”

This boiling heat was melting his mind. He hadn’t spoken those words aloud, right?

Zephyrus cleared his throat. “Would you mind repeating that?”

Her teeth sank into her lower lip. “Will you marry me, Zephyrus, and build a life with me here?”

Hoarse laughter hollowed out his chest, wrung every drop of apprehension from his body until he slumped back into the chair. Brielle’s mouth quirked playfully. Oh, she knew, had likely known the whole time. Fiendish woman.

“Yes, Brielle. I’ll marry you.” Pushing to his feet, Zephyrus enfolded her into his embrace—the woman who had stolen his corrupted heart, who he wanted nothing more than to grow old with, day after passing day, until they were bones in the earth. “That’s a promise I intend to keep.”

The series continues with *The South Wind*, which will focus on Notus' love story. To learn when it becomes available for pre-order, sign up for my newsletter [HERE](#).

AUTHOR'S NOTE

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